

CHAPTER 4

“A SHOW OF FORCE” FROM THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

BY June of 1943 the Japanese still had not attempted to land in the north-western or Torres Strait areas of Australia and the chances of even a token attack or demonstration appeared to be diminishing, but the possibility was still causing some anxiety to the local commanders. Major-General Allen,¹ the commander of Northern Territory Force, had expressed misgivings about the air strength available to Air Commodore Bladin to resist an invasion if it should come. In Washington, however, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff assured the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt (then seeking more aircraft for the Australian air force) that Allied land forces in Australia were “sufficient not only for the defence of Australia, but to continue with the plans of limited offensive operations”. Allied air forces in the Australian area were larger than the Japanese forces there and while Allied naval forces were less than the enemy’s “there were sufficient, in conjunction with shore-based aircraft, not only for the defence of Australia, but for its part in our present offensive operations”.

Perhaps the most vital consideration was that Japanese shipping tonnage available for operations had fallen to 600,000 tons and was still falling. It seemed unlikely that the Japanese could afford to suffer the serious shipping losses which might be expected to follow a seaborne assault, or undertake the added risks entailed in further stretching sea communications. Extracts from the Appreciation cabled by Dr Evatt are:

The reversals at Guadalcanal and in New Guinea have brought home to the Japanese the risks involved in seaborne expeditions in the face of land based aircraft. Japan is now faced with increasing Allied naval, land and air forces in all areas from India to the Aleutian Islands and the absolute limitations of her shipping position are never likely to increase. In these circumstances her strategy must be fundamentally defensive and be aimed at making her existing conquests as impregnable as possible.

LAND FORCES: Discounting Sumatra Islands there is a maximum of 200,000 troops in deployment over a lateral distance of 3,000 miles in the South and South-West Pacific areas. It is probable that only 9 out of 13 divisions forming Japan’s strategic reserve could be made available for these areas. Even discounting shipping losses, which might be heavy, previous experience indicates that it would take 9 months to concentrate in the SWPA these 9 divisions.

Against this there are the equivalent of 11 Allied divisions in Australia, and 3 and 2/3rd divisions in New Guinea. There are some 11 equivalent divisions in the South Pacific area. Five Australian divisions are being trained in jungle warfare and 2 further American divisions are being sent to reinforce the SWPA in the next 5 months. There is thus a marked superiority in Allied strengths and there should be sufficient land forces for the capture of Rabaul and a subsequent advance on Truk, apart from the security of our own bases.

¹ Maj-Gen A. S. Allen, CB, CBE, DSO, VD. (1st AIF: 13 and 45 Bns.) Comd 16 Bde 1939-41; GOC 7 Div 1941-42; Comd NT Force 1943-44. Accountant; of Sydney; b. Hurstville, NSW, 10 Mar 1894.

AIR FORCES: Japanese air forces in the SWPA are only maintained at their present level with difficulty. Even excluding air forces in the South Pacific, the Allied strength guarding Australia and in the SWPA is already considerably in excess of the total Japanese strength there and by the end of the year will be nearly three times as great.

The American Joint Staff planners had outlined a plan for an advance into the islands of the Arafura Sea south-west of New Guinea as well as the thrusts on the north coast aimed ultimately at Rabaul. However, in a report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, dated 23rd May 1943, they recommended that "because of the limitation of forces, operations (in the Netherlands East Indies) other than air warfare should be restricted to the seizure of those islands necessary to the capture of New Guinea". An airfield was to be established on the coast of south-west New Guinea (at Merauke) as a first step in the seizure of the Aru and possibly the Tanimbar Islands in the Arafura Sea. As the advance continued along the north New Guinea coast so Allied forces on the southern New Guinea front would move forward into the Maccleaur Gulf and Ambon Island.

Earlier, MacArthur had given some thought to an advance into the Netherlands East Indies, including Borneo and Celebes, but concluded that the depth to which enemy land forces were disposed there, combined with "close" waters in which both enemy navy and shore-based aircraft would operate, provided the enemy with the geographical requirements for strong defences. By contrast, operations on the northern coast of New Guinea could take advantage of the more open waters where Allied seapower could be used to more advantage.

In June 1943 no immediate seaborne assault on the islands of the Arafura Sea was being considered, but MacArthur planned to use the squadrons in the Northern Territory to aid the main New Guinea actions. The task of R.A.A.F. Command would be to pin down a considerable enemy air force which might otherwise be sent to reinforce the north New Guinea front. For as long as possible the enemy was to be confused as to the direction which the main Allied thrusts would take, and a "show of force" from the Northern Territory would add to the enemy's confusion. Developing the tactics to be followed in the campaign by North-Western Area, General Kenney wrote to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock on 20th May:

Allied Air Force operations instructions have indicated the inauguration of offensive operations in the New Guinea theatre. These operations will continue and increase in scope during the balance of this year. Analysis of enemy intentions has shown an uncertainty in his mind as to just where the expected Allied counter offensive will begin and when. In order to assist the New Guinea offensive and to further increase confusion in the enemy's plans you will take the necessary measures to increase the show of force in Northwestern Area.

The increase in bombardment strength in the Northwestern Area of both R.A.A.F. and Fifth Air Force units will be sufficient to permit periodic demonstrations likely to impress the enemy that large reinforcements have been made available in that area. His present ability to retaliate rests principally on the aerodromes at Koepang and Kendari. These bases, coupled with Ambon and Babo, represent the natural

objectives we would have if an actual offensive were being launched from Darwin. It is desired therefore that you concentrate your strength against these four major bases with particular emphasis on Koepang.

If Koepang can be eliminated as an air operating base for major staging by the enemy, the Japanese must centre additional effort on developing the Kendari, Ambon and Babo areas. This is what we desire to do in assisting the New Guinea action. It is suggested that for this purpose bombardment be concentrated in strikes of large numbers of aircraft repeated as availability permits. The impression of strength should not be reduced by utilising single ship or weak formations; nor should our efforts be expended on the minor targets surrounding Darwin. These minor targets will collapse of their own weight if the major bases are seriously hampered. Target material such as Surabaya can be profitably developed.

It is requested that you institute a plan for carrying out such a program during June and July, with maximum effort during the first part of July.

Kenney's instructions were repeated in an order by Bostock to North-Western Area. Bostock also directed North-Eastern Area to support North-Western Area in the show of force by sending the Catalinas of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons to bomb targets in the Babo and Ambon areas.

As directed by Kenney, the Allied squadrons in North-Western Area during June continued their attacks on enemy airfields with emphasis on Koepang. The Japanese were still reinforcing their bases north of Darwin and reports constantly reached the area command describing the development of airfields and the apparent increase in aircraft strength.

Four Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron raided Taberfane on 4th June in an attempt to destroy enemy float-planes. When they arrived it was evident that the enemy had had warning of their approach because the Japanese aircraft were in the air and a fight developed in which both sides suffered damage. The Beaufighters destroyed one float-plane.

On 11th June fifteen Liberators of No. 528 American Squadron, newly arrived in the area, went during daylight to bomb Koepang and their attack left a large area of the town in flames. This was one of the heaviest raids on Koepang up to that time. Zekes intercepted and dropped phosphorus bombs in mid-air. One Liberator landed on the water and blew up, killing the crew.

Operating through Millingimbi on 12th June the Beaufighters went again to Taberfane. To guard against interception, three of the Beaufighters remained at 4,000 feet over the target while four more machines attacked the float-planes.² The pilots were also ordered not to stay too long in the area dog-fighting with enemy float-planes. The raid was a great success. The attacking Beaufighters approached the float-planes at tree-top height and caught the enemy by surprise destroying seven aircraft and damaging two. They went on to machine-gun Taberfane village. One of

² Members of the crews which participated in this raid were—Sqn Ldr J. L. Stanley (Brisbane); F-Lt O. H. McCutcheon (Glen Iris, Vic); F-Os J. M. Forbes (Cowandilla, SA), K. N. MacDonald (Hawthorn, Vic), F. J. Magee (Coogee, NSW), R. Ogden (Yarraville, Vic); P-O's G. D. Erwin (Yan Yan Gurt, Vic), E. V. C. B. Hunt (Mount Lawley, WA); F-Sgts J. R. Muggleton (Brighton, SA), J. G. West (Kew, Vic); and Sgts E. J. C. Barnett (Glebe Point, NSW), P. S. Lennon (Parkville, Vic), H. O. Thorncraft (Rockdale, NSW) and C. D. Wright (Buranda, Qld).

the Beaufighter pilots flew so low during the operation that the tail of his machine was damaged by trees.

Evidently the enemy considered the patrols by their float-planes in the Arafura Sea to be of great importance because they continued to maintain their base at Tabernan in spite of the mounting losses inflicted by the Beaufighters. Bladin ordered another attack against them on 22nd June using three Liberators of No. 319 Squadron as well as nine Beaufighters. Both Liberators and Beaufighters were hampered by rain and cloud and were intercepted when they reached the target. The Liberators attacked first at 3 p.m. followed by the Beaufighters at 4.35 p.m. The Beaufighters strafed nine float-planes damaging two but immediately became engaged in a fight with Japanese aircraft. Two Beaufighters which were damaged in the engagement crashed when landing at Millingimbi but the crews escaped without injury.

The enemy, nervous of a possible Allied offensive north from Darwin, continued to develop air bases. Construction work was seen on Ceram Island on 10th June. Work continued on dispersal loops and blast pens at Penfui and on a new airfield on a near-by golf course. The air route between New Britain and Ambon appeared to be complete and this would allow rapid air reinforcement either way. The enemy had also begun to build an airfield on Selaru Island, the most southerly of the Tanimbar group and only 300 miles from Darwin. A Lightning aircraft piloted by Flight Lieutenant Sinnott³ of No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, R.A.A.F., took photographs of the island on 13th June and they showed that a clearing 5,500 feet long was being made on flat dry grass country in the centre of the island. Later in the month another reconnaissance revealed three new airstrips at Fuiloro, Timor, 380 miles from Darwin. Fuiloro and Selaru, if they became properly established would be a greater threat to Darwin than Koepang. It was essential that steps be taken to deter the Japanese from developing them.

Bladin decided to send to Selaru twelve Vultee Vengeance dive bombers of No. 12 Squadron, which up to that time had been engaged almost entirely on searches and escort duties. Although interception by enemy aircraft was not likely, six Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron were to accompany the dive bombers to protect them.

The twelve dive bombers flew from Batchelor airfield to Bathurst Island where they filled their fuel tanks. One plane could not take off from Bathurst because of electrical trouble, but the remainder, escorted by the Beaufighters, were airborne by 9.25 a.m. and headed for Selaru on the first bombing attack by Vengeances in the South-West Pacific. On arrival there they split into two sections, one led by Flight Lieutenant McPherson,⁴ bombed the village of Lingat and the other, led by Flight Lieutenant Keys,⁵ bombed the village of Werain. It was suspected that airfield workers

³ Sqn Ldr P. B. Sinnott, AFC, 250837; 1 PRU. Bank clerk; of Elsternwick, Vic; b. Melbourne, 15 Jan 1918.

⁴ F-Lt C. J. McPherson, 408697; 12 Sqn. Clerk; of Horsham, Vic; b. Horsham, 7 Jun 1918.

⁵ Sqn Ldr J. B. Keys, 260729; 12 Sqn. Motor mechanic; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Harden, NSW, 13 Nov 1910.

would be camped in these villages. The bombs fell in the target areas and the attacks appeared to be successful although results could not easily be seen because of the dust haze caused by the explosions. A lone Japanese aircraft intercepted the dive bombers but did not open fire at any stage of the attack. Evidently it was attempting to distract the dive bomber pilots as they aimed at the target.

A Dinah reconnaissance aircraft appeared over Darwin early on 17th June flying at a height of 28,000 feet. The Dinah patrolled over airfields at Hughes, Batchelor and Coomalie, as well as Darwin. Anti-aircraft guns fired on it and forty-two Spitfires took off. Although two Spitfires saw this elusive enemy, they were unable to attack because it was some distance from them at a much greater height. A reconnaissance aircraft was the usual forerunner of an air raid on Darwin, and two days later further evidence of the intention of the enemy to raid Darwin was obtained when Intelligence intercepted enemy radio traffic indicating the arrival of a large number of aircraft at Koepang. The fighter pilots were told of probable action next day, and ground crews set to work preparing the Spitfires for the coming battle.

At 9.45 a.m. on the 20th the radar stations detected Japanese aircraft approaching Darwin. The three Spitfire squadrons were ordered to intercept and forty-six machines were airborne a few minutes later. They rendezvoused over Hughes airfield at 20,000 feet. The radio on Wing Commander Caldwell's plane failed to work and the fighter sector controller on discovering this, ordered Squadron Leader Gibbs to lead the wing, but Gibbs' engine failed and he had to return to base. Thereafter the three squadrons decided to attack independently and were led by Squadron Leader MacDonald (No. 452), and Flight Lieutenants P. H. Watson (No. 457) and Foster (No. 54).

The pilots of No. 54 Squadron were first to see the enemy bombers which were flying at 27,000 feet over Bathurst Island. Nos. 54 and 452 Squadrons dropped their auxiliary fuel tanks and attacked this enemy force soon after it crossed the coast of the mainland. No. 54 launched its attack on both bombers and escort and shot down four bombers and a fighter. Flying Officer Hughes⁶ destroyed two of the bombers and Foster attacked another bomber which broke away from the formation and descended to the sea in flames. No. 452 also made a successful attack which caused the destruction of three enemy bombers. Three of No. 452 Squadron's Spitfires also engaged the fighter escort and Flying Officer Mawer⁷ shot one of them down into the sea.

The enemy bombers, now reduced to fifteen, remained in formation and then turned in towards Darwin where the anti-aircraft guns opened fire. Soon after, No. 457 Squadron attacked them and destroyed another bomber which crashed in flames on Cox Peninsula. It was now 10.45 a.m.

⁶ F-Lt M. C. Hughes, 42939; 115, 235, 165 and 54 Sqns RAF. Regular airman; of Penarth, Glamorganshire, Wales; b. Penarth, 18 May 1920.

⁷ F-O G. A. Mawer, 403112; 245, 501 and 54 Sqns RAF, 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Manly, NSW; b. Canterbury, NSW, 31 Oct 1919. Killed in action 26 Sep 1943.

and the bombers' target was Winnellie where they dropped forty bombs of the "daisy-cutter" type on the air force and army camps. Three soldiers were killed and eleven wounded. Two huts and a railway truck loaded with sixty drums of oil were also destroyed and the railway line broken in three places.

After dropping their bombs the enemy planes flew across Darwin harbour. Caldwell and Group Captain Walters at this stage attacked the bombers but Caldwell was prevented by Zekes from getting close enough to fire. In the ensuing fight, however, he shot one of the Zekes into the sea. Walters opened fire on a bomber without result, but continued to follow the enemy out to sea where he caught and destroyed another Zeke.

Meanwhile at 10.55 a.m. another enemy formation of ten bombers made a tree-top level attack with bombs and cannon fire on the Darwin airfield and at Winnellie. They destroyed one building and damaged the sergeants' mess. The Japanese plan was for the low-flying bombers to make a surprise attack while the Spitfires were engaged against the high-flying machines, but it lacked coordination. However, the low-flying bombers were seen later by pilots of No. 54 Squadron, who destroyed one of them.

Two Spitfire pilots (Pilot Officers Nichterlein⁸ and Ruskin-Rowe⁹) were shot down and killed during the morning's engagement, but the Spitfires had destroyed nine enemy bombers and five fighters as well as damaging another ten. For the R.A.A.F. this was the most successful encounter up to that time at Darwin. On this occasion, General MacArthur sent his congratulations for the victory which had restored confidence in the ability of the Spitfire squadrons.

In retaliation for the Japanese raid, Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron and Mitchells of No. 18 bombed Koepang and Penfui on the night of 20th-21st June. Six Catalinas of the United States Navy's No. 101 Squadron which had come up from Crawley Bay near Perth were over Penfui at midnight dropping bombs. Next day there were indications again of enemy planes near Darwin but no raid took place. It was concluded that the enemy bombers had failed to rendezvous with their fighter escorts and had then decided to abandon the raid.

On 23rd June Beaufighters visited the new enemy airfield at Selaru where they strafed two Lily bombers which caught fire and were destroyed.

Reconnaissance by Lightnings of No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit found further evidence of continued Japanese airfield construction. On Timor two new airstrips were discovered, one of 5,000 feet running parallel to the coast at Cape Chater and another at Lautem, and a total of thirty-six enemy aircraft were counted on Timor airfields. The presence of Lily bombers at Selaru indicated that the Japanese had rapidly brought this base into use as an airfield.

Nine enemy bombers escorted by nine fighters raided Darwin again on the morning of 28th June. When they were still 150 miles north-west of

⁸ P-O W. E. Nichterlein, 416104; 452 Sqn. Student; of Glen Osmond, SA; b. Penshurst, Vic, 14 Feb 1920. Killed in action 20 Jun 1943.

⁹ P-O A. T. Ruskin-Rowe, 411389; 131 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Station manager; of "Wonbobbie" and "Avoca", Warren, NSW; b. Double Bay, NSW, 4 May 1920. Killed in action 20 Jun 1943.

Darwin the radar screens detected them and two minutes later the Spitfire wing was ordered to intercept. Forty-two machines (twelve from No. 54, thirteen from No. 452 and seventeen from No. 457) took to the air. The Spitfire pilots saw the enemy near Darwin, and Caldwell ordered the anti-aircraft guns which had begun firing to cease because they would interfere with the fighter attack. However, the enemy force, after dropping a few bombs which damaged three huts and caused no casualties, turned sharply to the west, losing height and gathering speed. Nos. 54 and 452 Squadrons were unable to close with the enemy. No. 54 was diverted by a report of fighters above them. These, however, turned out to be Spitfires which had lagged behind. When the error was discovered the enemy force was from 10 to 15 miles away and the Spitfires were forced to give up the chase some 40 miles west of Cape Fourcroy.

However, No. 457 Squadron was able to attack some of the enemy. A section of three Spitfires from this squadron engaged three fighters after diving out of the sun. The enemy was evidently caught by surprise because the pilots did not attempt to evade the attack until after the Spitfires opened fire. Other Spitfires attacked the bombers, two of which were hit, while two of the Spitfires were damaged by return fire. The wing Intelligence officer assessed enemy casualties on the day as four fighters destroyed and two bombers probably destroyed. One Spitfire was destroyed as a result of a forced landing, but the pilot was uninjured.

During May and June reinforcements of Liberator bombers of the Fifth Air Force were moving into the Northern Territory to take part in the "show of force". By 1st June the headquarters of No. 380 Bombardment Group was established at Fenton, and on that date also Nos. 528 and 531 Liberator Squadrons were ready for action and were to be followed within a few days by Nos. 529 and 530 Squadrons. Kenney had passed control of the whole group to R.A.A.F. Command, and R.A.A.F. Command placed them under Bladin.

The Liberators could fly much farther than the Mitchell and Hudson bombers and were used for targets deep in Japanese-occupied territories, especially Kendari and Macassar, as well as nearer targets such as Penfui airfield. On 23rd June seventeen Liberators of No. 528 Squadron raided Macassar in daylight, losing one aircraft as a result of an enemy fighter crashing into it. Altogether during June the newly-arrived Liberator squadrons carried out fifty sorties.

Admiral Ishikawa, commander of the *23rd Air Flotilla*, organised a heavy raid against the Liberator base at Fenton on 30th June. A total of 27 Betty bombers and 23 escorting Zekes and Haps took part in this foray. Again the radar screens detected the enemy force approaching when it was still 160 miles from Darwin flying on a south-easterly course. The first "plot" was reported at 11.18 a.m. and two minutes later 38 Spitfires were ordered up to meet the coming attack. The Spitfire wing climbed in a northerly direction and when north of Sattler turned on to an easterly course. Caldwell, leading No. 457 Squadron, was in the centre, with

No. 452 on his right and No. 54 on his left flank. The ground controller now sent the wing in the direction of Batchelor which was well south of Sattler, the reason being that the enemy now appeared to be approaching the coast near Peron Island. When west of Batchelor, Caldwell saw the enemy flying eastwards towards Fenton and he ordered the wing to turn to the left taking up position abreast of the bombers and flying a parallel course in the same direction. Caldwell now told his pilots that their attack must be made in fours and sixes in line abreast followed by other sections of four or six aircraft in line abreast at intervals of 500 yards. Nos. 54 and 457 Squadrons were to attack the bombers while No. 452 was to engage the fighters.

When No. 54 Squadron reported that they were in a favourable position to attack, Caldwell gave the order and the action began. No. 54 Squadron attacked the bombers followed about thirty seconds later by No. 457. However, the leader of No. 452 had misunderstood the order and attacked the bombers instead of engaging the fighters. As a result the Spitfires were subjected to an attack by the escorts. The wing Intelligence report on this phase of the action reads:

The result of the failure to attack the fighters and engage them whilst the bomber formation was being attacked was inevitable and our aircraft were the subject of a well concerted attack by the bombers' escort. Many of them were engaged throughout the period of their contact with the enemy by these fighters and were not able to press home further attacks on the main bomber formation and squadron and section cohesion appears to have been lost.

Soon after the Spitfire attack (12.13 p.m.) the enemy bombers turned towards Fenton which they pattern-bombed at 12.31 p.m. The anti-aircraft guns at Fenton opened fire on the enemy force which was flying at 20,000 feet but they did not hit any planes nor did they divert them from their bombing, which was accurate. The enemy bombing destroyed three Liberators of No. 380 Group on the ground, damaged another seven and caused damage to equipment and installations. Two men were slightly injured.

The Spitfires kept up the pursuit of the bomber force after it had dropped its bombs on Fenton and had turned about, making for the coast. Pilot Officer Wellsman¹ (No. 54 Squadron) was killed in the engagement. A total of 6 Spitfires were destroyed but destruction of 3 of these was due to engine failure. Enemy losses were 6 bombers and 2 fighters destroyed. Flight Sergeant Duncan² of No. 452 Squadron, who was forced to parachute during the engagement when his engine caught fire, spent five days in rough country until found by a rescue party. Duncan was seen by fellow pilots on 1st July and they flew out eight times during that day to keep in touch with him. On the following day more flights were made and food and cigarettes dropped to him, and contact was kept up until he was rescued on the fifth day.

¹ P-O J. C. Wellsman, 142859 RAF; 54 Sqn RAF. Draftsman; of Twickenham, Middlesex, Eng; b. Peckham, London, 16 Jul 1921. Killed in action 30 Jun 1943.

² F-Lt C. R. Duncan, 401778; 452 Sqn. Building student; of Balwyn, Vic; b. St Kilda, Vic, 4 Aug 1919.

By the end of June losses of Spitfires had reduced the strength of No. 1 Fighter Wing to a low level and Bladin signalled the Chief of the Air Staff asking for the immediate dispatch of twenty-two aircraft to bring the wing up to strength. Replacement difficulties were a source of worry to the engineer officers, and training had to be cut because of the unserviceability of many aircraft. Bladin also asked that eleven new engines be flown up to replace the worn engines which the Spitfire pilots had to use in operations. Worn-out engines were causing slow speeds during battle, and formation leaders had been forced to reduce their speed in order to prevent straggling. Air force headquarters replied that up to seventeen Spitfires would arrive within a week or so. Another eighteen machines were being off-loaded in Melbourne and steps were being taken to assemble these machines in all haste. The failure of cannons and machine-guns was also reducing the effectiveness of the Spitfires. The stoppages of the weapons were usually caused by freezing of the mechanism and faults in ammunition. Steps were taken to reduce these failures.

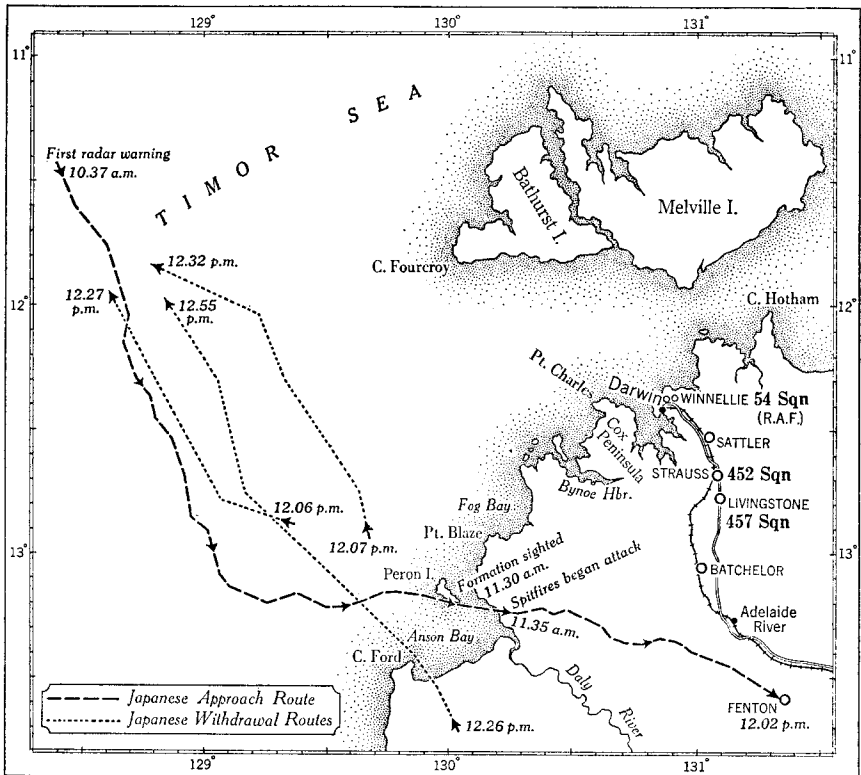
While the Spitfires fought off the enemy raiders over Fenton, Allied amphibious forces were landing in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea. Enemy retaliation to these landings took the form of air attacks of great strength in the Solomons and in the Darwin areas; there was no air opposition to the landings in New Guinea, or on Kiriwina and Woodlark Islands.

Bladin was sending more and more flights out to help keep the enemy's attention diverted from the New Guinea operations. On 30th June Mitchells, Hudsons, and American Catalinas which again came all the way from Perth for the purpose, bombed the Timor airfields. Beaufighters attacked Selaru again and the Liberators bombed Kendari. Float-planes in small formations were attempting to interfere with Allied shipping off Millingimbi early in July, but they achieved very little because of the constant cover provided by Allied aircraft.

On 3rd and 4th July a Dinah reconnaissance plane was over the Darwin area again, and on 6th July the *23rd Air Flotilla* made another raid. The radar station at Cape Fourcroy detected the attacking force at 10.37 a.m. when it was 160 miles from Darwin. The fighter controller ordered the Spitfire wing to take off and thirty-three aircraft were airborne seven minutes later. Another three machines were sent off, two to patrol at a low altitude and one to make off immediately towards the enemy force to report its direction of approach.

The three squadrons rendezvoused over Sattler at 6,000 feet and, with Caldwell in command in the centre, were directed by the ground controller to make for Batchelor. The enemy was then approaching the coast well south of Darwin near Anson Bay at a height of 20,000 feet. The slowness of the raiders' approach indicated that the enemy aircraft were climbing, therefore the Spitfires continued to climb. When they were at 32,000 feet the Spitfire pilots saw the enemy coming towards the coast over Peron Island at a height of 29,000 feet. There were 26 enemy bombers flying in three broad V's. The larger V's were divided into three smaller

V's of three machines each. Some 21 fighters could be seen escorting them. The Spitfires were between the Japanese and their target, which seemed almost certain to be Fenton where the enemy had attacked Liberators on the ground only a week before.



Caldwell's plan was that No. 452 Squadron should engage the fighter escort and No. 54 Squadron make the first attack against the bombers from head-on while No. 457 remained in reserve, flying on a parallel course to the enemy and 7,000 feet above, where it could see what was happening and take advantage of the battle situation as it developed.

At 11.35 a.m. shortly after the enemy force crossed the mainland coast Caldwell ordered No. 452 to open the attack. The enemy fighters were now turning left and forming a defensive circle about 2,000 feet above the bombers when "white" section of No. 452, led by Flight Lieutenant Hall,³ engaged them. These Spitfires succeeded in shooting down two enemy fighters while another seven were so diverted that they could no longer interfere with other Spitfires which were about to attack the raiding

³ F-Lt E. S. Hall, 403013; 129 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Grazier; of Werris Creek, NSW; b. Sydney, 10 Mar 1918.

bombers. However three Spitfires were lost. Flight Lieutenant Makin⁴ made a forced landing when his engine failed and Sergeant Richardson⁵ parachuted when his also failed. Flying Officer Lloyd,⁶ hit by enemy fire, was also forced to parachute.

Meanwhile, Squadron Leader Gibbs, leading No. 54, had begun his attack on the bombers, although three of his Spitfires were unable to keep up with the others, because of the poor state of their engines, and did not engage in the first attack. After six months' tropical service coupled with rapid climbs the engines were fast approaching a critical period in their flying life and were passing the limit of efficiency. Gibbs reported later that this position had "assumed a serious aspect quite suddenly because of the greatly increased activity of the enemy in this sector during the past few weeks". As a result, only 7 Spitfires of No. 54 engaged the bomber force of 27 enemy machines. They shot down 4 and damaged 2, while 2 of the Spitfires were lost.

No. 457 meanwhile had held its attack and followed the enemy bombers towards Fenton. About twenty miles from Fenton, Caldwell ordered two sections (eight aircraft) of this squadron to attack. Both sections were engaged by enemy fighters but the Spitfires succeeded in shooting down two bombers. However, three Spitfire pilots (Flying Officers Hamilton and Robinson⁷ and Pilot Officer McDowell) were shot down and killed.

By midday twenty machines of the enemy bomber force were over Fenton and dropped 140 bombs on the Liberator dispersal area in spite of anti-aircraft guns which fired eighty-eight rounds at them without effect. The enemy bombs destroyed one Liberator, damaged three others, and damaged anti-aircraft guns and the airfield. The Spitfires continued to attack through the anti-aircraft fire and another bomber was shot down almost over the gunners' heads. At this stage Caldwell gave permission to Squadron Leader James to attack, but James was thwarted by four enemy fighters and forced to dive down to 15,000 feet. He climbed again to make another attack, but was again diverted by two enemy fighters. The bomber force was now making for the coast and Caldwell made a lone head-on attack on a bomber just as it was crossing the coast. When pulling up again Caldwell was engaged by one of the escorts. Another two fighters turned in towards him and because his oxygen supply had been exhausted he took evasive action and returned to base. Another pilot (Pilot Officer R. W. Watson) followed the enemy twenty miles out to sea and succeeded in damaging a bomber.

After these losses Bladin again signalled to Air Force headquarters that it was "imperative that all Spitfires allotted this area from southern sources be delivered immediately". However, the raid of 6th July was the

⁴ F-Lt P. St J. Makin, 116507 RAF; 452 Sqn. Student; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 22 Oct 1920.

⁵ F-O A. R. Richardson, 411644; 167 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Hamilton, NSW; b. Hamilton, 10 Jan 1920.

⁶ F-Lt C. P. Lloyd, 404690; 452 Sqn. Grazier; of Roma, Qld; b. Kyneton, Vic, 3 Jan 1918.

⁷ F-O N. F. Robinson, 401284; 457 Sqn. Student; of Toorak, Vic; b. Hawthorn, Vic, 23 Jun 1922. Killed in action 6 Jul 1943.

last to be made in strength over the Darwin area, and within a few days more Spitfires began to arrive from the south.

Meanwhile Mitchells, Hudsons, and Liberators raided airfields at Penfui, Cape Chater, Babo, Nabire, Fuiloro and Selaru. On 6th July five Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron led by Flight Lieutenant Austin bombed Koepang town at night. The following night Austin led seven more Hudsons against grounded aircraft on the near-by Penfui airfield. The bombing caused many fires, but there was no proof that enemy aircraft had been destroyed.

Next day the Liberators of No. 380 Group, which had suffered losses from the bombs of the Japanese raiders at Fenton on 30th June and 6th July, replied by sending 9 aircraft against Penfui in daylight. Only 6 of the Liberators reached the target and they were immediately engaged by 10 to 14 Zekes, of which 3 were shot down. Hazy photographs taken at Penfui showed that 13 Betty bombers were parked on the airfield, indicating that the Japanese, in spite of the constant bombing, were still able to maintain bombers at this advanced base.

On 10th July a Liberator was lost when Zekes intercepted a flight of Liberators of No. 531 Squadron which raided Babo. The Liberators bombed Macassar in Celebes on 18th July, and on 22nd July made their first raid on a target in Java, bombing Surabaya, where they damaged oil refineries and docks.

In order to reach Surabaya, the Liberators staged through the Western Area base at Corunna Downs, some miles inland from Port Hedland. This base was the closest point to Surabaya from Australia, and Allied aircraft operating from it were able to give a wide berth to the many enemy fighter bases on Timor and other islands between Darwin and Java. Late in 1942 a party of thirteen R.A.A.F. men under Flying Officer Sutton⁸ had arrived at Corunna Downs and formed an operational base unit there. In later months civilian workers directed by the Allied Works Council built a bitumen-surfaced airstrip. Fuel, bombs and ammunition were stored at the base for use by staging aircraft.

This airfield was on an iron ridge surrounded by flat spinifex country. It was only 30 miles from Marble Bar, reputedly the hottest town in Australia; temperatures of 120 degrees are commonplace in this area and the men at the base suffered severely from the heat. There were few amenities. The food was mostly tinned and this caused the health of the men to suffer.

No. 31 Squadron during July carried out convoy-escort duties as well as attacking such enemy bases as Selaru airfield and the float-plane base at Taberfane. Several times during the month bad weather frustrated attempts to attack the float-planes. On 24th July twelve Beaufighters flew from Coomalie Creek to Taberfane to make an attack. Rain squalls and heavy cloud prevented effective action, as the rain on the windshields had made it impossible to shoot accurately, but four enemy aircraft were damaged. When the Beaufighters arrived at the base four of the

⁸ F-Lt L. V. Sutton, 294443; comd OBU Corunna Downs 1942-43. Trust officer; of South Perth, WA; b. Perth, 17 Dec 1904.



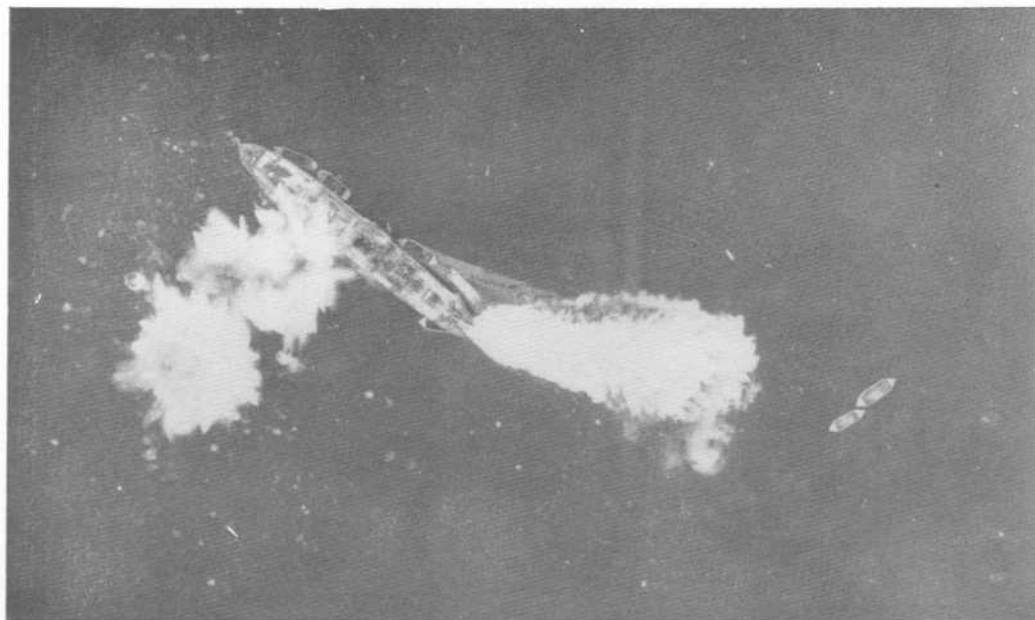
Rabaul ablaze on 2nd November 1943. Two Mitchell aircraft can be seen through the smoke at top left.

(R.A.A.F.)



(R.A.A.F.)

Beaufighter crews of No. 30 Squadron being "debriefed" by the Intelligence Officer at Goodenough Island in October 1943 after a big raid on Rabaul. The Intelligence Officer, F-Lt H. J. Ellis, is holding a pencil; opposite him with his hand over his face, F-Sgt. C. Harris; F-Lt K. Barber points to the map. Behind the table Sqn Ldr F. R. Maguire, leaning forward; F-O A. F. Catt, partly obscured; and W Cdr J. G. Emerton holding a cigarette.



(R.A.A.F.)

A freighter-transport near Pomelaa, Celebes, under attack by aircraft of the American No. 380 Heavy Bombardment Group on 21st August 1943.



(R.A.A.F.)

Beauforts of Nos. 6, 8, and 100 Squadrons bombing a camp area at Amgen River, near Lindenhafen, on 17th January 1944.



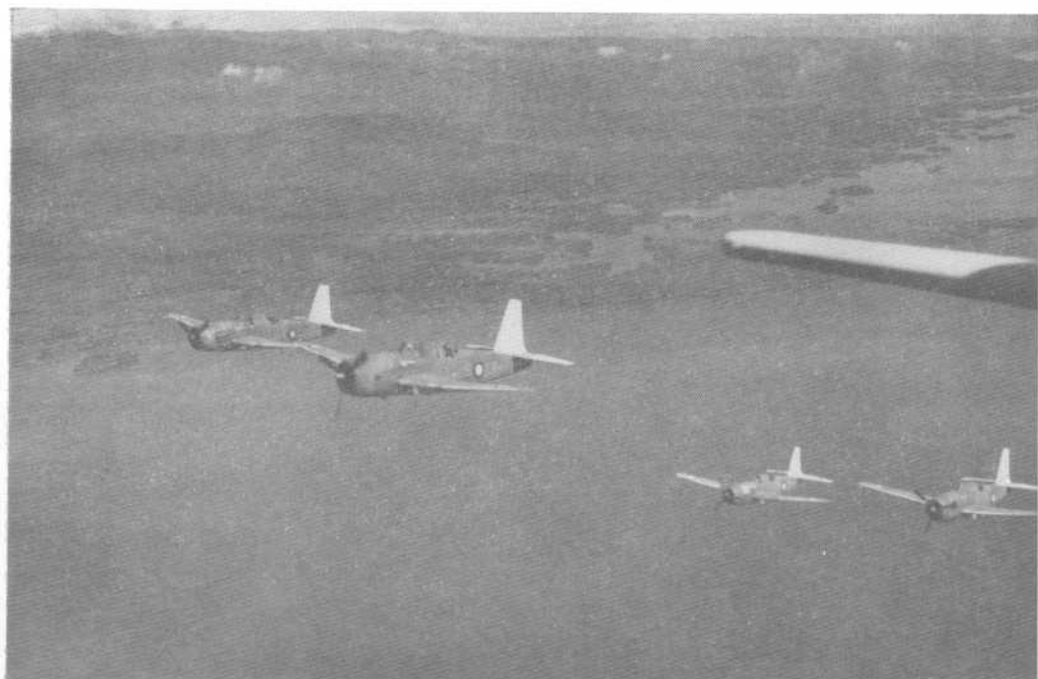
(R.A.A.F.)

A Beaufort of No. 1 Squadron leaving the target area at Su, in Dutch Timor, on 19th April 1944, after a successful raid by a mixed force from Nos. 1, 18, and 31 Squadrons.



(R.A.A.F.)

A ground crew at Kiriwina take shelter from one of the sudden tropical downpours under the wing of the Kittyhawk they are servicing, in February 1944.



(R.A.A.F.)

Vultee Vengeance dive bombers of No. 24 Squadron returning from a raid on Alexishafen airstrip on 27th February 1944.

enemy aircraft were in the air and another took off. Enemy fire damaged two Beaufighters before they set course for Millingimbi where they were to refuel, while one Beaufighter (Flying Officers Gillespie⁹ and Cameron¹) did not return and was presumed lost.

⁹ F-O B. W. Gillespie, 406842; 31 Sqn. Insurance officer; of Nedlands, WA; b. North Fremantle, WA, 11 Jul 1922. Killed in action 24 Jul 1943.

¹ F-O A. J. Cameron, 1424, 7169; 31 Sqn. Regular airman; of Watson's Bay, NSW; b. Waverley, NSW, 4 Jan 1914. Killed in action 24 Jul 1943.