

## CHAPTER 7

### THE NORTH-WESTERN FLANK, AUGUST-DECEMBER 1943

IN July, after a long term—since March 1942—as Air Officer Commanding in North-Western Area, Air Commodore Bladin was posted for duty with the R.A.F. in Europe. He was replaced by Air Vice-Marshal Cole who had just returned from Europe. Cole had commanded a general reconnaissance wing in the Middle East and then served as air adviser in the Dieppe raid in 1942, during which he had been wounded. When he recovered, he became Air Officer Commanding, Royal Air Force in Northern Ireland, until his recall to Australia.

He reported on arrival in the Northern Territory that his command was “well organised, keen and in good shape”. However, the future security of the area, he said, depended on three essentials:

- (a) equipment to carry out long-range reconnaissance;
- (b) extra long-range fighters;
- (c) extra striking power against invasion or major raid.

Air Vice-Marshal Cole wrote to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock on 23rd July advising that he could not “guarantee the initial security of this area from an air point of view . . . the present equipment is scarcely sufficient deterrent in power to make enemy raids uneconomical. . . .”

Cole considered that the fighter strength of three Spitfire squadrons was not enough. He wrote:

In two recent enemy raids, fighters had to be withdrawn through lack of fuel whilst the enemy was still over Commonwealth Territory. In addition the numbers are too few to provide for adequate defence against “chain raids” spaced at time intervals which will probably be the enemy’s next tactical development.

The Commander of Northern Territory Force (Major-General Allen) also considered that in numbers and type, the air strength in the area was inadequate to give really effective support in repelling a possible invasion, and pointed out that there were no fighters to give cover to bombing aircraft beyond a radius of 150 miles. Both Allen and Cole considered that fighters of the P-38 (Lightning) type were needed, and that there was also a need for a system of army cooperation. Because of the increasing difficulty of supplying bases such as Millingimbi by sea and land, Cole also asked for twenty Dakota air transports to carry food and equipment to his scattered units.

There was, however, little prospect of Cole’s requirements being met because of the demands of the offensive in the New Guinea-Solomons areas. He had to get the best results from the squadrons he had. Bostock pointed out that the needs of the area were well understood but with the exception of a Dutch squadron of Kittyhawks (No. 120) there was little probability of obtaining more aircraft for the area. He wrote on 29th July:

The present insurmountable difficulty lies, not in the lack of appreciation of requirements, but in the physical inability to procure the necessary aircraft. On three specific occasions during the last six months I have forcibly represented to the Commander, Allied Air Forces (General Kenney) the need for increased fighter strength in North-Western Area and, in particular, I have made requests for the allocation of one or more P-38 squadrons. The Commander Allied Air Forces is fully aware of the situation but nevertheless has determined that priority of available fighter squadrons must be given to the North-Eastern sector in the present situation.

Bostock pointed out that should the situation demand it, temporary reinforcements would be flown into the Northern Territory from the Fifth Air Force to deal with the emergency.

By August 1943 the squadrons operating in North-Western Area were:

*Australia*

- No. 2, general reconnaissance, equipped with Hudsons.
- No. 31, long-range fighter, equipped with Beaufighters.
- No. 452, interceptor fighter, equipped with Spitfires.
- No. 457, interceptor fighter, equipped with Spitfires.
- No. 1 Photo Reconnaissance Unit, equipped with Lightnings and Lancers.

*United Kingdom*

- No. 54, interceptor fighter, equipped with Spitfires.

*United States*

- No. 528, heavy bomber, equipped with Liberators.
- No. 529, heavy bomber, equipped with Liberators.
- No. 530, heavy bomber, equipped with Liberators.
- No. 531, heavy bomber, equipped with Liberators.

*Holland*

- No. 18, medium bomber, equipped with Mitchells.

The Spitfire squadrons had lost 44 aircraft in their six months of operations although only 17 of these losses had been directly due to enemy action. By comparison enemy losses at the hands of the Spitfires had been 63 destroyed and another 13 probably destroyed. The Spitfire squadrons had been below strength after a period of intense action in late June and early July, but replacements had come from the south during the month, and there were no further losses in action because the Japanese raids had ceased. Indeed, by the end of July, enemy activity in the air was almost at a standstill.

Bostock considered that while the existing wing organisation of the Spitfire squadrons made it necessary to keep the three squadrons together in a single wing, the tactical situation in the north might call for fighter protection in several areas. He therefore asked Air Force headquarters to disband No. 1 (Fighter) Wing thus allowing the squadrons to be distributed according to operational needs. Air Force headquarters agreed to the proposal and disbanded the wing headquarters, commanded at this time by Wing Commander Caldwell who had taken over from Group Captain Walters. Headquarters directed that fighter squadrons were to come directly under North-Western Area for administration, but that

operational control of all fighter squadrons in the area was to be exercised by No. 5 Fighter Sector Headquarters. During fighter operations there had been confusion as to the functions of the wing leader and the commander of the fighter sector headquarters. Trouble arose when the ground controller on duty tried to control the fighters in the air whereas only the sector commander should give orders to the wing leader and fighter squadrons in the air.

It was considered that the new arrangement would overcome the confusion that had arisen. However, Air Force Headquarters, some months later, re-introduced the name "No. 1 (Fighter) Wing", taking the view that the difference was only a matter of title, there being no difference in function between "Fighter Wing" and "Fighter Sector Headquarters". Air Vice-Marshal Jones, in making this change said: "The uncertainty concerning the wing organisation for the fighters in Darwin has occurred through the officer commanding the wing in the past not being fully qualified to control the fighters from the Operations Room. With the posting of Wing Commander Jeffrey<sup>2</sup> (as commander of No. 1 (Fighter) Wing), this difficulty has been overcome."<sup>3</sup>

For some months the Spitfire squadrons in North-Western Area tested the "anti-G" suits developed by Professor Cotton<sup>4</sup> of Sydney University. The pilots found that these suits, although at first badly fitting and uncomfortable in the tropical north (pilots could actually pour sweat from their boots when the suits were taken off), were successful in reducing the tendency to "black out" during turns at high speeds and when pulling out of dives. The suits were excellent in the dog-fighting type of manoeuvre, but Spitfire pilots were not permitted to dog-fight because the advantage would lie with the more manoeuvrable enemy fighter planes. Furthermore there were never enough suits available at one time to give them a proper trial in action. For these reasons and because enemy fighters over Darwin were now becoming a rarity, the suits were never given a thorough test in operations.

After the setback caused by the enemy air raids on Fenton, No. 380 Bombardment Group slowly increased its bomber effort from fifty sorties in June to seventy-eight in July. The commander of the group, Colonel William Miller, was handicapped by lack of replacements, both of aircraft and crews. The length of service of American crews had to be extended to meet the needs of operations. Wrong weather forecasts had adversely affected operations. In July and August alone fifty sorties failed because of bad weather over the target when good weather had been forecast. The strength of the No. 380 Group was to be built up to 48

<sup>2</sup> Gp Capt P. Jeffrey, DSO, DFC, 145. Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41; W Ldr 234 Wing RAF 1941; comd RAAF Stn Bankstown and 2 OTU 1942-43, 1 Wing 1943-44, 2 OTU 1944-45. Regular air force off; of Sydney; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 6 Jul 1913.

<sup>3</sup> The organisation of fighter control units was a source of friction between Jones and Bostock and the course of the argument it evoked is too involved and technical to be related here. At one stage Bostock appealed direct to the Minister (Mr Drakeford) on the question. The rival systems were never fully tried out since, after 1943, the RAAF was rarely engaged in defensive fighter operations.

<sup>4</sup> Prof F. S. Cotton. Research Prof of Physiology, Sydney University, 1941-55. Of Hornsby, NSW; b. Sydney, 30 Apr 1890. Died 23 Aug 1955.

aircraft, but during August the group had an assigned strength of 28 crews and 25 aircraft.

There had been some difficulty in achieving smooth cooperation between the Australian and American squadrons. The methods taught to the American airmen were different from the Australian. On 8th August Cole complained to Bostock that the commander of the bomber group had received an instruction direct from General Kenney not to attack targets near enemy fighters in daylight. This limitation, he claimed, gravely affected his power and affected R.A.A.F. Command orders relating to heavy-bomber operations. Bostock told Cole to disregard the instruction received by the American group commander and on 10th August, Kenney informed Bostock that he had no knowledge of any instruction limiting the use of the Liberators. However, he "expected Cole to use his head in regard to ordering daylight strikes in that sector. Obviously bombers unescorted by fighters should not be dispatched to make daylight attacks on targets known to be heavily defended by enemy fighters." Kenney also directed that no strikes were to be ordered in which fewer than six Liberators took part.

We know now that, beginning on 10th August, Japanese air regiments of the *7th Air Division* began to withdraw from Ambon to Wewak. This movement was aided by the completion of the air route between the Arafura Sea bases and northern New Guinea. The movement out of Ambon took place at the same time that other *Fourth Air Army* units moved out of Rabaul to Wewak, and was in accordance with the Japanese policy of concentrating army air squadrons in New Guinea, and navy air squadrons in the Rabaul-Solomons area.

However, the *23rd Air Flotilla* remained in the islands north of Darwin with its headquarters at Kendari and forward bases at Penfui, Ambon, and in the Kai Islands. Enemy float-planes also continued to harry Allied shipping moving through Torres Strait and the Arafura Sea. The enemy maintained this activity in spite of repeated attacks on their base at Taberfane in the Aru Islands by Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron. In August the Beaufighters, in addition to attacking the float-plane base, were also assigned to protecting ships from the float-planes. They operated out of their base at Coomalie Creek and staged through Millingimbi airfield.

On 6th August two float-planes bombed the steamer *Macumba* (2,526 tons) while the vessel was on its way from Thursday Island to Darwin. A bomb struck the *Macumba* in the engine room and the escorting naval vessel, *Cootamundra*, decided to take the vessel in tow. Three Beaufighters of No. 31 had been detailed to give cover for these vessels, but the rain and cloud were so bad that the first two aircraft had not been able to find the convoy. The float-planes attacked the convoy while the Beaufighters searched for it. Immediately after the attack *Cootamundra* radioed for more Beaufighters to cover her while she towed *Macumba*. However, during the day *Macumba* sank.

The radar station reported that a daily reconnaissance was being made in the Millingimbi area by float-planes, and on 10th August two Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron, based at Millingimbi to provide protection for shipping, fired on a float-plane which was hit and plunged on fire into the sea. Another one escaped after being hit, but appeared to have little chance of surviving the return flight to its base at Taberfane.

Cole ordered further attacks by Beaufighters on the base at Taberfane. The next day nine Beaufighters led by Squadron Leader Gordon<sup>5</sup> went to Millingimbi where they refuelled and then flew on to Taberfane. The weather was misty and heavy rain was falling. The Beaufighters flew at a height of fifty feet after passing Enu Island and then climbed to 1,000 feet for the run in towards the target. These tactics did not, however, take the enemy by surprise. Gordon, who was first to arrive, saw a Pete in the air at 300 feet near the beach used by the float-planes. He attacked it and caused some damage. In the next ten minutes three of the Beaufighters were dog-fighting with five enemy aircraft. The enemy succeeded in driving the Beaufighters away from the float-plane beach. Four of the enemy attacked Gordon, who broke off the engagement, called his Beaufighters together and returned to base, where all arrived undamaged except one machine piloted by Flying Officer Mitchell<sup>6</sup> which had been hit in the mainplane by enemy fire.

The Beaufighter squadron was a well-led, high-spirited and successful unit. It attacked Taberfane again on 17th August, this time with greater success, shooting down one Pete and three Rufe which they fought in the air over the base. Flight Lieutenant Entwistle,<sup>7</sup> who led the flight, reported later: "I saw a Rufe and a Pete each at 12 o'clock and 300 feet high. I attacked the Pete firing from 300 yards, head on, and closing right up. The Pete crashed into the water and was destroyed." Sergeant Kilpatrick,<sup>8</sup> who destroyed a Rufe, reported: "I came in formation with my flight leader (Entwistle) and saw a Pete and a Rufe airborne and a Rufe taking off from the float-plane beach. I pulled up to 1,000 feet in a left-hand turn and attacked a Rufe over the beach firing from 500 yards to 100 yards. Shells burst on the wing roots and with large clouds of black smoke trailing the Rufe crashed into the coconuts and burned." Kilpatrick then turned his cannons on another Rufe which was attacking Entwistle. He diverted it and having by then run short of fuel flew back to Millingimbi. Flight Lieutenant Willard<sup>9</sup> and Flight Sergeant Warren<sup>1</sup> who took part in this operation, flew their Beaufighters along the Serwatu River and came on a lugger flanked by two motor-launches. The two

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr R. L. Gordon, DFC, 485. 24 and 31 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of Coogee, NSW; b. Sydney, 6 Jul 1917. Killed in action 27 Feb 1944.

<sup>6</sup> F-Lt L. B. Mitchell, 412171. 18 and 31 Sqns. Salesman; of Roseville, NSW; b. Rose Bay, NSW, 19 Aug 1917.

<sup>7</sup> F-Lt J. D. Entwistle, DFC, 250796. 31, 21 and 22 Sqns. Commercial pilot; of South Yarra, Vic; b. Adelaide, 18 Jun 1919.

<sup>8</sup> F-O R. J. Kilpatrick, 409717; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of East Malvern, Vic; b. East Malvern, 19 Mar 1920.

<sup>9</sup> F-Lt W. E. Willard, 472. 30 and 31 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of Waverley, NSW; b. Waverley, 4 Feb 1921. Killed in action 30 Aug 1943.

<sup>1</sup> F-O V. T. J. Warren, 411974; 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Goulburn, NSW; b. Goulburn, 12 Feb 1918.

pilots dived on them firing their cannon. They saw some forty to fifty Japanese jumping into the water and swimming shorewards. The Beaufighters flew up and down machine-gunning the vessels and the Japanese, and it appeared that only about twenty of them reached the shore.

The Beaufighters' victory on this day was followed by a disaster a few days later, when on 21st August six of them were ordered to attack Taberfane again. They destroyed two Rufes and damaged two Petes on this day. Competition among crews for "kills" was keen and two of the Beaufighters (Flight Lieutenant Gardiner<sup>2</sup> and Flying Officer Leithhead<sup>3</sup>), which had been acting as top cover, dived together from 2,500 feet to attack a Pete which was just taking off from the float-plane beach. Their machines were seen by other pilots converging towards the Pete. Evidently the two pilots, eager to attack and concentrating on their quarry, did not notice each other and they collided. The force of the impact tore off the mainplanes of both Beaufighters, the port engines caught fire and both crashed burning into the bay 400 yards off Taberfane village. The machines then disappeared below the water and none of the four men in the crews came to the surface.

The enemy had been intercepting Liberators from the Darwin area over Balikpapan, Koepang and in southern Celebes, as well as challenging the Beaufighters at the float-plane base at Taberfane. Three times in August the Liberators attacked Balikpapan, the important oil-refining town in Borneo, as well as Ambon. One of the Liberators crash-landed on a salt pan on the Anjou Peninsula near Drysdale after returning from a raid on Balikpapan on 14th August. This was the first attack on Balikpapan from Australia, and the Liberators flew 2,620 miles, remaining aloft more than sixteen hours.

The Japanese had not sent aircraft, other than high-flying reconnaissance planes, against the Northern Territory since early July. On 13th August, however, evidently unwilling to risk daylight attacks against certain interception by the Spitfire squadrons, they attempted a night raid. About 9.30 in the evening eighteen enemy aircraft, divided into three groups, were detected coming in. Two groups went to Fenton airfield and dropped their bombs there without causing damage and the other group flew over Batchelor, then over Hughes, where they dropped a flare. The group then proceeded to Coomalie Creek where they dropped about twenty bombs including aerial burst and incendiaries. Again, there was neither damage nor casualties.

The alert was sounded in Darwin when men of the three Spitfire squadrons were holding parties to celebrate the arrival of the fighter wing in Australia twelve months before. Supper was about to begin for No. 457 Squadron when the men were ordered to take shelter in trenches. A number of Spitfires of No. 54 Squadron were on a night-training

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt F. J. Gardiner, 407575; 31 Sqn. Miner; of Broken Hill, NSW; b. Broken Hill, 4 Mar 1920. Killed in action 21 Aug 1943.

<sup>3</sup> F-O V. C. Leithhead, 406858. 14 and 31 Sqns. Civil servant; of Victoria Park, WA; b. Subiaco, WA, 23 Jan 1921. Killed in action 21 Aug 1943.

exercise at the time of the raid and tried to intercept the raiders but without result. Another six Spitfires from the squadron and two from No. 452 went up to join in the hunt but returned without success.

The enemy air force continued to send high-flying reconnaissance aircraft over the Darwin area. On the morning of 20th August three arrived. No. 457 was duty squadron, and Squadron Leader James, the commanding officer, destroyed one of the enemy over Fenton airfield. He fired three bursts into the aircraft and saw it hit the ground where it burned. Flight Lieutenant P. H. Watson chased another one near Anson Bay. He fired a long burst from his cannons and both motors of the enemy aircraft began to smoke. It then blew up covering Watson's Spitfire with oil. Watson was so close that he was forced to break away violently to avoid striking flying debris. The wreckage blew up again when about 5,000 feet from the ground. Pilot Officers Jenkins<sup>4</sup> and R. W. Watson attacked a third and sent it down in flames over Bathurst Island from which wreckage and the bodies of two Japanese airmen were later recovered.

The failure of the three reconnaissance aircraft to return evidently prompted the Japanese commander to send another aircraft over Darwin in the afternoon. A Dinah was detected at 3.30 p.m. when about 20 miles north-west of Darwin, and Wing Commander Caldwell, with Flight Sergeant Padula<sup>5</sup> as his Number Two, took off to intercept. Guided by radar reports they headed towards Point Charles where they saw the enemy aircraft at a distance of about 12 miles flying at 26,000 feet at a speed of about 300 miles an hour. Caldwell overtook the raider 20 miles from the coast and opened fire with all his guns and cannon when he was within 200 yards. One of the raider's engines caught fire and pieces of debris from it hit Caldwell's Spitfire. Padula then fired on and hit the raider. Caldwell followed the doomed machine down until it splashed into the water. He circled for a time and saw the body of a Japanese in a black flying suit and helmet, lying spreadeagled on top of the water, face upward.

On 21st August a force of some eighteen Japanese bombers raided the Northern Territory airfields again at night, dropping bombs near Coomalie, Fenton and Pell airfields. Men at the airfields were ordered to trenches, while five Spitfires from No. 452, and five from No. 54, went up but failed to find the raiders. Conditions at the time were hazy and there was only a half moon. The enemy crews evidently had difficulty in finding their targets because they spent a great deal of time flying round before dropping bombs. These caused little damage or injury.

The enemy reconnaissance aircraft which came over Darwin by daylight had rarely escaped destruction, and the Japanese therefore decided to protect them. On 7th September they sent a twin-engined aircraft heavily escorted by fighters. The first warning of this reconnaissance in force came at 8.30 a.m. when the enemy planes were 180 miles from Darwin. Twelve

<sup>4</sup> F-Lt J. R. Jenkins, 405210. 452 and 457 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Newmarket, Qld; b. Maryborough, Qld, 22 Jan 1921.

<sup>5</sup> F-Lt P. A. Padula, 411813. 167 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Assistant hotel manager; of Cobar, NSW; b. Brisbane, 5 Apr 1917.

aircraft of No. 457 were ordered to go to exit points to intercept. The radar operators thought at first that only one aircraft was coming, but soon it was clear that many were on their way, and a total of 48 Spitfires took to the air.

While the Spitfires of Nos. 54 and 452 were near Port Patterson the pilots saw 21 enemy aircraft 16 miles west of Sattler and at a higher altitude. The enemy fighters attacked before these Spitfires could gain a height advantage. In the affray which followed one enemy fighter was destroyed and two probably destroyed. A Spitfire pilot (Flying Officer Hinds<sup>6</sup>) was shot down and killed, while two others (Squadron Leader MacDonald, commander of No. 452, and Pilot Officer Tully<sup>7</sup>) were shot down but escaped by parachute. A cannon shell from a Japanese fighter exploded in the cockpit of MacDonald's machine and he suffered serious burns before baling out. He was found later and returned to the R.A.A.F. Medical Receiving Station in a Tiger Moth aircraft flown by Squadron Leader Fenton.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after this clash, No. 457, which had been airborne earlier and had a height advantage, carried out a successful attack on the enemy aircraft, shooting down four Zekes and damaging others. All Spitfires from this squadron returned undamaged to base. Flight Lieutenants Watson and MacLean and Flying Officer Smithson<sup>9</sup> shot down one Zeke each, while Flight Sergeant White<sup>1</sup> and Flying Officer Gregory<sup>2</sup> shared in the destruction of another.

Within the limits of the air strength allotted to him Air Vice-Marshal Cole was to aid General MacArthur's advance to Lae-Nadzab and New Britain. MacArthur had told Cole in general terms what he proposed to do in New Guinea in 1943, and asked Cole what he could do in North-Western Area in support. Cole had five main duties. They were: firstly, air protection of the base by day and night; secondly, reconnaissance to seaward to give 36 hours warning of major raids or invasions; thirdly, protection of shipping; fourthly, interference with Japanese air-fields; and fifthly, interference with enemy shipping. After carrying out these duties, North-Western Area could do little more until additional squadrons were assigned. However, by reducing reconnaissance, it was possible to strike at a wider diversity of targets. Some days before the Lae-Nadzab operation was to begin, Kenney told Cole about it, and it was left for Cole to increase his bombing activity to the limit. Accord-

<sup>6</sup> F-O W. T. Hinds, 129948 RAF. 234 and 54 Sqns RAF. Student; of Smarden, Kent, Eng; b. Ashford, Kent, Eng, 15 Dec 1921. Killed in action 7 Sep 1943.

<sup>7</sup> F-Lt P. D. Tully, 404998; 452 Sqn. Grazier; of Quilpie, Qld; b. Brisbane, 14 Jun 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Sqn Ldr C. C. Fenton, OBE, 261462. 34 Sqn; comd 6 Comm Unit 1942-45. Medical practitioner; of Katherine, NT; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 16 May 1901. Well known as the Katherine "flying doctor" in the 'thirties.

<sup>9</sup> F-Lt J. H. Smithson, DFC, 401252. 616 Sqn RAF, 457 Sqn. Fitter; of Oakleigh, Vic; b. Seddon, Vic, 22 Oct 1918.

<sup>1</sup> F-O F. C. White, 403614. 452 Sqn, 41 Sqn RAF, 457 Sqn. Carpenter; of Seaforth, NSW; b. Sydney, 19 Mar 1916.

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt R. H. W. Gregory, 401944. 610 and 54 Sqns RAF, 457 Sqn. Chemist; of Brighton Beach, Vic; b. Yarragan, Vic, 15 Oct 1915.

ingly, day and night, late in August and during September, North-Western Area sent Mitchells, Liberators, Hudsons, Beaufighters and Catalinas on bombing and strafing missions designed to bluff the enemy and wear his strength down by constant harassment and destruction, and force him to retain fighters which might otherwise be sent to Wewak and Rabaul to check the Allied advance in New Guinea. The enemy continued to keep forward bases supplied and in doing so lost aircraft, men, shipping and material from attacks by the squadrons of North-Western Area.

On 30th August, five Beaufighters attacking Taberfane, shot down a Pete and strafed a 100-ton vessel off Workai village. On the night of 31st August, Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron bombarded Taberfane and Langgur. Next day, Liberators of Nos. 529 and 530 Squadrons struck at Bima (Sumbawa) and Waingapu (Samba), while Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron bombed and strafed Manatuto (Timor) and Naga (Flores) villages. Four Catalinas from the newly-formed No. 43 Squadron staged from their base at Karumba (at the south-eastern end of the Gulf of Carpentaria) to bomb Langgur on 8th September. On 14th September, Beaufighters, Hudsons, Catalinas and Liberators all bombed a variety of targets.

The enemy's reply to this constant attack was to mount two more night raids on Northern Territory bases. About fifteen enemy bombers were over Fenton at a height of about 21,000 feet on 15th September. They dropped bombs which did some damage. Five Spitfires of No. 54 were sent up to attack them but failed to find the raiders. On 19th September another nine bombers attacked Fenton—the sixty-third raid on the Northern Territory since the beginning of the Pacific War. No damage was caused and again Spitfires sent to intercept them were unable to find the enemy bombers.

On 27th September, the Japanese made a surprise daylight raid on Drysdale River Mission and the near-by airfield occupied by No. 58 Operational Base Unit. The airfield and facilities had been used for some time as a staging base for R.A.A.F. aircraft proceeding on reconnaissance and bombing missions to Koepang and Penfui. The Japanese raiding force comprised 21 Lily bombers of the Army Air Service escorted by a flight of Zeke navy fighters. No. 317 Radar Station at the old mission picked up the bombers at 9.56 a.m. and thirty minutes later saw the bombers flying directly overhead. Meanwhile, the alarm had been given and everyone was sheltering in trenches. The bombers opened fire with machine-guns and continued machine-gunning while they dropped their bombs on the main runway. They caused no casualties but destroyed the armourer's hut where for some time afterwards ammunition could be heard exploding. Part of the bomber force then wheeled towards the Drysdale Mission where one of the bombers made a direct hit on a slit trench killing Father Thomas and five aborigines who were sheltering in it. Four buildings marked with the Red Cross were also destroyed. The enemy force then formed up and left on the return journey to Timor.

A party of R.A.A.F. men helped the mission fathers to put fires out and dig graves for the dead. It was considered that the interest of the enemy in Drysdale may have been aroused by the constant shuttling of aircraft between Darwin and Drysdale after the crash-landing of a Liberator on Anjou Peninsula in August. The Liberator was salvaged and flew from the area back to Fenton the day before the raid. Since there were no R.A.A.F. fighters in the area and the bombers were too high for the light anti-aircraft weapons, the enemy was not challenged and suffered no loss or even damage.

Wedged between the main concentration of Allied squadrons in New Guinea and the squadrons in the Northern Territory, were two R.A.A.F. squadrons which carried out the threefold task of guarding Horn Island at the extreme tip of Cape York Peninsula; Merauke, a desolate marshy little port in Dutch New Guinea; and the waters of the Torres Strait area which connect the Coral Sea to the Arafura Sea.

Torres Strait Force provided the garrison, and the R.A.A.F. provided air defence against both air and sea attack. No. 7 (Beaufort) Squadron, based on Horn Island, gave protection to shipping convoys and No. 84 (Boomerang) Squadron, commanded by Squadron Leader Ford,<sup>3</sup> arrived in April 1943 to provide fighter protection. North-Eastern Area, under the command of Air Commodore Cobby, directed operations. In early 1943 the enemy was considered capable of bombing or even invading the Torres Strait area, and General MacArthur desired warning of and protection against any such operation. His ELKTON plan for the offensive in New Guinea therefore provided for the building up and garrisoning of an air base at Merauke.

In mid-1942 American engineers had begun construction of an airfield at Merauke, but before the work was completed the engineers were withdrawn to carry out more urgently needed work elsewhere. No. 40 Radar Station had been sent to Merauke in 1942 and frequently during 1942 and early 1943 the radar equipment picked up enemy formations and single aircraft approaching the area. Between 10th and 15th December a total of 42 enemy aircraft made reconnaissance flights over the area, and on 31st December 22 bombers attacked the town and airfield.

The defence of Merauke had been discussed at an Advisory War Council meeting on 25th January 1943. MacArthur had told the council that there were two A.I.F. companies at Merauke, but he did not have the resources to occupy the town in force. Furthermore, the Japanese had command of the sea in the region if they chose to use it.

In March General Blamey had written to General MacArthur recommending that construction of the airfield be completed. He had pointed out that the Japanese were developing the Kaukenau-Timuka area and showing constant interest in Merauke. If the Japanese captured Merauke the airfield could readily be placed in action, and as a Japanese forward

<sup>3</sup> Air Cmdre N. Ford, OBE, AFC, 113. Chief Flying Instructor, Central Flying School 1940-42; comd 84 Sqn 1943-44, RAAF Stn Pt Cook 1945. Regular air force offcr; of Largs Bay, SA; b. Adelaide, 15 Jul 1914.

air base, it would threaten MacArthur's flank. In reply, on 26th March, MacArthur had informed Blamey that his recommendation had already been incorporated in a newly-approved plan (mentioned earlier in this volume) for the defence of the Torres Strait area: Merauke was to be occupied as an air operations base. In April at Garbutt airfield, Townsville, the R.A.A.F. formed No. 72 Wing Headquarters, commanded by Group Captain C. Eaton, which was ordered to Merauke, where the advanced headquarters of the wing arrived on the 28th of that month.

Meanwhile, No. 84 Squadron, operating from Horn Island, was carrying out patrols over Merauke. This squadron was the first equipped with the Australian-made Boomerang fighter aircraft to undertake an operational task. Merauke was 180 nautical miles from Horn Island, and because of their limited range the Boomerangs could remain over Merauke only for an hour during each sortie. On 8th May Eaton directed the squadron to maintain a standing patrol of two aircraft over Merauke during the daylight hours. In addition it was to provide cover for all shipping within a radius of 20 miles of Merauke. The Boomerangs continued their patrols without incident until 16th May when they made their first interception of enemy aircraft. Two Boomerangs piloted by Flying Officer Johnstone<sup>4</sup> and Sergeant Stammer<sup>5</sup> saw three Japanese Betty bombers and opened fire, pressing the attack to within 250 yards. The guns of one Boomerang failed to fire, but the other fired a one-and-a-half-second burst. The enemy replied with fire from the turret and tail guns without hitting the Boomerangs and then withdrew into clouds.

A Beaufort of No. 7, captained by Flying Officer Hopton,<sup>6</sup> on patrol over Torres Strait on 26th June, saw an indication of an enemy plane on its radar screen at about six miles distance. The Beaufort captain made off in the direction of the indication and saw an enemy float-plane which he attacked. The enemy plane caught fire at the wing root and dived towards the sea. The Beaufort followed, machine-gunning, and the crew saw the float-plane crash into the sea.

Towards the end of June the airfield at Merauke was at last completed, and on 30th June the first aircraft landed on it. On 2nd and 3rd July twenty-three Kittyhawks of No. 86 Squadron arrived at Merauke to provide fighter defence for the base. The commanding officer of this squadron, which had been formed earlier at Gawler in South Australia, was Squadron Leader Meehan. By July the force at Merauke had been considerably strengthened, as described earlier. There were now 4,200 men there of whom 3,500 were of the Australian Army and 700 of the R.A.A.F.

In May R.A.A.F. Command had ordered No. 12 (Dive Bomber) Squadron from the Northern Territory to Merauke where it was to operate under the command of No. 72 Wing. A ground party of 270

<sup>4</sup> F-Lt R. W. Johnstone, 405740. 23 and 84 Sqns. Jackeroo; of Barcardine, Qld; b. Winton, Qld, 18 Jul 1920.

<sup>5</sup> F-O M. F. J. Stammer, 425067; 84 Sqn. Tarmac hand; of Kedron, Qld; b. Sydney, 21 Apr 1923.

<sup>6</sup> F-Lt P. P. A. Hopton, DFC, 416024. 7 and 100 Sqns, 8 Commn Unit. Ecclesiastical student; of North Adelaide; b. Burra, SA, 28 Aug 1920.



(R.A.A.F.)

The convoy which carried R.A.A.F. personnel to the Aitape landing moving in to the beach at dawn on 22nd April 1944.



(R.A.A.F.)

R.A.A.F. and American commanders confer at Aitape about operating Australian and American aircraft from the Tadjai airstrip. Left to right: Air Cmdre F. R. W. Scherger, Brig-General Paul B. Wurtsmith, Col Leif J. Sverdrup, \_\_\_\_\_, W Cdr W. A. C. Dale, Lieut-General Walter Krueger and Gp Capt C. D. Candy.



(R.A.A.F.)

With the port aileron torn completely away, and less than 75 per cent of the wing surface intact, this Kittyhawk of No. 75 Squadron, was flown over 200 miles back to Noemfoor Island on 9th August 1944. Here F-O T. R. Jacklin, who piloted the aircraft examines the damage and counts his luck.



(R.A.A.F.)

Ground staff of No. 76 Squadron service the guns of a Kittyhawk at Noemfoor after it had returned from a strike in late 1944. Left to right: Sgt A. L. Stobbs, and Cpls H. Groth and A. G. Easlea.

arrived on 8th July, but by 15th July not a single building for the squadron had been even commenced because of shortage of materials. The aircraft and crews of the squadron had therefore to remain behind at Cooktown, Queensland, whence they were used in anti-submarine patrols and the escort of shipping—tasks for which the aircraft were not suited. However, No. 72 Wing had an operational base unit (No. 44), a medical receiving station and mobile fighter sector at the base ready for duty by July.

On 27th July an enemy bomber accompanied by three fighters approached the area and sixteen Kittyhawks took off to intercept them. The warning given of the approach of the enemy was only fifteen minutes and this was not enough to allow the Kittyhawks to reach sufficient height. The enemy aircraft were seen but escaped into clouds before the Kittyhawks could overtake them. However, by 2nd September, another radar station (No. 316) was set up at Cape Kombies, 120 miles west of Merauke. Warnings given by this station of hostile planes approaching would enable the Kittyhawks at Merauke to gain sufficient height for effective interception.

A week later, on 9th September, the Cape Kombies station detected enemy aircraft approaching Merauke when they were still 200 miles off, and plotted them right to the village. The enemy force comprised 16 Betty bombers escorted by 16 fighters. At 10.30 a.m., 14 Kittyhawks, led by Meehan, took off from the airfield followed four minutes later by four Boomerangs of No. 84, led by Flight Lieutenant Brown.<sup>7</sup> The enemy approached at a height of 20,000 feet. Eight of the enemy fighters were in front and on each side of the bombers, while another eight were above and well behind them acting as rear cover. The Kittyhawks attacked only the rear fighters. Only four of the 14 Kittyhawks were free of gun trouble during the engagement; because of oil thickening a total of 41 guns failed completely or partially to fire. However, Flight Lieutenant Stark<sup>8</sup> and Flying Officer Tucker<sup>9</sup> both shot down a Zeke while Flying Officer Stuart<sup>1</sup> destroyed an Oscar.

There were no R.A.A.F. losses. The four Boomerang aircraft did not reach the enemy. Meanwhile the bombers had attacked the airfield, making three hits on the landing strip, causing one minor casualty, and destroying a Boomerang aircraft in its dispersal bay. The damage to the airfield was repaired in less than an hour.

On 20th September a Beaufort of No. 7 Squadron, captained by Flying Officer Legge,<sup>2</sup> discovered a Jake float-plane while on patrol 42 miles

<sup>7</sup> Sqn Ldr K. R. Brown, 280701. 1 PRU, 84 Sqn; comd 75 Sqn 1944-45. Grocer; of Hyde Park, SA; b. Hyde Park, 24 Oct 1916.

<sup>8</sup> Sqn Ldr C. W. Stark, AFC, 576. 12, 13, 22, 24, 86 and 76 Sqn; comd 77 Sqn 1944. Regular air force offr; of Taren Point, NSW; b. Canterbury, NSW, 28 Jun 1919. Killed in aircraft accident (Empire Test Pilots' Course, UK) 13 Apr 1950.

<sup>9</sup> F-Lt A. D. Tucker, 405432. 75 and 86 Sqn. School teacher; of Margate Beach, Qld; b. Brisbane, 5 Mar 1920.

<sup>1</sup> F-Lt H. W. Stuart, 270841. 76, 86 and 82 Sqn. School teacher; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Toowoomba, 6 Mar 1920.

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt J. L. Legge, 408854. 7, 67 and 2 Sqn. School teacher; of Glen Iris, Vic; b. Murchison, Vic, 11 Jul 1916.

west of Cape Valsch. Unobserved by the Japanese, Legge closed on the enemy aircraft from the rear and engaged it with machine-gun fire. The Jake was forced to alight on the water and the pilot dived overboard. As all forward-firing guns had jammed, Legge then tried unsuccessfully to finish the aircraft by bombing. In the meantime, the navigator had managed to clear a gun, so the Beaufort went down to 100 feet and the Jake was set on fire and destroyed.

No. 12 arrived at length during September and on 28th September began standing patrol duties. On 9th October a Vengeance pilot saw an enemy float-plane which he attacked with machine-gun fire at long range but the float-plane escaped into cloud. No. 12 was employed almost entirely on patrol work, flying a daily patrol to Cape Valsch, up the coast to Cook's Bay and then back to Merauke. Apart from the clash with a float-plane on 9th October they had no direct contact with the enemy.<sup>3</sup>

Enemy activity in the Merauke-Torres Strait area was slight after September. Occasionally patrol planes appeared and one of these was shot down by a Beaufort of No. 7 on 11th November, 66 miles south-west of Cape Valsch. No. 84 at Horn Island was re-equipped with Kittyhawks in October and in the same month was incorporated into a new wing (No. 75) formed to take charge of all units at Horn Island, Thursday Island and Higgins Field. Because of the absence of enemy activity both No. 86 and No. 84 had little to do. The Merauke airfield, however, was useful for staging aircraft to carry out bombing attacks on Dutch New Guinea and in November and December, Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron, Beauforts of No. 7 and Kittyhawks of No. 84 staged through for strikes on enemy positions, chiefly Timuka and Kaukenau. No. 86 also took part in these missions.

In the last few days of 1943 the Cape Kombies radar station plotted a Japanese aircraft regularly making a landfall at Cape Valsch and then heading towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the commander of No. 86 decided to send two Kittyhawks to Cape Valsch to attempt to catch this aircraft. As a result, on 22nd January, Flight Lieutenant Stuart intercepted a Betty and shot it down. The following day two Kittyhawks were flying in the same area and saw another Betty accompanied by a fighter. Flight Lieutenant Whittle<sup>4</sup> shot down the Zeke and together with Flight Sergeant Kerrison<sup>5</sup> also destroyed the Betty. The Kittyhawks continued patrolling the area for another four days but the enemy did not come again. This squadron also destroyed four enemy barges at the mouth of the Lorentz River on 31st January. These had been used the day before for an attack on an army post on the Eilanden River; the Kittyhawks attacked next morning and sank all the barges by strafing.

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<sup>3</sup> This squadron ceased operations on 9 June 1944, and towards the end of that month all the Vengeances were flown south to Strathpine (Queensland).

<sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr R. J. C. Whittle, DFM, 404009. 250 Sqn RAF, 86 Sqn. Pharmaceutical chemist; of Murwillumbah, NSW; b. Brisbane, 10 Jul 1914.

<sup>5</sup> F-O S. T. Kerrison, 408373. 86 Sqn, 114 FCU. Carpenter; of Launceston, Tas; b. Launceston, 22 Sep 1922.

Although the Merauke and Horn Island squadrons had relatively slight contact with the enemy in 1943 they fulfilled a very useful purpose in conjunction with the North-Western Area squadrons in securing the flank of MacArthur's forces.

In October, North-Western Area squadrons continued to support the New Guinea offensive by destroying as much of the enemy strength as possible in the Netherlands East Indies.

No. 31 Squadron led by Gordon went on an armed reconnaissance to Selaru on 9th October. Gordon was attacked by a twin-engined enemy fighter. He jettisoned the bombs he was carrying, chased the enemy fighter at a speed of 250 knots, made a determined attack, closing to within twenty-five yards, and shot it down into the sea. Return fire hit Gordon's machine in the mainplane and tore an exhaust ring off an engine. Gordon then strafed a twenty-foot power barge. Some minutes later he saw an enemy fighter attacking other Beaufighters in the formation. Gordon chased this machine firing on it from 350 yards and saw it burn and crash into the sea 15 miles off Selaru. One of Gordon's engines later went out of action. He tested his landing gear over Bathurst Island and found this was out of order too but succeeded in making a crash-landing at Livingstone, Northern Territory, and both he and his navigator (Sergeant Jordan<sup>6</sup>) escaped injury. Another Beaufighter on this mission had also shot down an enemy fighter.

The Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron and Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron continued nightly attacks on Koepang, Lautem, Fuiloro, Langgur, and other targets. Catalinas of Nos. 11, 20 and 43 Squadrons coming from Cairns and Karumba, Queensland, bombed Ambon on a number of occasions in October and November. On the night of 18th October two of the Catalinas attempted a torpedo attack on a 2,000-ton vessel in Ambon, but failed to hit it.

Four Liberators which reached Pomelaa, in Celebes, on 25th October after eight other machines had turned back because of technical faults or engine failure, put up a magnificent running fight against some ten enemy fighters which intercepted. Two of the Liberators were shot down but four members of one crew were rescued later. In a letter to the commander of the heavy-bomber group some days later Cole urged that loose defensive formation should be maintained throughout such operations and this formation should be capable of being tightened to give maximum gun-power protection when the formation was attacked. He said that the main purpose of North-Western Area at the time was to reconnoitre and attack enemy targets without casualties; combat was to be avoided.

Technical and supply difficulties were limiting the efforts of North-Western Area during the last three months of 1943. A number of Boomerang aircraft of No. 83 Squadron arrived from the south to do

<sup>6</sup>F-O R. S. Jordan, DFM, 421681; 31 Sqn. Butcher; of Macksville, NSW; b. South Grafton. NSW, 11 Nov 1923.

duty in defence of Millingimbi, but none could be used for operations because of technical faults. By December however six of them were ready for duty and they were used to protect shipping convoys. No. 2 was very short of serviceable aircraft. (Ultimately this squadron was to be re-armed with Beaufort aircraft.) Great difficulty was also experienced in keeping No. 31 up to its strength in aircraft. Bomb racks had been fitted to the Beaufighters and during November they made frequent bombing attacks, especially against the Tanimbar Islands.

After being quiet during October, the enemy sent nine aircraft over Darwin and Fenton in the early hours of 12th November. Three aircraft from No. 457 and six from No. 54 took off to attempt interception. Smithson, who was patrolling over Darwin harbour, was told to prepare to meet enemy aircraft entering the Darwin area. Shortly afterwards he saw reflected bomb bursts through the clouds over Darwin and then three bombers in a V formation 1,000 feet below him. He immediately gave chase, lost them, and then saw them again illuminated in a searchlight directly in front. Losing height to dead astern he opened fire on a bomber which dropped vertically. He attacked another which caught fire and dived away. He followed it down for a short distance and then attempted to find the third bomber, but it escaped.

Apart from this encounter there was little for the Spitfire squadrons to do and the pilots again became impatient. The chances of heavy raids were becoming more remote because of the movement of a large part of the enemy air strength to the Central Pacific. According to one diarist Spitfire pilots were beginning to regard "readiness" as a term meaning "monotonous hours waiting for nothing".

Through October and November the radar station at Drysdale continued to register plots of enemy aircraft, though none came in to bomb the airfield. An enemy reconnaissance aircraft was over the area for one hour and a half on 3rd November at a height of 20,000 feet. Fearing another raid on Drysdale, North-Western Area sent a flight of six Spitfires from Livingstone to Drysdale. Two days later an enemy reconnaissance plane was over again. The six Spitfires took off and came close enough to fire, but the enemy managed to escape. The Spitfires were "scrambled" often until the end of 1943 but as a rule the cause of the alarm proved to be friendly aircraft. The thunderstorms, humidity, heat and torrential rains of the monsoon season began in November, causing a reduction of air operations. In one day seven inches of rain fell at Drysdale airfield making the runway unusable and bringing down telephone lines. Operations and training had often to be cancelled.

In spite of difficult weather Beaufighters and Mitchells carried out a notable attack on Japanese shipping in December. On 15th December eight Beaufighters of No. 31 led by Gordon went on a harassing mission to Timor. The Beaufighters went first to Drysdale airfield on 14th December, and, taking off early next morning, arrived over Timor just before dawn, having flown the last 100 miles at zero height. After landfall they flew over the hills to Manatuto on the north coast where they machine-

gunned and sank two barges and damaged six schooners. Gordon then saw a convoy of cargo ships escorted by a destroyer. He reported later: "Six airplanes made one strafing run each on the transports opening up on the waterline amidships and then raking the deck and superstructure. Many troops and crew were killed and some jumped overboard." The Beaufighters next attacked a small vessel of about 500 tons and sank it, and then ranged over Timor. Its cultivated fields were green and fresh from the rains and the crews could see cattle, buffalo and ponies grazing. They attacked Atambua airfield, machine-gunning anti-aircraft positions, and fired on a group of twenty Japanese troops in a military camp.

On arrival at base Gordon reported the presence of the shipping convoy off Timor, and Cole ordered No. 18 to send as many Mitchells as possible to attack it. Flown by their Dutch crews, five Mitchells took off in the afternoon, found the convoy, and all five aircraft attacked from mast height scoring hits with their bombs and leaving one of the vessels in flames. This vessel, *Wakatsu Maru* (5,123 tons) was burnt out and sank next day.

Early next morning eight Beaufighters, loaded with two 250-lb bombs each, were ordered to find the ships and attack them again whether they were afloat or beached. To save time they went direct from Darwin airfield instead of Drysdale. Again they flew the last 100 miles to Timor skimming the surface of the sea in order to avoid detection by enemy radar. The Beaufighters were led by Wing Commander Mann<sup>7</sup> and the crews found *Wakatsu Maru* still burning. Mann led the attack against the other transport, which was apparently undamaged, and had two barges alongside; three other barges were between the ship and the shore in Lautem roadstead.

Mann's bombs hit the hull below the forward mast. Flight Sergeant Ferguson,<sup>8</sup> who followed him, strafed and bombed hitting the transport which was covered in dense smoke. Ferguson flew so low that his aircraft cut the ship's wireless aerial between the masts. Other Beaufighters followed, bombing and strafing. Meanwhile, Gordon had noticed the approach of four enemy Nick aircraft (two-engined fighters similar to the Beaufighter). Gordon promptly shot one down and damaged another. Flying Officer Garnham<sup>9</sup> strafed and bombed one of the barges which capsized, throwing Japanese into the water.

As a result of this foray the Beaufighters sank the cargo ship *Genmei Maru* (3,180 tons) causing heavy casualties to the enemy. The Beaufighter crews were not sure of the result and reported on return to base that the ship had been "probably destroyed", but research after the war showed they had sunk it. One of the Nicks followed the Beaufighters

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<sup>7</sup> W Cdr F. W. B. Mann, DFC, 142; comd 31 Sqn 1943-44. Regular air force offr; of Artarmon, NSW; b. Sydney, 13 Apr 1918.

<sup>8</sup> P-O D. W. Ferguson, 416943; 31 Sqn. Power house assistant; of Clare, SA; b. Melbourne, 10 Feb 1923. Killed in aircraft accident 22 Mar 1944.

<sup>9</sup> F-Lt J. A. Garnham, 413573; 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of The Entrance, NSW; b. Quirindi, NSW, 5 Nov 1919.

for 80 miles when they set course for base, but the Beaufighters were faster and shook it off.

Three times in November Liberators of No. 380 Bombardment Group, operating through the R.A.A.F. base at Corunna Downs, raided Surabaya in western Java and Den Pasar in Bali. The Liberators because of their great range and bomb-carrying capacity were making the most effective contribution achieved from North-Western Area. Their geographical position in the Northern Territory enabled them to strike at targets far behind the Japanese front lines which were out of the reach of other Fifth Air Force bomber groups in New Guinea. They attacked Manokwari and Sorong in Dutch New Guinea, Halmahera, Ambon, Ternate, Kendari (the important base in Celebes) and Pomelaa, also in Celebes, where the Japanese mined nickel. These activities made a worthwhile contribution to MacArthur's advance along the north New Guinea coast by destroying enemy installations and forcing the enemy to retain defences well to the rear thereby weakening the front.

Both Bostock and Cole were anxious that the Liberators should attack Balikpapan, a very important strategic target because of the oil refineries there. Intelligence had shown that Balikpapan was in full operation as a fuel centre and the importance of the refineries to the enemy was further shown by an instruction from Japanese Headquarters dated 12th November that the building of an airfield for local protection be given first priority. Balikpapan had the only important refineries in range of Allied aircraft in the South-West Pacific. Cole ordered the group to attack it on 11th December. At about midnight, eleven Liberators dropped bombs on the target causing huge fires and explosions. Macassar was also bombed when the Liberators were on their return flight.

Cole was anxious, however, that the target should be attacked in a daylight strike in order that the best result should be obtained. Colonel Miller (commander of No. 380 Group) pointed out that such an operation was extremely hazardous because of increased enemy fighter strength at Balikpapan and the fact that the Liberators would be operating at their extreme range without fighter cover. He nevertheless agreed to lead a mission himself if Cole and Kenney would agree to accepting heavy losses. Kenney agreed, but, after further discussions between Cole and Bostock in Brisbane, it was decided not to make any further daylight strikes against well-defended back bases, including Balikpapan, until new crews were sufficiently trained. There had been an almost complete change of crews and command in No. 380 Group. Two fatal accidents had been caused by overloading of aircraft at take-off and for Balikpapan it would be necessary to load the aircraft beyond a safe limit. The risks of such a raid were too great.

By December, the character of the war in North-Western Area which was still almost entirely an air war, had undergone a great change. Japanese air strength was falling and the enemy was unable to maintain more than a few aircraft at forward bases. The Japanese were forced to discontinue

raids against Darwin. They occasionally intercepted Allied aircraft over Timor, but in the main were holding most of their fighter machines beyond the 600-mile limit.

The heavy losses suffered by the Japanese Naval Air Service around Rabaul and the Northern Solomons had forced a redistribution of the available squadrons. One 36-aircraft fighter squadron of the *23rd Air Flotilla* with 12 reserves was sent to Truk in December, and a 36-aircraft bomber squadron with 12 reserves was sent to Kwajalein in the Central Pacific to await the expected advance of the American Fleet. The weakened *7th Air Division* was withdrawn to Ambon from Wewak to assist the Japanese Navy in the protection of the Celebes area.

Air Vice-Marshal Cole was no longer thinking in terms of a "holding" strategy in North-Western Area, but was looking for a change-over to an offensive policy. Darwin was now a potential base from which an invasion of the Netherlands East Indies might be launched. Earlier Darwin had been considered too vulnerable to air attack. Now more aircraft were being moved in and supply facilities built up there. Cole moved stores, maintenance and repair facilities north to Darwin to save transport from back areas. Melville Bay was being developed as a base for Catalinas. There was even a plan to base at Darwin some of the new big American bombers, the Superfortresses (B-29's) for attacks against Balikpapan and other distant targets.