

CHAPTER 11

THE ADMIRALTIES

HAVING secured the approval of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General MacArthur made ready to complete the isolation of Rabaul by seizing Kavieng, the Admiralties and the Hansa Bay area in New Guinea. Admiral Halsey's South Pacific forces would seize Kavieng on 1st April and on the same day South-West Pacific forces would invade the Seeadler Harbour area in the Admiralties. Orders were issued for these operations on 13th February.

The Allies wanted the Admiralties not so much because they would help isolate Rabaul, but because they would serve as a substitute for Rabaul. Seeadler Harbour, fifteen miles long and four wide, was capable of sheltering large naval forces; and, on Los Negros, airfields could be built from which aircraft could reach out to Truk and Biak. General Kenney planned to use his entire bomber force in the New Guinea area in support of the Admiralty Islands operation. Squadrons of the Australian No. 9 Group during the campaign were to neutralise enemy air forces in central New Britain and be prepared to occupy Manus Island with three fighter squadrons. Kenney also directed that two Liberator squadrons of the No. 380 Bombardment Group in the Darwin area should go to Nadzab to aid in the bombing operations. North-Western Area was also directed to help by carrying out armed reconnaissances of Jefman Island, Halmahera, Noemfoor, Ambon and Babo to defeat enemy attempts to move aircraft or ships through those areas towards the Admiralties. This duty was to begin on 15th March and continue through D-day (1st April) to the 7th April.

The R.A.A.F.'s No. 73 Wing, then at Kiriwina, was chosen as the fighter wing to garrison the Admiralties for a period of ninety days, after which this duty would be taken over by South Pacific forces. No. 73 Wing was commanded by Wing Commander Steege and included Nos. 76, 77 and 79 Squadrons. In addition to these squadrons No. 49 Operational Base Unit, No. 27 Air Stores Park and No. 26 Medical Clearing Station would accompany the wing. It was also planned that R.A.A.F. signals and fighter-sector personnel should land soon after 1st April and have everything in readiness for the fighters to operate immediately they were called forward to Los Negros. A total R.A.A.F. strength of 2,775 would be moved.

Air Commodore Lukis had protested strongly to Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne and to General Kenney when squadrons of No. 9 Group were assigned to the Admiralty Islands operation, on the ground that there would be little work for the fighter squadrons to do there. Contact with the enemy air forces was unlikely. General Kenney and General Whitehead (deputy commander of the Fifth Air Force) pointed out that Manus Island was to be developed into a naval base and that it was essential

that it be given adequate fighter protection. They overruled Lukis' objections and preparations began immediately for the move of No. 73 Wing. It was important that the R.A.A.F. fighters should be established as quickly as possible in the Admiralties to provide fighter cover because fighters operating from New Guinea bases and Cape Gloucester would be too far away to remain long in the air over Manus.

Late in February, when it became clear to Kenney that the Japanese air forces were abandoning the Bismarck Archipelago he conceived the idea that a small force of troops could immediately seize and hold Los Negros Island. Kenney briskly relates how he put to MacArthur this proposal to move into the Admiralty Islands five weeks ahead of schedule and how the general had readily agreed:

On the evening of the 23rd [February] the daily reconnaissance report indicated that the Jap might be withdrawing his troops from Los Negros back to Manus. There was nothing for him to stay for. . . .

The message of the evening of the 24th confirmed my estimate. It said that the reconnaissance plane had flown at low altitude all over the island for half an hour. No one had fired a shot at it. There was still a heap of dirt in front of the Jap field hospital door that had been piled there two days before by the bombing. There had been no washing on the lines for three days. In short, Los Negros was ripe for the picking.

I went upstairs to General MacArthur's office and proposed that we seize the place immediately with a few hundred troops and some engineers, who would quickly put the airdrome in shape so that if necessary we could reinforce the place by air. Kinkaid had a lot of destroyers at Milne Bay and we could use them for a fast express run as the Japs had done to us all through the Buna Campaign. We could load a couple of hundred of General Swift's crack 1st Cavalry Division on each destroyer, run up there during the night, and unload and seize the place at daybreak. I could have fighters overhead and bombers to knock out the Japs if they did try to stop us from stealing Los Negros from under their noses. If the weather should stop me from supporting the show, it would also prevent the Jap air force from interfering. We need not take any real chances. On arrival off the island, if the Nips did too much shooting, we could always call it an armed reconnaissance and back out. On the other hand, if we got ashore and could stick, we could forget all about Kavieng and maybe even Hansa Bay. Manus was the key spot controlling the whole Bismarck Sea.¹

MacArthur agreed; but Kenney's hope that the enemy might be withdrawing from Los Negros was not realised. In fact Colonel Ezaki, the garrison commander, was fully aware of the coming invasion, he had prohibited all firing at Allied aircraft, and allowed no movement in the open until 5 p.m. each day to create the impression that the defending forces had gone. Allied scouts who arrived in a Catalina on the 27th February went ashore and found the place "lousy with Japs". The landing of this Catalina, according to a Japanese officer interrogated later, had been observed and the forces were ordered to prepare for immediate action. Japanese troops in the Admiralties numbered 2,615. General Imamura, anticipating the danger, had sent a battalion of the *38th Division* to the island in February to reinforce the garrison, the main force of which was stationed on Los Negros.

¹ General Kenney Reports. pp. 358-9.

General Kenney's plan was given immediate effect although the sudden change gave little time for preparation. For example, the cruiser *Phoenix* which was to take part in the operation was in Brisbane on the 26th February, and the captain was told to be at Milne Bay on the 28th. Shore patrols from the ship raced round Brisbane, with blaring loud-speakers broadcasting the code word for recall to 300 sailors.

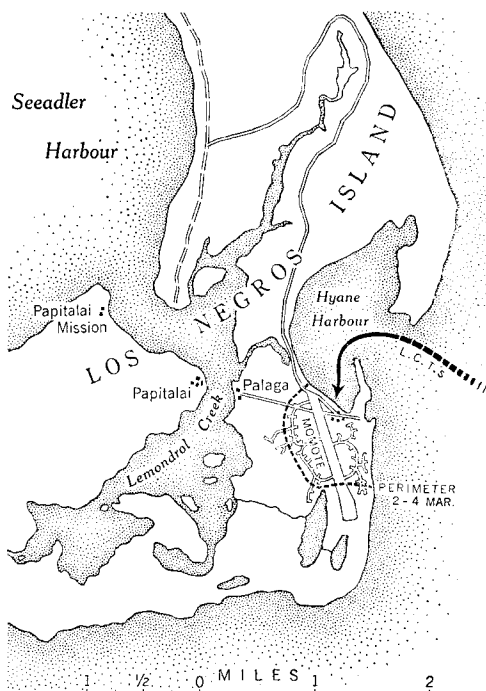
Before the landing on the 29th February cruisers and destroyers carried out a bombardment of shore targets, but because of the foul weather only nine aircraft from the

ten squadrons of Liberators and Mitchells assigned to the operation got through to support the landing. However, units of the 1st Cavalry Division, commanded by General Swift, landed on the south-west shore of Hyane Harbour near the Momote airfield. There was little initial opposition and the airfield was quickly seized and defences set up. Six hours after the landing, General MacArthur, who had observed the operation from the *Phoenix*, went ashore. He walked up and down the airstrip, pacing its length and width and dug into the coral surfacing to test it "while his anguished aide, Colonel Lehrbas, tried to get him to hurry his investigations and get out of the

range of occasional sniper fire that was beginning to develop. The General told Brigadier-General Chase to stay and hold the place."²

There was no air opposition to the landing, because, no doubt, of the heavy weather. No enemy aircraft appeared at all until 2nd March, when Allied fighters chased off more than forty of the enemy.

Meanwhile, Japanese troops had made determined counter-attacks both by day and by night, but were repulsed. Reinforcements, composed of the remainder of the 5th Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division and supporting artillery units arrived on 2nd March. The same convoy brought Wing Commander Minchin,³ who had been appointed Signals Liaison



² Kenney, p. 362.

³ W Cdr W. A. Minchin. 270916. (1914-18: Wireless Branch RAN.) Area Sigs Offr Southern

Officer to coordinate signals services between the R.A.A.F. units engaged and the Sixth American Army. He was accompanied by a party of twelve R.A.A.F. men of No. 114 Fighter Sector, who were to set up the fighter-defence organisation.

A supreme effort was made by the enemy on the night of 3rd-4th March when they attacked in a series of waves, but were repulsed. To the astonishment of the American soldiers, one of the enemy attacks was preceded by the playing of a gramophone record *Deep in the Heart of Texas!* More American reinforcements arrived on the 4th, 6th and 9th March.

The ground party of No. 77 Squadron arrived in an L.S.T. on the morning of 6th March in a convoy that also brought American reinforcements. The party, comprising nine officers and 194 airmen under Flight Lieutenant Irwin,⁴ had left Goodenough Island on 2nd March and Finschhafen on the 4th. The convoy had to enter Hyane Harbour through a small opening in the reef about 120 feet wide. As the ships entered, Japanese troops on a point opposite, about 300 yards off, fired on them with machine-guns and 25-mm cannon. The L.S.T.'s in the convoy returned the fire and destroyers also opened up on them. When the American reinforcements filed ashore from the L.S.T.'s they were marched to the front line about 200 yards along the beach. At this time the area held by the Americans comprised the airfield and a narrow area between the airfield and the sea. One of the first Australians off the L.S.T. asked a near-by American where the front line was. The American replied: "Boy, you're right in it!"⁵

The men of the R.A.A.F. set to work unloading 600 tons of squadron equipment, while American Mitchell bombers carried out a bombing and strafing attack on enemy positions only 300 yards away. At nightfall they dug foxholes along the fringe of the beach and from these kept watch for enemy infiltration. Small parties of the enemy came forward during the night, but none reached the air force positions. Some days later aided by American engineers the Australians began to hack a site for their camp out of the jungle.

Meanwhile, at Kiriwina, the pilots of No. 76 Squadron stood by their machines ready for the order to fly to Momote as soon as the airfield there was ready to receive them. General Kenney had directed that the R.A.A.F. fighters should arrive between D-plus-five days (4th March) and D-plus-ten (9th March). The aircraft of No. 76 were to travel from Kiriwina to Finschhafen and then on to Momote. On arrival at Momote half the squadron was to land, refuel and be brought to "stand-by" as quickly as possible while the other half patrolled overhead. When the

Area 1941-42; Chief Commn Offr North-Eastern Area 1942-43; comd 10 Sigs Unit 1943; Chief Sigs Offr 9 Gp and Northern Cd 1943-44; RAAF Sigs LO Fifth Air Force and 10 Gp 1944; Chief Sigs Offr Southern Area 1945. Radio engineer; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. Warracknabeal, Vic, 15 May 1896.

⁴ F-Lt L. Irwin, 274540. 77 Sqn, 83 Wing. Journalist; of Warwick, Qld; b. Warwick, 24 Feb 1914.

⁵ Gordon Powell, *Two Steps to Tokyo* (1945), p. 166.

first half had been brought to stand-by the remainder would land, refuel and also come to stand-by.

The advanced ground party of No. 76 which was to go to Momote ahead of the flying echelon of the squadron, was directed by No. 9 Group to move on 4th March. The order for the movement of this advanced party had come unexpectedly at Kiriwina and men of the whole squadron had worked feverishly for eighteen hours to prepare the party and its equipment for this emergency move. However it could not take place on 4th March because at that date American engineers preparing the airfield for use were still being fired on by Japanese snipers and the airfield was not ready for operations. Advanced headquarters of the Fifth Air Force therefore signalled No. 9 Group informing Lukis that the "tactical situation . . . prohibits troop carrier operation at this time". Since ground crews of No. 76 could not be moved to Momote, the ground crews of No. 77 Squadron, who would arrive on 6th March, were directed to take over the handling of No. 76's aircraft.

By 7th March, the American engineers had 3,500 feet of the Momote airfield ready, and that afternoon the first Allied aircraft to reach the island—an American Mitchell—landed. On the same day, twenty-three Kittyhawks of No. 76, whose pilots included Wing Commander Steege, commander of the wing, and Squadron Leader Loudon,⁶ commander of No. 76, left Kiriwina for Finschhafen. After twenty-four hours delay at Finschhafen, twelve of these aircraft were called forward to Momote. They were guided to the island by a Mitchell and landed at Momote on the afternoon of 9th March. Steege found that because of Japanese night activity no tents had been put up, and the R.A.A.F. men on the island were living under the most primitive conditions, including sleeping at night in damp, unhygienic dugouts. Unburied Japanese dead lay around the airfield bringing swarms of flies. The pilots had to spend the first night in the open in drizzling rain. Sleep was disturbed by the constant fusillade of small arms fire at shadows and movement.

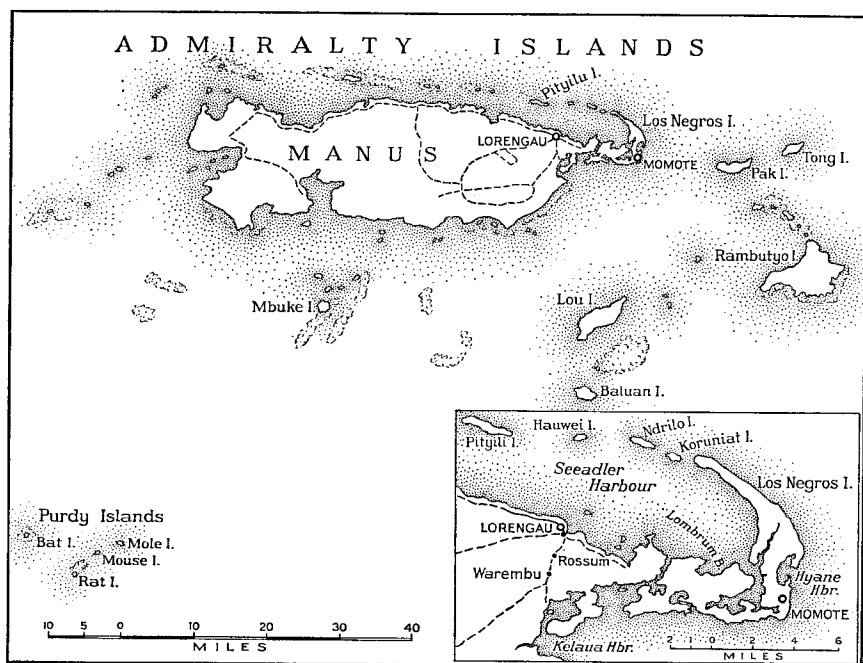
The twelve Kittyhawks came to readiness immediately they arrived on 9th March and the remaining twelve aircraft of No. 76 arrived at midday on the 10th. One of these crashed on landing but the pilot escaped injury. There were a number of ships standing off shore and the naval commander asked Steege to provide Kittyhawks for patrols to counter possible enemy air attacks. A standing patrol was provided from dawn until dusk on 10th March. On this day two Kittyhawks were ordered off the ground to attempt the interception of an enemy plane reported by radar south of Los Negros, but they failed to find the enemy aircraft and were recalled to base. Before landing they made a general search of the area but found no signs of enemy activity.

Fifth Air Force Fighter Command, on 11th March, directed No. 73 Wing to provide fighter cover for a squadron of Mitchell bombers which were to bomb Lorengau airfield on Manus. Twelve Kittyhawks of No. 76

⁶ Sqn Ldr I. S. Loudon, DFC, 404691. 603 Sqn RAF; comd 76 Sqn 1943-44. Rubber planter; of Port Moresby, Papua: b. Port Moresby, 17 Oct 1921.

led by Loudon took off at 10 a.m. and carried out this duty without meeting interference from the enemy. The same day reports arrived of the approach of an enemy naval force, and all available Kittyhawks were armed with 500-lb bombs to attack it. However, further searches failed to find this force and it was considered that low-lying islands to the north of Manus had been mistaken for enemy naval vessels.

About 10 p.m. on the night of the 11th March Japanese aircraft dropped four bombs on the runway of Momote airfield. They damaged four of the Kittyhawks, but the ground crews repaired these aircraft during the night and all were ready for flying early next morning.



An American patrol had been sent to reconnoitre Hauwei Island on 11th March to find suitable advanced artillery positions for support of a landing on Manus Island. This patrol had been badly mauled by the enemy, and next day the American commander called for artillery, air and naval support while a larger force landed. No. 76 provided six Kittyhawks which bombed and strafed the western tip of the island. Four of their 500-lb bombs fell on the target area and two landed in the sea fifty yards south of it. The landing by a squadron of the 7th Cavalry was successful although they met stern resistance from the enemy. The occupation was completed the following day.

No. 76 Squadron gave support to a larger operation on 15th March when units of the cavalry division embarked in transports in Hyane Har-

bour with the object of seizing the Lorengau airfield. Supported by fire from six destroyers, artillery fire and bombing attacks by Mitchells, the troops went ashore at dawn. Early in the afternoon No. 76 was ordered to bomb a position 800 yards west of the Lorengau airfield and marked for them by a white cross and smoke. The primary position was hit by four of the 500-lb bombs. The squadron made a second attack later in the afternoon. By nightfall the Americans were near Lorengau airfield, which was captured on 17th March; next day Lorengau village was taken.

Meanwhile R.A.A.F. reinforcements had arrived at Los Negros. On 13th March fourteen Kittyhawks of No. 77 led by Squadron Leader Stark had left Vivigani and they arrived at Momote that afternoon. Before landing they patrolled over the airfield while twenty Douglas transports which brought the long-delayed advanced party of No. 76 unloaded and dispersed. Ground crews of No. 76 immediately took over the care of the squadron's twenty-three Kittyhawks. Next day No. 77 again carried out shipping patrols and on 16th March six aircraft were loaded with 500-lb bombs and told to attack ground positions in support of the cavalrymen on Manus Island. All bombs dropped within the target area. On the afternoon of the same day Squadron Leader Stark led another six of his Kittyhawks in a bombing and strafing attack on a village in the south-western corner of Los Negros Island. They bombed red-roofed dwellings in the village and repeatedly strafed it with machine-gun fire. Later observation showed that some twenty huts were burned out as a result of the attack.

The stock of bombs was now depleted, and Steege signalled for another fifty 500-lb bombs. Five air transports were used to bring these in. When they arrived it was learned that equipment and personnel of No. 76 had been unloaded at Dobodura to provide transport for the bombs. This left the squadron still short of essential men and equipment and caused serious problems of maintenance.

On this day there was a considerable increase in R.A.A.F. strength when the transport *Marcus Daly* arrived from Kiriwina with 897 men. Units on the *Marcus Daly* included No. 73 Wing Headquarters, No. 114 Mobile Fighter Sector, No. 14 Wireless Telegraphy Station, No. 10 Signals Unit installation party, No. 26 Medical Clearing Station, No. 27 Air Stores Park, No. 79 Squadron ground party (207 men) and detachments of service police, a malaria-control unit, a bomb-disposal squad, and No. 4 Replenishing Centre. Because of limited space aboard the ship it was found impossible to embark No. 12 Repair and Salvage Unit which had 360 men on its strength. At Milne Bay, some 200 more men were embarked, together with a quantity of deck cargo, and this severely cramped accommodation. Meal parades were a never-ending procession from one end of the ship to the other. When they arrived off Los Negros the men were allowed to take only their personal gear ashore, which meant that they had to spend several nights without cover. Flies were present in swarms and, as it was impossible to prevent them coming into contact with food, the number of cases of enteritis increased. At times

20 per cent of the ground crews suffered from malaria, dengue or dysentery. Very sick cases were admitted to the American 58th Evacuation Hospital.

With two squadrons now established at Momote No. 73 Wing was able to assume the duty of providing cover for shipping that moved in and out of Seeadler Harbour. General Whitehead on 16th March ordered the wing to take over responsibility for all shipping north of latitude 3 degrees 37 minutes south, whether north or south bound, or while at anchorage. This became the main function of the wing. On 17th March No. 77 provided this cover all day; four Kittyhawks remained aloft at a time, maintaining the patrol for three hours each flight. The two Kittyhawk squadrons shared this responsibility on alternate days. Despite the fact that these constant patrols involved a great deal of flying, and despite the difficult conditions, No. 76 maintained an average daily serviceability of twenty-one aircraft, an achievement which reflected great credit on the ground crews.

To give early warning of the approach of enemy aircraft five R.A.A.F. radar stations, Nos. 337, 340, 345, 346 and 347, were assigned to the Admiralty Islands. Nos. 337 and 347 arrived at Los Negros on 9th March and began immediately to instal their equipment. No. 340 Station was sent to Bat Island, one of the four tiny islands of the Purdy group south of the Admiralties. This radar station arrived at Bat Island on 11th March and within three days was operating. However, conditions at Bat Island were found to be most unhealthy. The island, only 450 yards long and 300 yards wide, was excellent as a site for a radar station, except that it was the filthy home of seagulls, thousands of rats, and hundreds of wild pigs. Ten days after the station began operating a man became ill from scrub typhus and, from then on, nineteen more R.A.A.F. men went down with typhus and dengue. Two of them died. Four out of six Americans who were on the island died from typhus.

Because of the outbreak of scrub typhus orders were issued early in April for the station to be withdrawn from Bat Island. It ceased operations on 13th April. While it operated, the station kept tracks of Allied aircraft and gave warning of a few enemy aircraft detected by its instruments.

The success of the daring move into the Admiralty Islands, and the withdrawal of the enemy air units from Rabaul and the fleet from Truk presented General MacArthur with a chance to move his men rapidly forward. Admiral Halsey flew to Brisbane early in March to discuss the situation with him, and on 3rd March MacArthur suggested to Halsey that he should assault Kavieng on 15th March instead of 1st April. Halsey said that it could not be done, but offered to move into Emirau instead of Kavieng by that date. MacArthur, however, wanted Kavieng to be taken. There was general agreement that Hansa Bay should be by-passed in favour of Hollandia. The Hollandia operation would also be aided by a preliminary operation to seize Aitape for an advanced fighter base to cover the troops as they landed at Hollandia farther west.

MacArthur radioed the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 5th March, informing them that the enemy was massing ground forces forward in the Madang-Wewak area, leaving relatively weak forces at Hollandia. He therefore proposed to seize Hollandia and by-pass Hansa Bay. This operation, he said, "would hopelessly isolate some 40,000 enemy ground forces along the New Guinea coast and hasten the advance westwards by several months".

The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed, and Hollandia was substituted for Hansa Bay, the target date being 15th April. To MacArthur's surprise the Joint Chiefs also cancelled the Kavieng operation and directed him to complete the isolation of the Rabaul-Kavieng zone "with the minimum commitment of forces". He was also to speed up the complete occupation of the Admiralties, which was to be developed as a fleet and air base, and to establish air forces there to complete the neutralisation of Rabaul and Kavieng, and assist in the neutralisation of Truk.

MacArthur therefore on 16th March cancelled the Kavieng operation and directed Halsey to occupy Emirau Island where he was to establish air and light naval forces which were to blockade the Rabaul area. Halsey's landing force left Guadalcanal on 18th March and occupied Emirau on the 20th. It sailed through waters which a few months earlier had been controlled by the Japanese, but no enemy plane, surface ship, or submarine attempted to interfere. Admiral Halsey reported: "The island was ours at the price of one casualty: a Seabee fell off a bulldozer and broke his leg."⁷

After the fall of Lorengau airfield on Manus Island the 1st Cavalry Division pushed south across the island. Though their main task was the protection of shipping the Kittyhawk squadrons continued to support the infantry in the task of destroying the remaining Japanese forces. On 21st March Kittyhawks of No. 77 bombed and strafed a target indicated by the infantry by smoke bombs. Led by Stark, they continued to Pityilu Island north of Manus where they machine-gunned houses and native huts.

No. 77 attacked again on 23rd March at Warembu village and the following day bombed and strafed Rossum, a Japanese strong-point on Manus Island. Twelve Kittyhawks took part in this mission and all bombs fell in the target area. One machine piloted by Pilot Officer O'Reilly⁸ hit palms at the southern end of the Momote airfield when it was coming in to land after the mission. The Kittyhawk crashed and immediately caught fire, O'Reilly being fatally injured.

Steege and Loudon had observed the bombing at Rossum from the ground on 24th March. The Americans were to launch a final assault on this strong-point next day, and Steege arranged with Brigadier-General

⁷ W. F. Halsey: *Admiral Halsey's Story*, p. 184. A "Seabee" i.e. CB, a member of a Naval Construction Battalion.

⁸ P-O E. N. O'Reilly, 432559; 77 Sqn. Student; of Pymble, NSW; b. North Sydney, 19 Dec 1922. Died of injuries 24 Mar 1944. A brother, F-O T. B. O'Reilly, also a fighter pilot, was killed over UK 12 Jun 1943.



(R.A.A.F.)

Closely coordinated ground-air wireless liaison achieved this successful strafing attack on a Japanese Topsy aircraft at Selaru Island on 22nd July 1944. The message from the enemy pilot over his base saying he was about to land, was intercepted by an Australian W/T station, and relayed to three Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron which were in the vicinity and headed for the Japanese strip. After having waited until the Topsy had landed they delivered surprise attacks on the enemy aircraft and destroyed it.



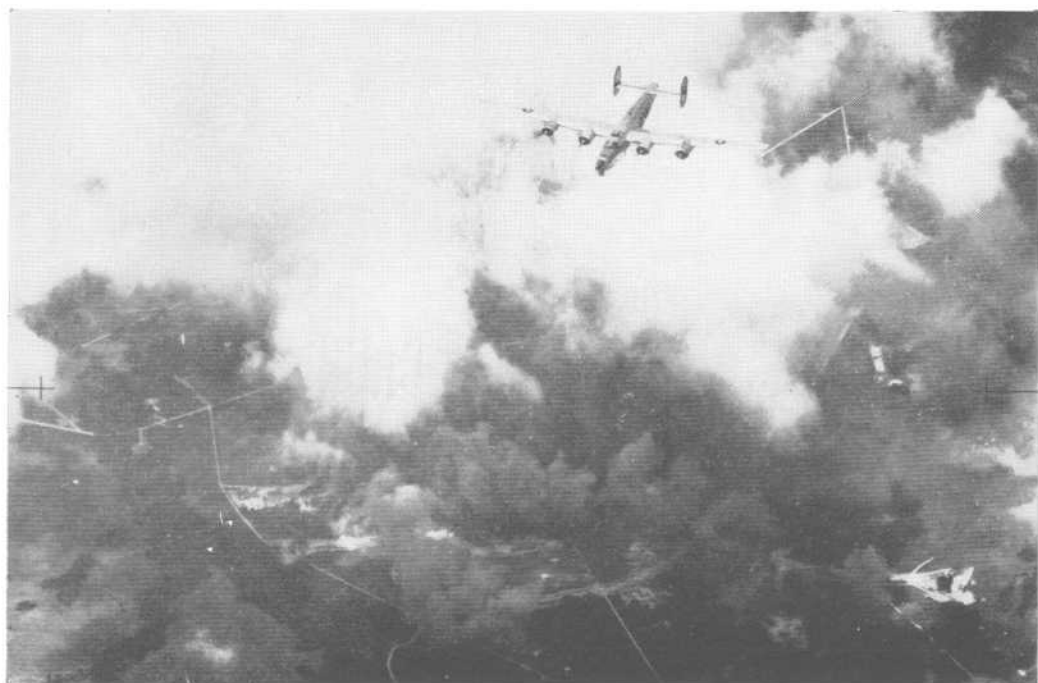
(R.A.A.F.)

Mitchells of No. 18 (Netherlands) Squadron on an airfield in North-Western Area in July 1945.



(R.A.A.F.)

A "Sugar Charlie" (300-1,000 ton sea trucks used by the Japanese for inter-island transport) is left burning and listing off the tip of Alor Island, north-west of Timor, on 21st August 1944, after being bombed and strafed by three Mitchells of No. 2 Squadron, piloted by F-Os E. L. Ekert and K. E. Coughlan, and F-Sgt P. Hocking.



(R.A.A.F.)

A Liberator of No. 24 Squadron over Ambesia airstrip, Celebes, on 24th October 1944.

Mudge, commander of the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division, to give extensive close-support bombing. The position of the American troops was to be marked by white smoke and the Kittyhawks were to bomb 500 yards in front of the smoke and parallel to it. At the conference it was also arranged that Flying Officer Hannagan,⁹ the operations officer of No. 76, should be stationed with the forward troops to control the Kittyhawks by radio. No. 77 attacked with ten Kittyhawks at 8 a.m. next day, all their bombs dropping in the target area indicated to them. These aircraft returned to Momote, reloaded and, all except one which had become unserviceable, again bombed and then machine-gunned the target. Loudon led thirteen more Kittyhawks of No. 76 against the same target. The American forces then attacked Rossum and seized it. This was the end of organised resistance by the Japanese on Manus.

There had been considerable delay in calling forward the Spitfires of No. 79 because of the difficulties met by the ground party in establishing a camp area for them on Los Negros. They were finally summoned on 28th March and flew from Kiriwina direct to Momote. On the same day ten additional Kittyhawks of No. 77 arrived at Los Negros from Finschhafen.

The experience at Los Negros had shown that R.A.A.F. units were not organised to cope with rapid movement. The men did not have enough handling gear to load their equipment; there was a lack of transit cases and crating timber; and the men of the units lacked experience of unloading vessels. As a result great damage was done to equipment during unloading, and this caused delay in setting up camps and operating facilities. Even so, after the cargo was taken off the ships the squadrons were soon operating efficiently. On 28th March the condition of each squadron of No. 73 Wing was:

- No. 76 Squadron: Twenty-three aircraft which were being serviced by the advanced flight of about half the squadron; the remainder of the squadron was still at Goodenough with heavy equipment awaiting transport to the Admiralties.
- No. 77 Squadron: Twenty-four aircraft operating, and a small rear party of about forty men remaining at Goodenough.
- No. 79 Squadron: Twenty-four aircraft in operation with a small rear ground party still at Kiriwina.

As soon as they arrived, the Spitfires joined the other two squadrons in attacks on Pityilu Island where the enemy maintained their last defences threatening the security of Seeadler Harbour. The 1st Cavalry Division was to land there on 30th March and on the 29th the R.A.A.F. wing was to bombard and strafe the island. Heavy rain had put the airfield out of use on the morning of 29th March, but by midday it was fit for operations again. No. 76 flew twenty-four bombing and strafing sorties in the afternoon. The Spitfires of No. 79, led by Squadron Leader Bott¹ also machine-gunned targets on the island which were presumed to be the enemy head-

⁹ F-Lt J. L. Hannagan, 415141. 76 and 25 Sqns. Stockman; of Northam, WA; b. Northam, 29 Mar 1912.

¹ Sqn Ldr M. S. Bott, 260779. 21 and 76 Sqns, comd 79 Sqn 1943-44. Clerk; of Manly, NSW; b. Brisbane, 16 Apr 1914. Killed in action 16 Apr 1944.

quarters. Six of their bombs fell on the targets. The air assault on Pityilu continued early next morning when Nos. 76 and 79 attacked again, bombing and strafing a beach before the landing of troops. The Americans landed successfully and by 31st March had crushed enemy resistance.²

During their operations in support of the American ground forces in the Admiralties the R.A.A.F. aircraft were bombing targets indicated to them by signals or by map references. In very few instances could the pilots actually see evidence of enemy activity and on most occasions were unable to report whether or not their attacks had been successful. The squadron records of the period give very little information on this phase of R.A.A.F. operations. However, the constant bombing and machine-gunning undoubtedly had a moral effect on the enemy ground forces as well as destroying positions and killing Japanese soldiers.

Early in April minor operations against Koruniat, Ndrilo, Rambutyo and Pak Islands were carried out by the Americans supported by the R.A.A.F. squadrons. In addition, the Australian aircraft continued to give daily cover for shipping in the area. The protection of shipping and defence of the Admiralties against possible enemy air attacks became the only function of the wing, but not one engagement took place in the air between an R.A.A.F. and a Japanese aircraft during the whole of the Admiralties campaign, indicating how completely Japanese air power had been defeated in the New Guinea-New Britain area. "Allied air supremacy from this point on was complete and unchallenged."³

Without aircraft and naval vessels the Japanese base of Rabaul had no offensive power. The Allied landings in the Admiralties and Emirau completed the ring of bases which surrounded it, tightening the blockade. In addition to the destruction of air and naval power at Rabaul, Allied air attacks inflicted many casualties and damaged defences and installations.⁴ The Japanese expected that the Allied air attacks on Rabaul would increase in strength, and therefore, late in 1943, they began to build a system of underground tunnels. The work went on apace and by March 1944 most of the Japanese installations were underground. The Japanese had sufficient stocks of food and supplies at Rabaul to last them a considerable time. This was fortunate for them because except for small

² F-Lt R. Taylor (Tenterfield, NSW) and F-O H. Belcher (Campsie, NSW) who commanded RAAF Bomb Disposal parties in the Admiralty Is took an RAAF party comprising Cpl L. F. Reeves (St Kilda, Vic), LAC's G. A. Germain (Alphington, Vic), T. K. Neal (Chatham via Taree, NSW), G. A. Marven (Albert Park, Vic) and H. Messenger (Coolgardie, WA), into the invasion of Pityilu. The party went in with the troops in their initial assault and although there was little opposition to the actual landing, the fighting later became severe. The party dealt mainly with unexploded bombs which had been dropped prior to the landing. Earlier in the campaign these parties had moved ahead of the infantry and mechanised forces detecting mines with plate mine detectors. The parties were constantly under fire and two Americans working with them were killed and one RAAF airman, LAC H. J. Pares (Solomontown, SA) wounded by shrapnel. The Americans awarded a Silver Star to F-Lt Taylor and Bronze Stars to Cpl A. F. Nixon (Ascot Vale, Vic) and to LAC's Pares, Moore and E. Morrison (Punchbowl, NSW). F-O Belcher was seriously injured in May 1944, when an explosive missile, which he and two members of his party were examining, exploded. Sgt N. Horn (Maroubra, NSW) was blinded by the explosion and LAC Messenger badly injured.

³ US Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Allied Campaign Against Rabaul*, p. 24.

⁴ Of about 10,000 deaths among the Japanese garrison at Rabaul during the whole period of the war, at least 4,700 were a result of Allied aerial bombardment and naval gun fire. The greatest number of deaths occurred in the ten-month period Oct 1943-Jul 1944. In Nov and Dec 1943, 907 persons met their deaths as a result of the Allied air attacks (U.S. Bombing Survey, *Allied Campaign Against Rabaul*, p. 26).

craft no vessel reached it with supplies after April 1944. The last vessel to get through was a cargo-carrying submarine which docked in April 1944.

The isolation of Rabaul by March 1944 was an important victory. By blockading Rabaul, the Allies prevented a garrison of about 80,000 highly-trained Japanese from taking an active part in the war. In their efforts, which continued until early in 1944, to maintain Rabaul as an offensive base and as a supply point for outlying bases, the Japanese lost 820 aircraft, 30 surface naval vessels, 154 large cargo ships, 517 barges and 4 submarines in Rabaul waters. Air losses had an important bearing on later naval engagements. An invasion of Rabaul by the Allies was unnecessary because it was effectively blockaded and neutralised by continued air bombardment. The passing of Rabaul's power gave great freedom of action to MacArthur's forces which, after the Admiralties campaign, were ordered to move rapidly forward towards the Philippines.

"*Rabaul delenda est* was the one essential condition of General MacArthur's advance along the New Guinea-Mindanao axis," wrote Professor Morison, the American naval historian. Yet this fortress had been neutralised without the firing of a single rifle by the infantry.