

## CHAPTER 15

### TO NOEMFOOR AND MOROTAI

ON 15th June 1944, nine days after the Anglo-American invasion of Normandy, the V American Marine Corps went ashore at Saipan Island in the Mariana group. The invasion was of great importance because it cut Japanese sea communications to the south and brought the enemy home islands within reach of heavy bombers. "Saipan," said Vice-Admiral Wenecker, the German naval attaché at Tokyo, "was really understood to be a matter of life and death."

Admiral Nimitz employed in the Saipan operation 2,000 aircraft and 600 vessels, ranging from battleships and aircraft carriers to small assault boats. The mounting of such a large-scale project within a week of the Normandy invasion and concurrently with General MacArthur's drive in Dutch New Guinea was evidence enough to convince Japanese leaders of the strength of the fighting forces and the war material now at the disposal of the Allies. Nevertheless, to make the Pacific operations of 1944 possible there had to be considerable interchange of vessels and means between Nimitz's and MacArthur's commands. MacArthur would have the vessels long enough to make a landing and as soon as he was settled ashore he would have to hand them back so that Nimitz could make one. The timing had to be fixed to allow this interchange, and the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff retained control of the shipping which supported both commanders to ensure that the maximum interchange was achieved.

Early in 1944 Nimitz had planned to invade Truk and, some months later, the Marianas, but the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 12th March had directed him to neutralise Truk by air bombardment, by-pass it to the north, and invade the Marianas two months and a half ahead of the time originally planned. The assault force for the Marianas was staged in three principal areas, namely the South Pacific, Pearl Harbour and the United States. Bringing them together from such widely separated points was a notable feat of planning and coordination.

From the beginning of June, bombers of the Fifth Air Force and 13th Air Task Force operating from Green Island, Los Negros, Emirau, and Hollandia aided the operation by bombarding Truk, Palau and Yap. Carrier aircraft struck at Pagan, Tinian, Rota, Guam and Saipan in the Marianas. Preceded by gun-fire from battleships, the marines then went ashore at Saipan, but desperate Japanese resistance made their task difficult and slow.

Admiral Toyoda had learned on 9th June that Admiral Spruance's fleet was approaching Guam and he had ordered the execution of a plan which provided for "one big operation" against the American fleet using land-based and carrier-based planes in a combined attack, followed by the destruction of the amphibious vessels which carried the assault forces.

The Japanese carrier fleet with 450 aircraft under Vice-Admiral Ozawa sortied from Tawi Tawi in the southern Philippines, while Rear-Admiral Kakuda prepared some 500 land-based planes for action from Palau, Yap and Guam. Reference has been made already to the withdrawal from Sorong to Palau at this time, of the *23rd Air Flotilla*, which opposed MacArthur's advance, and the abandonment of the Japanese Navy's third attempt to reinforce Biak when the American threat to the Marianas appeared.

Battle was joined on 19th June when Ozawa's carriers launched a series of aircraft attacks on Spruance's task force, which included fifteen large and small carriers. Over Guam the American fighters defeated a big force of Japanese fighters and the Japanese carrier pilots who were to land there to refuel had no protection. Altogether the Japanese lost 400 carrier aircraft.

American submarines sank two carriers, including Ozawa's flagship *Taiho*, forcing him to transfer his flag during the battle. The following day American carrier pilots attacked, sinking the carrier *Hitaka*, but ninety American planes were lost when they ran short of petrol and had to alight on the sea. After losing a total of three carriers sunk, one badly damaged and several others damaged, Toyoda ordered Ozawa to abandon the attack and retire to Okinawan waters. It was a crushing defeat for the Japanese Navy.

Though its contribution was very small compared with the total effort that went into the Saipan campaign, the R.A.A.F. took part indirectly in the operation by laying mines in the waters around Palau and Kau Bay, Halmahera. On 9th June Nimitz had asked MacArthur's headquarters to provide Catalinas to do this work. In order to fly six sorties needed to carry out the task at Palau, the planned mining operation at Kau Bay was halved. Spruance's fleet had laid 78 mines at Palau on 31st March and the 12 to be laid by the R.A.A.F. in June were not likely to be more than a nuisance to enemy vessels.

There was a danger that the Catalinas would meet night fighter interception if they operated out of Darwin and it was therefore decided to use Lake Sentani, at Hollandia, as the advanced base. There were no facilities for flying-boats at the lake, but these were improvised by the Fifth Air Force. The Catalinas, which came from Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons, taxied up to the beach and rested there with their hulls in the water and tails over the land, the bows being moored to floats made from empty oil drums and the tails tied to coconut palms. The crews were provided with sleeping quarters and food at the camp of No. 78 (Fighter) Wing R.A.A.F., some three miles from the beach.

The Catalinas had arrived at Lake Sentani on 15th June and two laid mines on the night of 16th-17th June at Palau. A third flying-boat which went on the mission returned when its radar equipment became unserviceable. On succeeding nights further mines were laid both at Palau and at Kau Bay where much enemy shipping had been seen by observation aircraft. All the Catalinas returned safely from these missions.

The ground struggle on Saipan was bitter, but by 9th July the marines had crushed all organised resistance. Further landings followed on Guam (21st July) and Tinian (24th July).

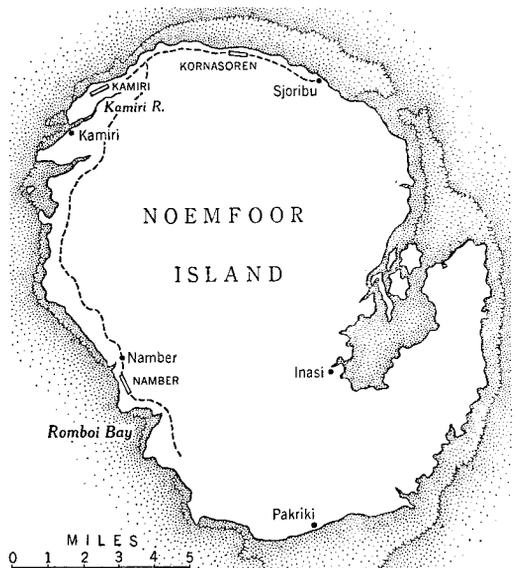
Japan's precarious position was now apparent to many influential Japanese. On 27th June a group of leaders called on the Premier, General Tojo, and asked him to resign. He refused; but on 18th July the newspapers announced the fall of Saipan, describing "the heroic death of all its defenders" and Tojo gave way. It was at about this time, according to Shigeru Hasunuma, chief aide-de-camp to the Emperor, that "I was able vaguely to discern the Emperor's 'peace anxiety'". The Emperor directed Admiral Yonai and General Koiso to form a new Cabinet.

With Japanese attention fixed on Saipan, MacArthur's forces prepared to jump westwards to Noemfoor Island in Geelvink Bay. Again, MacArthur's primary interest in Noemfoor was that it would provide airfield facilities from which fighters could take off to escort bombers on missions in the Geelvink Bay-Vogelkop Peninsula area and at Ambon-Ceram. Fighters based on airfields at Noemfoor would also give advanced protection for the main air concentrations at Biak; would dominate the air over western New Guinea and would provide escorts for bombers attacking Halmahera in anticipation of the invasion of Sansapor and Morotai, which were to follow.

Noemfoor lies at the northern limit of Geelvink Bay, midway between the Vogelkop Peninsula and Biak. A fringe of coral reef runs almost completely around the island which is

about fourteen miles long and roughly elliptical. The northern half is low and flat. It had a native population of about 5,000 and native foods and water were ample for their needs.

Noemfoor was selected because it was estimated that not more than one battalion of Japanese would be based there, and it could therefore be seized without large-scale operations. It was essential that it should be a small-scale attack because amphibious vessels in the South-West Pacific were already overtaxed providing the requirements of Wakde and Biak. Noemfoor was a particularly suitable objective because it had the



greatest number of airfields (Kamiri, Kornasoren and Namber) and could be seized in the quickest time with the smallest force. Furthermore, by the end of June, it had become abundantly clear that the Japanese air defences in western New Guinea were at a low ebb. On 30th June the following estimate of the enemy situation appeared in an Intelligence report issued by General Headquarters:<sup>1</sup>

A general state of debilitation now characterises the enemy's air bases in western New Guinea. Jefman is apparently abandoned. Little activity has been observed at Samate. The latter field has been so wet as almost to preclude air operations. The Babo area likewise, is generally unserviceable . . . there are only four serviceable fighters on the ground . . . the Namber and Kamiri strips at Noemfoor, while rough, are probably serviceable though getting little use . . . a possibly generous statement now places nineteen bombers and thirty-seven fighters in New Guinea.

Apart from the numerical weakness of the Japanese Air Force in the forward zones, the Japanese were fast losing the ability to replace losses. General Arnold has described how, as the Pacific war progressed,

the Japanese found they were losing their most experienced leaders, their air staffs, their planners and best mechanics, in a strange way. Their key people were being marooned and by-passed as we advanced across the Pacific. The loss of such specialists helped to break the strength of the Japanese Air Force. No air force can lose hundreds, perhaps thousands, of its trained personnel—especially in the experienced technical and staff categories—and maintain the same standard of effectiveness. The Japanese had no other sources from which to pick up experience in the air. They did not have it in China, or in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

On 17th June MacArthur directed the Sixth Army to seize Noemfoor on 30th June; a few days later this date was altered to 2nd July because of "new logistical considerations". The Fifth Air Force was again the air assault force for Noemfoor and General Whitehead assigned No. 10 Group an important role. He appointed Air Commodore Scherger air task force commander, and directed him to establish his headquarters at Kamiri airfield soon after the beach-head had been secured, and assume operational control of all air force squadrons on Noemfoor until the commanding officer of No. 309 Bombardment Wing U.S.A.A.F. arrived. After that Scherger would continue to control all units at Kamiri but relinquish control of the units at Kornasoren to the commander of No. 309 Wing. As soon as possible Scherger was to call forward No. 78 Wing to Noemfoor to be followed at later stages by Nos. 77 and 71 Wings, and by D-plus-40 days, by No. 81 Wing. The American units assigned were: No. 348 Fighter Group (75 Thunderbolts), No. 58 Fighter Group (75 Thunderbolts), No. 417 Bombardment Group (Fifth Air Force) and No. 307 Bombardment Group (Thirteenth Air Force).

The rapid repair of the Japanese airfields on Noemfoor was important since it was being undertaken primarily to provide facilities for the deployment of air power. Group Captain Dale, commander of No. 62 Works Wing, was appointed chief engineer for the operation, and given command

<sup>1</sup> Military Intelligence Section, General Staff, "Daily Summary" No. 221. 30 June-1 July, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (1949), p. 371.

of the American engineer units as well as those of the R.A.A.F. His first task was the repair of Kamiri airfield as soon as it had been seized by the assaulting troops. Immediately it was ready the Kittyhawks of No. 78 Wing would be called forward from Biak to give fighter defence.

To prevent enemy air resistance to the landing, squadrons of the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces had beaten down Babo, Jefman, Samate, Manokwari and other enemy airfields in Dutch New Guinea. As with earlier landings, the squadrons under the control of North-Western Area at Darwin were also used to assist the Noemfoor landing by harassing enemy installations in Timor and Ceram, and aiding the neutralisation of bases in the Vogelkop Peninsula.

On 20th June, the Fifth Air Force had directed Air Commodore Scherger to embark his Aitape headquarters for Noemfoor via a staging camp at Tum. Group Captain Dale and the headquarters of No. 62 Works Wing, together with a forward detachment of No. 4 Works Maintenance Unit, arrived at Tum on 23rd June. Scherger and his headquarters arrived on 24th June. The movement of No. 10 Group's units was hurried, only eight hours' notice being given. Conditions at Tum were deplorable as a result of heavy rain. Equipment suffered because of exposure to sun, air and rain, and unavoidable rough handling on the way. In spite of discomforts and cramped living conditions, however, the spirits of the men remained high. The advanced element of the construction wing was to go ashore at Noemfoor immediately after the assault. On 27th June they took part in a trial invasion landing east of Tum and at 6 p.m. on 1st July made a rendezvous with their convoy of naval escorts near Biak.

It was believed there were only about 1,500 Japanese on the island, but the landing was to be made on the coastal strip adjoining the Kamiri airfield where the enemy defences were strong. Pre-assault bombardment was therefore to be much more intense than on previous invasions. On 2nd July, eight minutes before the assault, three cruisers, twenty-two destroyers and three rocket ships opened fire. Ten minutes before the landing-craft made for the shore Liberators dropped 300 1,000-lb bombs along the line of the beach defences. At 7.30 a.m. the augmented 158th Regimental Combat Team began its landing, and tanks and artillery were ashore by 9 a.m. When the infantry landed, not a shot was fired by the enemy. The Kamiri airfield was quickly seized after dazed groups of Japanese had been cleaned out of the caves at its eastern end by troops using flame-throwers. A half hour after the infantry had landed Dale and the advance party of his works wing went ashore on alligator tanks. The enemy was still holding parts of Kamiri airfield and mortar fire opened up on the beach. Although shells were bursting on hard coral at the water's edge, only two Americans were wounded. There were no Australian casualties. Dale and his staff officers made a survey of Kamiri airfield and the area as far as the Kamiri River, while others of his men established camp at one end of the airfield. An American engineer unit after filling in bomb craters began lengthening Kamiri and constructing dispersals.

On the day before the assault the Kittyhawks of Nos. 75 and 80 Squadrons, together with a number of ground staff men, moved from Cyclops airfield at Hollandia to Mokmer airfield on Biak ready to cover the Noemfoor operations and fly in to Kamiri as soon as it was ready to receive aircraft. No. 80 Squadron flew patrols over Biak on 2nd July and the following day extended them to Noemfoor. These patrols continued until the Kittyhawks were ready to move to Noemfoor but there was not a single clash with enemy aircraft.

After interrogation of a Japanese prisoner who, to the surprise of his questioners, said there were 5,000 enemy on the island, Brigadier-General Patrick, the task force commander, asked for reinforcements and General Krueger dispatched the 503rd Paratroop Regiment. Some 1,400 men were dropped on Kamiri on 3rd and 4th July, about 9 per cent of them being injured. However, the prisoner's information proved to be false and the ground forces had little difficulty in crushing all resistance. After 7th July only mopping-up operations remained.

On 4th July the Americans had occupied the Kornasoren airfield. On this day the advanced headquarters of Scherger's No. 10 Group, including 35 officers and 89 men, arrived off the beach-head and went ashore that night. Group headquarters was set up about one mile from the east end of the airfield. There had been no air resistance at all until the night of 4th July when a light bomber dropped three small bombs near the mouth of the Kamiri River. A few days later four single-engined fighters damaged dumps when they dropped about forty incendiary bombs.

During July the pilots of No. 78 Wing continued to keep a fighter "umbrella" over Biak, Noemfoor and Hollandia. Occasionally the monotony of patrol duty was broken when they carried out dive-bombing and strafing missions in support of the troops on Biak. On 18th July the ground staff of No. 78 Squadron was flown from Hollandia to Kamiri airfield which had been opened for operations and on 20th July twenty-three aircraft of No. 78 landed at the airfield. They were followed two days later by the air echelons of Nos. 75 and 80 Squadrons which flew in from Biak.

The constant strain imposed on the men by the frequent moves was beginning to tell. The diarist of No. 78 notes in July 1944:

The squadron has moved six times in nine months involving the setting up of temporary camp sites before anything of a permanent nature can be completed. Packing, loading and transportation involves intensive work on a twenty-four hour basis before departure and arrival at new locations. During the process of movement flying is maintained. Fatigue is particularly noticeable following the strenuous work on each move. Numerous nightly red alerts create disturbed sleep, there being two actual enemy aircraft raids since arrival.

No. 78 began operations from Noemfoor on 21st July when twenty-four aircraft patrolled above Noemfoor from dawn to dusk. Noemfoor is not far distant from Manokwari and the last detail on patrol saw two enemy barges near Manokwari and strafed them while they were loading stores.

Both barges burned and were destroyed. Nos. 75 and 80 carried out their first patrols from Noemfoor on 23rd July.

American torpedo boats were patrolling in Geelvink Bay attacking enemy small vessels, barges, canoes and shore targets. The R.A.A.F. Kittyhawks gave them cover during some of these operations. On 24th July four Kittyhawks found a barge hide-out and, in a strafing attack, set fire to two and damaged five. Anti-aircraft fire was encountered and a shell or bullet struck Flying Officer Wehl's<sup>3</sup> aircraft forcing him to land in the sea four miles from Manokwari, but an American patrol boat in the area saw Wehl crash and rescued him uninjured from the water.

On 26th July eight aircraft of No. 78 struck at the waterfront in the Jefman-Samate area. A barge was strafed and left sinking. Operational sorties flown by No. 78 Wing in July totalled 1,369, compared with 1,454 in June. The figure was high in the circumstances because all squadrons had interrupted their flying to move their bases during the month. Numbers of pilots who had reached a high standard of flying proficiency had now completed their nine-months operational tour in the tropics and were due to be posted south. Already replacement pilots with little previous experience had arrived and squadron commanders had the task of bringing them up to the high standard set by the tour-expired men.

While the American engineers had concentrated on the construction of Kamiri airfield, Dale's Australian works squadrons built Kornasoren, which was to be occupied by Fifth Air Force units. Contrary to the Intelligence reports received earlier, the Japanese had completed only a few hundred feet of the runway. The Australians began work on Kornasoren on 17th July and by the 25th it was ready to receive aircraft, and a squadron of American Thunderbolts moved in. The airstrip was completed to a length of 6,000 feet and width of 100 feet. Work continued day and night. The R.A.A.F. squadrons had not been supplied with sufficient heavy equipment and had to borrow bulldozers from the American engineers for clearing the heavy rain forest.

Mines had been laid by the Japanese from the north-east end of Kamiri down to Kornasoren and these had to be removed before construction work could begin. R.A.A.F. bomb-disposal men recovered the mines and also rendered safe many unexploded American bombs which had been dropped before the invasion.

General MacArthur needed one last air base in western New Guinea before moving into objectives in the Halmahera area. Scouts of the Sixth Army found that the coast near Sansapor on the Vogelkop Peninsula was a suitable place to build an airfield and at the end of June the army had been ordered to seize it.

From Kamiri the Kittyhawks of Nos. 75, 78 and 80 Squadrons were already giving indirect support to this operation by harassing the Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> F-Lt R. C. Wehl, 405332. 453 and 75 Sqns. Student; of Barcaldine, Qld; b. Toowoomba, Qld. 15 May 1921.

in the Vogelkop Peninsula and denying the use of Geelvink Bay to small Japanese surface craft. In the week of 22nd to 29th July these squadrons flew 677 operational sorties. As D-day (30th July) approached, General Kenney directed No. 380 Group from Darwin to increase its bombardment of Ceram-Ambon where the enemy, in spite of continued air bombardment, maintained a number of aircraft which would be used to bomb Sansapor.

A heavy raid was made on Halmahera on 27th July, when bombers attacked airfields, destroying thirty enemy aircraft on the ground. The Bula oilfields on Ceram were also struck heavily on 27th and 28th July. By the time the assault force was ready to move in to Sansapor enemy air strength had been so reduced that there was little to fear from it.

On 29th July as the task force sailed north of Noemfoor the R.A.A.F. Kittyhawks patrolled overhead to protect it from enemy raiders, but no interference was attempted. The invasion took place as planned next morning and was heavily supported by Fifth Air Force and R.A.A.F. aircraft, but again there was no interference either in the air or on the ground. Allied domination of the air was so complete that Allied aircraft were sent over the invasion area spraying D.D.T. the day before the landing to keep down the enemies of health and comfort—mosquitoes and flies. In addition to landing at Sansapor the American troops landed at Amsterdam and Middleburg Islands just off the coast. In a few days the whole area was secured for a total cost of 10 dead and 31 wounded. The enemy forces in the area consisted mainly of service troops and labourers. A number of Formosan labourers surrendered during the first week after the landing.

The Sansapor landing was the last of MacArthur's amphibious operations in New Guinea and it completed an advance of 1,500 miles since the first move from Milne Bay to Kiriwina and Woodlark, thirteen months before.

At Noemfoor early in August Air Commodore Cobby had assumed command of No. 10 Group from Scherger who had been injured in a jeep accident. The 50-year-old Cobby was one of the most highly decorated members of the Royal Australian Air Force. He had established a notable reputation as a fighter pilot of the Australian Flying Corps in the 1914-18 war and had shot down many German aircraft. When the 1939-45 war began Cobby was not in the R.A.A.F., having resigned his commission in 1936 to become Controller of Operations on the Civil Aviation Board. He had been placed on the Citizen Air Force Reserve, however, with the rank of wing commander, and on 25th July 1940 he was called up to become Director of Recruiting. Later he served as Air Officer Commanding North-Eastern Area and Commandant of the R.A.A.F. Staff School. On 1st August Group Captain Gibson, who since early 1943 had been Bostock's senior air staff officer at R.A.A.F. Command in Brisbane, had been posted to No. 10 Group in June as Senior Air Staff Officer replacing Group Captain Pearce.

With No. 10 Group now at the western extremity of New Guinea it had become difficult for Northern Command, which still controlled the group administratively, to carry out its supply and maintenance functions adequately. Air Force Headquarters therefore separated No. 10 Group from Northern Command on 1st July, but, for operations, it continued to be under the command of Fifth Air Force. A proposal made by Bostock at this stage, that the name of the group be changed to "First Tactical Air Force", was deferred pending the return of the Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, who was in London.

Following the successful landing at Sansapor, No. 10 Group's three Kittyhawk squadrons at Kamiri now entered a period of intense activity. Airfield construction was being rushed at Biak, Sansapor and Owi Island as well as at Noemfoor to accommodate the many squadrons at rear bases which were now so far away from the war that they had few worthwhile targets to hit. Until the forward airfields were built there was nothing for them to do so Kenney encouraged the granting of leave in Australia to Fifth Air Force men, as a result of which "Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane saw more of the United States Air Force than at any time before or since".<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, No. 78 Wing was being pushed almost to the limit of its operational capacity. In early August its chief responsibility was Sansapor. On the 4th thirty-six Kittyhawks from all three squadrons patrolled over this area. On the 5th forty-seven patrolled Sansapor again. Between the 8th and 10th four Kittyhawk pilots were lost on operations. One pilot of No. 78 Squadron crashed into the sea and was killed after a strafing attack on a village on 8th August; next day, over Sansapor, two Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron collided in the air while on patrol duty, and crashed into the sea killing both pilots. Another Kittyhawk, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Jacklin,<sup>5</sup> was struck by one of the colliding aircraft and part of its port mainplane was broken off, but Jacklin recovered from a spin and flew the damaged aircraft 200 miles back to Noemfoor, landing safely. On 10th August another pilot of No. 78 Squadron failed to return after he had taken part in the machine-gunning of a village.

Meanwhile, the aircraft of No. 77 Wing, which now controlled Nos. 30 (Beaufighter) and 22 (Boston) Squadrons, had been called forward to Noemfoor to join in the air campaign over Dutch New Guinea. The wing headquarters had already arrived by boat on 12th July and the aircraft of No. 30 Squadron were flown in from Tadjji on 4th August.

Eleven Bostons arrived on the 10th and six on the following day. The squadron had been re-equipped with Boston "G" aircraft which had a petrol capacity of 300 gallons more than the older type of machine, thus giving them a 500-mile range carrying 2,000 pounds of bombs. The Bostons, commanded by Squadron Leader Woodman,<sup>6</sup> were allotted the

<sup>4</sup> G. C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports*, p. 416.

<sup>5</sup> F-Lt T. R. Jacklin, 405738; 75 Sqn. Cane farmer; of Mackay, Qld; b. Mackay, 15 Feb 1920.

<sup>6</sup> W Cdr C. E. Woodman, 169. 21 Sqn; comd 22 Sqn 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Killara, NSW; b. Northwood, NSW, 14 Oct 1915.



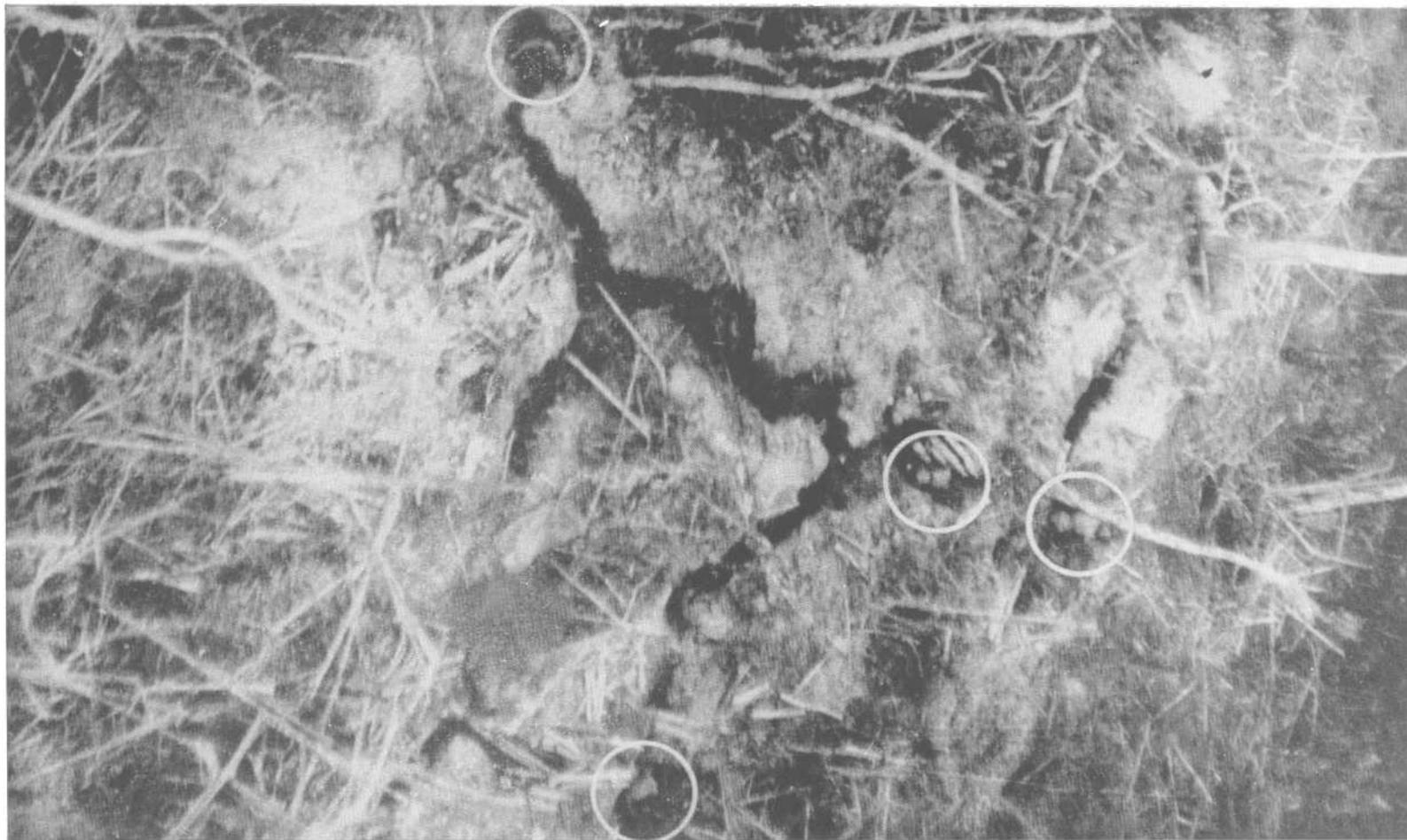
(R.A.A.F.)

An Auster of No. 17 Air Observation Post Flight preparing to spot for the artillery over Bougainville on 18th February 1945.



(R.A.A.F.)

A Dakota of No. 36 Squadron dropping supplies to forward troops on Bougainville in February 1945. During the period January to August 1945, this squadron dropped 2,514 tons of supplies



Japanese taking shelter from a strafing attack by Boomerangs of No. 5 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, on 4th June 1945, during the Bougainville campaign. The photograph was taken from a few feet above tree-top level.

*(R.A.A.F.)*

task of attacking enemy airfields, villages and shipping. The Beaufighters were also to attack airfields and carry out sweeps against waterborne traffic along the coasts of Ceram and west to Waigeo Island. Led by Squadron Leader Sandford, six Beaufighters carried out their first mission to Ceram on 19th August. Near Cape Paa they fired on a small 75-ton vessel which had been camouflaged with green foliage. Many of the Japanese on the vessel jumped overboard in their anxiety to escape the strafing and were seen swimming in the water alongside.

By 18th August engineers had built two airfields at Sansapor—Mar on the mainland and at Middleburg on Middleburg Island. American Lightnings of the Thirteenth Air Force had been flown in and by 24th August the Americans began air operations from these new bases. The arrival of the American fighters at Sansapor relieved No. 78 Wing Kittyhawks of the duty of providing air cover patrols and they flew their last patrol mission on 21st August.

By August air fighting in the South-West Pacific Area had slowed down. The Japanese had withdrawn most of their aircraft to the Philippines where the bulk of their Pacific strength was now collected. They had there an estimated strength of 1,157 aircraft, a force which had been built up by withdrawing aircraft from the forward areas and by a flow of air reinforcements from home. Enemy operations in New Guinea had been cut down to sporadic night harassing raids on Biak and Noemfoor. However, although the Japanese had few aircraft in the forward areas, they continued to maintain serviceable aerodromes especially in Halmahera, Ceram and Ambon. From these forward bases and others on the Vogelkop Peninsula they would be able to stage raids against forward Allied bases.

Freed of the responsibility of patrolling Sansapor, Cobby now turned his attention to some of these forward enemy airfields. He planned an all-out offensive on 23rd, 24th and 25th August using all available Kittyhawks, Beaufighters and Bostons. The main target for the Kittyhawks was the airfield system at Babo, while the Beaufighters and Bostons were to hammer the three enemy airfields in the area south of the Maccleur Gulf—Mongosah, Sagan and Otawiri.

Thirty-six aircraft of No. 78 concentrated on No. 2 strip at Babo on 23rd August and 31 bombs were seen to explode along and in the centre of the runway. The operation was repeated the following day when 24 bombs fell directly in the centre of the runway, the rest bursting along the end of the runway and among huts and dispersals. On 25th August 36 aircraft scored a further 23 direct hits on the runway of No. 2 strip. Altogether the Kittyhawk wing flew 304 sorties against the target in the three days' bombardment. One pilot was lost.<sup>7</sup>

North-Western Area air support for the Noemfoor landing had begun late in June. On the 27th, No. 2 Squadron, which had been engaged mainly on searches and patrols since it converted to Mitchell bombers, made

<sup>7</sup> F-Sgt P. F. Guster (Henley Beach, SA), whose aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and crashed into the sea.

its first strike with the new aircraft. The target was Lautem West on Timor Island where the airfield was to be neutralised. Flight Lieutenant Hill<sup>8</sup> led the nine Mitchells taking part. They left Hughes airfield early in the afternoon and at 5.15 p.m. began the attack. Bombs from the first three, released at 10,000 feet, fell short into the sea, but the following aircraft landed their bombs on the centre of the west end of the target. Anti-aircraft fire was moderate and it appeared that the enemy had been warned of the approach of the Mitchells.

The numbers of small Japanese vessels plying between the islands north of Darwin increased in July, and the Mitchells and Beaufighters sought them out. On 1st July four Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron attacked a small vessel which was accompanied by eighteen barges. Bombs fell among the barges and one just missed the vessel. On the same day, the Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron destroyed beached vessels while on a shipping sweep around Leti, Sermata and Babar Islands. Operating out of the new airfield at Truscott on 16th July, four Beaufighters made a successful attack on Maumere. Led by Squadron Leader Boyd,<sup>9</sup> the Beaufighters surprised the enemy by attacking early in the morning, destroying two enemy aircraft which were just about to take off from the airfield. Boyd also destroyed another one which had become airborne. He fired two bursts at a distance of 200 yards and the enemy aircraft, a Nick, went into a vertical dive and crashed into the sea. Boyd then attacked another Nick which he hit but the Japanese pilot broke off the engagement and escaped. The Beaufighters then turned their attention to the shipping in the harbour. They strafed five motor vessels and two naval craft in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire, but the enemy scored no hits. The Beaufighters in this attack were operating at extreme range and had very little petrol left by the time they landed at Truscott.

At the end of July the usual heavy attacks on airfields were carried out in support of the final landing on western New Guinea at Cape Sansapor. On 29th July No. 79 Wing sent nine Mitchells from No. 2 and twelve from No. 18 against Penfui airfield. They bombed at sunset but the operation was disappointing because cloud almost blanketed the target.

The sorties made by squadrons in North-Western Area in July were:

Squadron	Sorties
No. 1 . . . . .	82
No. 2 . . . . .	89
No. 18 . . . . .	107
No. 31 . . . . .	76
No. 54 . . . . .	15
No. 380 Group . . . . .	335
Total . . . . .	<u>704</u>

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt C. N. Hill, 406528; 2 and 7 Sqs. Audit clerk; of South Belmont, WA; b. Perth, 25 Sep 1918.

<sup>9</sup> Sqn Ldr J. A. P. Boyd, 400691. 125 Sqn; comd 31 Sqn 1944. Office equipment mechanic; of Melbourne; b. Brighton, Vic, 1 Feb 1915.

Because of the marked enemy weakness in the air, the Spitfire squadrons again had a lean period in July. The Spitfire force in North-Western Area had been increased in that month by the arrival of two more R.A.F. squadrons, mentioned earlier: No. 548 stationed at Livingstone and No. 549, at Strauss. The intention was that these two squadrons would free the Spitfires of No. 80 Wing (Nos. 452 and 457 Squadrons) for the planned invasion of Selaru. As time went by the likelihood of this operation taking place grew less and there was little for the pilots to do except train. There was one clash with the enemy on 20th July when three Spitfires of No. 54 Squadron, stationed at Truscott, caught and destroyed a reconnaissance plane over the Drysdale Mission. On three other occasions Spitfires were sent up to intercept reported raiders but without finding any.

Early in August, the R.A.A.F.'s first Liberator bomber went into action from Manbulloo. It was piloted by Flying Officer Frecker<sup>1</sup> and made three bombing and strafing runs over a 1,500-ton vessel near the Banda Islands. The bombs missed but hits were scored with machine-gun fire. The vessel opened fire in reply, killing Flying Officer Middleton,<sup>2</sup> the rear gunner. Some days earlier seven Liberators of No. 24 Squadron, the first squadron to be armed with Liberators, had flown from Manbulloo airfield to Darwin where they were to take part in operations with aircraft of No. 380 Bombardment Group. On arrival at Darwin, however, all the aircraft were found to be unserviceable for operations because of mechanical faults, and they returned next day to Manbulloo.

No. 24 Squadron was the first of seven which the R.A.A.F. planned to arm with Liberators. American aircraft production was proceeding at such a pace that there was a surplus, and General Kenney had asked that enough for seven squadrons be given to the R.A.A.F. for duty in North-Western Area. Kenney could then withdraw No. 380 Bombardment Group to New Guinea.

It was originally intended that the first R.A.A.F. Liberator squadron should be No. 99, which was to form in Queensland on 15th March. However, when Kenney ordered the withdrawal of the Vultee Vengeance squadrons from New Guinea, it was decided that these squadrons (Nos. 21, 23 and 24) should not disband but be re-armed and used as the nucleus of the first Liberator squadrons. In January 1944 General Arnold had told General Kenney in Washington that he would let the Australians have twelve Liberators in May and then send an additional six each month beginning in July 1944.

Air Force headquarters realised that it would be difficult to supply experienced aircrews for the Liberators. Few could be obtained from Britain because of the intense operations of R.A.F. Bomber Command there. General Kenney offered Fifth Air Force training facilities, and

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<sup>1</sup> F-Lt M. D. Frecker, DFM, 402653. 115 Sqn RAF, 460 and 24 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Mosman, NSW; b. Brisbane, 14 Aug 1918.

<sup>2</sup> F-O B. J. Middleton, DFM, 408052. 49 Sqn RAF, 24 Sqn. Clerk; of Hobart; b. Subiaco, WA. 15 Dec 1918. Killed in action 5 Aug 1944.

crews to be converted to the Liberators were drawn from squadrons under R.A.A.F. Command and from the instructional staff of flying schools; most of the pilots had had long experience of flying multi-engined aircraft and many had been decorated.

Training had begun as early as December 1943 when five crews started their conversion courses at Charters Towers. These crews went through further training exercises with the 5th Bomber Command Replacement and Training Centre in New Guinea and were then assigned for operational training to the American No. 43 Bombardment Group at Nadzab.

By May 1944 the Liberator flying training program was in full operation. The thirty-days conversion course at Jackson Field, Moresby, could produce between five and ten complete flying crews a month. Advanced technical training equipment and good instructors were available and the R.A.A.F. was given full cooperation by the senior American officers and their staffs. After leaving Jackson Field the crews served with No. 380 Group for a further two months.

By the end of June, the headquarters of No. 24 Squadron moved from Lowood, Queensland, to Manbulloo, Northern Territory. The squadron, equipped with twelve new Liberators, which had been ferried out from America, was ready for operations by 5th July, its commander being Wing Commander J. B. Hampshire.

No. 24 was employed mainly on shipping searches in August. During one of these missions on 25th August a Liberator piloted by Flying Officer Carrigan<sup>3</sup> found and attacked an enemy convoy of merchant vessels in the Molucca Sea. An enemy aircraft was covering the convoy but did not attempt an interception. Carrigan, attacking from 10,000 feet, dropped eight 300-lb bombs scoring two and possibly three direct hits and several near misses on one of the vessels which was left smoking.

Early in August R.A.A.F. Command ordered three of the Liberators to proceed to Hollandia where, on 12th and 22nd August, they picked up reconnaissance parties and dropped them in enemy-held territory in the Vogelkop Peninsula. With three out of its twelve aircraft away on this special work the squadron found it difficult to provide sufficient aircraft for offensive missions. Cole urged that in fairness to the squadron it should be allowed to work together during its early life without providing detachments for special missions.

Ambon which was heavily attacked by Liberators in August was practically destroyed. All the airfield facilities and buildings were flattened and the runways put out of order for a month. Almost daily attacks continued in September.

In September Air Commodore Charlesworth,<sup>4</sup> who had replaced Air Vice-Marshal Cole as air officer commanding, reported that No. 80 Wing was causing him some concern. It had been moved to the Darwin area

<sup>3</sup> F-Lt H. D. Carrigan, DFC, 403122. 159 Sqn RAF, 24 Sqn. Grazier; of Boomi, NSW; b. Maitland, NSW, 10 Feb 1917.

<sup>4</sup> Air Cmdre A. M. Charlesworth, CBE, AFC. Comd RAAF Forward Ech 1943, Eastern Area 1943-44; AOC North-Western Area 1944-46. Regular air force offr; of Laverton, Vic; b. Lottah, Tas, 17 Sep 1903.

but had nothing to do except train. After July, the enemy did not even send reconnaissance aircraft over northern Australia. The spirit of the men was still high but there was a danger of a drop in morale unless they were given some active role in the war. Charlesworth said in a report to Bostock: "I cannot urge too strongly the early employment of it on active operations in some other theatre or its withdrawal to a southern location where personnel may rest."

For twelve months, North-Western Area had supported the Allied advance in New Guinea and to Morotai. The need to give this indirect support overriding attention had meant that on occasions many Japanese shipping targets had to be left unmolested. In June and July the enemy used some 400,000 tons of shipping to reinforce their forces in the islands north of Darwin. While this reinforcement proceeded the main target for the Allied aircraft was Ambon and few aircraft could be spared to attack the enemy ships.

During September, North-Western Area directed its attack against Ceram and southern Celebes. The Liberators of No. 24 Squadron began offensive operations in September, joining with No. 380 Group in combined missions. A substantial part of the group's aircraft taking part in these offensive operations were flown by R.A.A.F. airmen. On one combined operation, 14 of the 24 Liberators were manned by R.A.A.F. crews and on another, 12 out of 24.

The Mitchells and Beaufighters of No. 79 Wing carried out shipping sweeps, and bombing and harassing attacks on enemy centres including Maumere, Tual, Langgur, Larat and Dobo. Although enemy activity was at a low ebb during September, the month was an unfortunate one for the wing, which lost nine aircraft. Of 42 crew members in these lost aircraft only 16 survived.

On 1st September Mitchells of Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons attacked targets in the Kai Islands. No. 2 found that its objective, Tual, was cloud covered, but they contrived to place their bombs in and close to the town starting a large fire. One of the captains got off course on the return journey and made a forced landing in the sea near Peron Island when his fuel supply gave out. The crew was rescued later, some with minor injuries. Another Mitchell sent out from Hughes to search for the lost aircraft crashed in the same locality, killing two members of the crew. A Beaufighter was lost on 18th September when it crashed into the sea near Broome soon after taking off to provide cover for a Catalina. Two more were lost on a similar mission on 24th September.

Replacement crews for No. 2 Squadron were not arriving in North-Western Area in time to release crews who had completed their operational tours. Not only were replacements slow in arriving but they were not trained on Mitchell aircraft. As a result, towards the end of the month No. 79 Wing found it necessary to suspend nearly all operational flying in both Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons in order to train and convert seven Hudson replacement crews for No. 2 and ten replacement crews for No. 18 who were not fully trained.

After Sansapor, General MacArthur made ready to move forward again towards Mindanao. There was little to stop him. The next point of attack his planners selected was Morotai Island, which lay midway between New Guinea and Mindanao. Morotai was the logical choice, because it was not too far from Sansapor for fighters to give air cover, and it was weakly held by the Japanese. A landing there would also by-pass the strong enemy concentrations on Halmahera. Morotai lies east of the northern end of Halmahera, and commands the entrance to Kau Bay, which the Japanese had developed extensively. It is a mountainous island which in 1941 had a population of 9,000.

The attack into Morotai was to be preceded by widespread bombardment by aircraft of Admiral Nimitz's Pacific Fleet. The 15th September was to be assault day, and on the same day a force of American marines was to seize Palau in the Caroline Islands. The simultaneous actions would help to divide Japanese reaction, whatever it might be.

Again the S.W.P.A. air forces were to play their part. Beginning on 1st September, they were to carry out heavy daylight raids against enemy air facilities in Ceram, Halmahera and north Celebes and, in addition, to neutralise the Vogelkop airfields. Tasks in the Vogelkop area would be carried out by No. 10 Group. Heavy bombers of the Thirteenth Air Force were also to attack as far north as Davao in Mindanao and as far west as Balikpapan in Borneo.

In their operations in the Vogelkop the Kittyhawks of No. 80 Squadron began carrying a 1,500-lb bomb load, instead of the normal load of 1,000 pounds. The increased load was possible because this squadron had the latest type of Kittyhawks which were more sturdily built. On 3rd September, four aircraft of the squadron dive-bombed Babo in the first operation with the 1,500-lb bomb load, and from then on No. 80 delivered this load in many bombing attacks, mainly against Babo and Kokas. Carrying the extra bomb load, however, shortened the range of the aircraft because it was not possible to carry additional fuel supplies.

The Bostons and Beaufighters with their longer range were used against airfields on Ceram and in the Kai Islands, and for barge sweeps. About half of both squadrons' efforts were concentrated on denying the enemy use of Bula airfield in Ceram and Langgur on the Kai Islands. These attacks produced good results with about 75 per cent of bombs landing on the targets. Minor damage was caused to eight aircraft by anti-aircraft fire. One Boston was found to have forty holes in it when it returned to base after a raid on Bula on 5th September.

The Morotai task force left Aitape on 10th September and arrived in the objective area on 14th September. Before this all hostile aircraft had been cleared out of Palau, Halmahera and the Vogelkop areas. Pacific fleet carrier air strikes had largely neutralised enemy airfields in the Philippines, thereby isolating Morotai from immediate air attack. Naval and air bombardment of the beaches paved the way for the assault force which went ashore at 8.30 a.m. The landing was unopposed. Troops and supplies moved ashore across mud-covered and half-submerged coral

reefs into the coconut trees and scrub which lined the shore. Only a few Japanese were met and all the Americans soon reached the objective line which included the Pitu airfield. Next day six Japanese were killed during light clashes while the troops were pushing towards their final objectives.

Group Captain Rooney's<sup>5</sup> No. 61 Airfield Construction Wing, which had left the Darwin area in August, arrived off Morotai (via Aitape) on 18th September to take part in construction projects on the island. The wing headquarters and the engineers of No. 14 Airfield Construction Squadron went ashore at Pitu Bay, and the following day began work on road repair to the Wama airfield site. By 20th September the squadron had begun work on the Wama airfield itself.

No enemy aircraft came to interfere with the Morotai and Palau landings on 15th September. This was a clear indication of the weakness of available enemy air strength. The possession by the Allies of airfields at Morotai would permit the free use of land-based bomber aircraft over the Philippines, and allow them to seal the Celebes Sea and Macassar Strait.

No. 10 Group was reinforced in September by the addition of No. 81 Wing, which was to have Nos. 76, 77 and 82 Squadrons under its control. Group Captain Steege, who commanded the wing, formed an advanced headquarters at Los Negros on 30th August. Nos. 76 and 77, with No. 79 Spitfire Squadron, had continued through May, June and July to provide fighter protection for the American base in the Admiralties, but by August this was no longer needed, and the Kittyhawk squadrons were transferred to No. 81 Wing, which was absorbed by No. 10 Group.

The equipment and stores of Nos. 76 and 77 Squadrons and No. 27 Air Stores Park had been loaded on the American Liberty ship *Vitus Bering* which had left Los Negros on 13th August. These units with their equipment arrived at Noemfoor on 30th August. When unloading, it was found that much of the equipment had been pilfered and damaged. Between 9th and 12th September, twenty-eight air transports carried ground staff of the two squadrons to Noemfoor, and on 13th September Nos. 76 and 77 Squadrons, flying in wing formation, set out for Wakde on the first stage of their flight to Noemfoor. Before they reached Wakde, however, they were forced to turn back because of heavy cloud. The forty-eight aircraft, led by Steege, set out again at dawn next morning, and reached Noemfoor in the afternoon.

Shortly after its arrival at Noemfoor No. 81 Wing, with Nos. 76 and 77 Squadrons, was ordered to prepare for movement to Morotai as soon as the engineers had prepared a strip there. As a result of this order, the wing remained on six hours' notice with equipment packed ready to move by air transports to Morotai. At the end of September, however, the order was cancelled, and on the 30th twenty-two Kittyhawks of No. 76

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<sup>5</sup> Gp Capt D. J. Rooney, OBE, 250317. Comd 1 Mobile Works Wing 1942-43, 61 Airfield Construction Wing 1943-45. Civil engineer; of Vaucluse, NSW; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 28 Jul 1904.

dive-bombed Babo while eight from No. 77 and ten from No. 80 bombed Samate.

Throughout the month squadrons of No. 78 Wing had continued their operations against the Vogelkop airfields. The squadrons completed 1,120 operational sorties of all kinds, and 216 tons of bombs and 278,000 rounds of ammunition were expended during the month. Enemy airstrips within the radius of action which the wing attacked included Samate, Jefman, Babo, Utarom, Ransiki, Faan and Langgur, all of which had been put out of action. Following is an analysis of the efforts of each squadron for the month:

No. 75 Squadron 375 sorties 1,075 hours  
 No. 78 Squadron 363 sorties 1,046 hours  
 No. 80 Squadron 382 sorties 1,148 hours

No. 30 Squadron flew 159 sorties and No. 22 Squadron 129 sorties.

Meanwhile, on 4th October at Morotai, Wama airfield, on which Nos. 3 and 14 Airfield Construction Squadrons had been working, was opened for flying and a squadron of American Lightnings arrived. The next move by the men of the South-West Pacific Area was to be the invasion of the Philippines, and in the coming struggle Morotai would provide a valuable base for Allied aircraft.

While MacArthur's spearhead was thrust towards the Philippine Islands his naval, army and air forces had to cope with the problem of providing security to the rear bases. The strength of the *XVIII Japanese Army* cut off in the Wewak area was still considerable and it seemed likely to MacArthur's staff that General Adachi, its commander, would attempt to break out and attack Allied defences at Aitape. During the latter half of May and through June there was increased enemy patrol activity and movement. Elements of the *XVIII Army* were carrying out careful probings of the American positions. Allied Intelligence estimated that the enemy could prepare a combat force of 20,000 men and there was an added strength of about 11,000 in the Wewak area.

The Fifth Air Force, meanwhile, had continued to bomb and strafe the enemy at Wewak and in May No. 71 Wing, R.A.A.F., together with the air echelons of Nos. 8 and 100 Squadrons, left Kiriwina-Goodenough and moved to Nadzab where they, too, joined in the bombardment. At Nadzab the wing came under the control of No. 10 Group.

The first missions of the Beauforts were flown on 9th May and during the month No. 8 Squadron flew 143 operational sorties and No. 100 flew 146. Results of the bombing were often difficult to assess, but it was learned that considerable damage had been done to Japanese supply dumps and to equipment and bivouac areas.

On one of these missions on 20th May a Beaufort of No. 100 Squadron, piloted by Flying Officer MacLaren,<sup>6</sup> with Flying Officer Anderson<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> F-O L. M. MacLaren, 416874; 100 Sqn. Clerk; of Kingswood, SA; b. Wagin, SA, 17 Jan 1916. Killed in action 20 May 1944.

<sup>7</sup> F-O S. L. Anderson, 410192; 100 Sqn. Clerk; of Canterbury, Vic; b. Moonee Ponds, Vic, 13 Jan 1918. Killed in action 20 May 1944.

as navigator and Flying Officer Graetz<sup>8</sup> and Flight Sergeant Maloney<sup>9</sup> as wireless air gunners, was hit by anti-aircraft fire while striking enemy supply lines in the coastal area. One of the engines caught fire and the pilot came down in the sea about twenty yards offshore from But plantation. The crew, who were injured, took to their dinghy and paddled seaward, but Japanese soldiers opened fire from the shore with machine-guns as soon as the dinghy left the shelter of the aircraft. Anderson and MacLaren were killed by the machine-gun fire which sank the dinghy and carried away a lobe of Graetz's right ear. Graetz started to swim westward and eventually landed on the west side of the But jetty. Maloney was last seen by Graetz swimming seaward.

For the following eight days Graetz was in the jungle avoiding Japanese patrols, and the information he collected on enemy positions and movements later proved valuable. He was seen on 28th May near the Danmap River by American Airacobra pilots and later picked up by a patrol boat and taken to Aitape.

For a time, Kittyhawks of No. 10 Group and Airacobras of No. 110 American Squadron operating from Aitape aided in the attacks on the Japanese in the Wewak area, but by the end of May the Kittyhawks had moved to Hollandia. In June Nos. 8, 100 and 30 Squadrons were called forward to Aitape. They were under the command of Wing Commander Moran, and, on 22nd June, when Air Commodore Scherger left to take over the air task force at Noemfoor he handed over control of the Aitape Air Task Force to Moran, an experienced regular officer. All the equipment and supplies for the wing had to be transported to Aitape by air lift. Moran used his Beauforts as well as Dakotas to move the squadrons which were forced to operate on minimum facilities. All bombs, petrol and much of the food came from American stocks. Even the vehicles to carry aircrews from their tents to the airfield were supplied by the Americans. In spite of these difficulties the Beauforts were able to maintain a high rate of flying effort. The Beaufighters, although handicapped by a lack of spare parts which resulted in many being out of order, also flew a large number of sorties. They began operations from Tadjj on 10th June attacking barges plying between Wewak and Muschu Island. They destroyed eighteen in twenty-one days.<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of June the Beaufort squadrons were flying an average of thirty-three operational sorties daily. Their targets included bomb and fuel dumps, stores, motor transport, troop assembly areas, gun positions and bridges. Night sorties were carried out in cooperation with the patrol torpedo boats. In the thirty days from 7th June to 6th July No. 71 Wing mounted 495 sorties.

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<sup>8</sup> F-Lt R. A. Graetz, MC, 417175; 100 Sqn. Aircraft assembler; of Springton, SA; b. Mt Pleasant, SA, 10 Dec 1917.

<sup>9</sup> F-Sgt F. Maloney, 410995; 100 Sqn. Fitter and turner; of Coolamon, NSW; b. Coolamon, 1 Aug 1918. Killed in action 20 May 1944.

<sup>1</sup> The commander of the squadron, W Cdr P. L. B. Gibson (of Sydney) was killed in an aircraft accident on the airfield on 11th June. He was succeeded by F-Lt J. T. Sandford.

By the end of June it was known that the Japanese were preparing for an attack on Aitape. The Allies therefore heavily reinforced this base, widening the ring of defences and stationing two battalions to the east in the Driniumor River area. Major-General Charles P. Hall, commanding the XI Corps, had the 32nd American Division at Aitape, and the 43rd American Division was in the process of moving in. He planned a vigorous attack to counter the enemy assault.

Close air support was available from Moran's force which comprised the following squadrons:

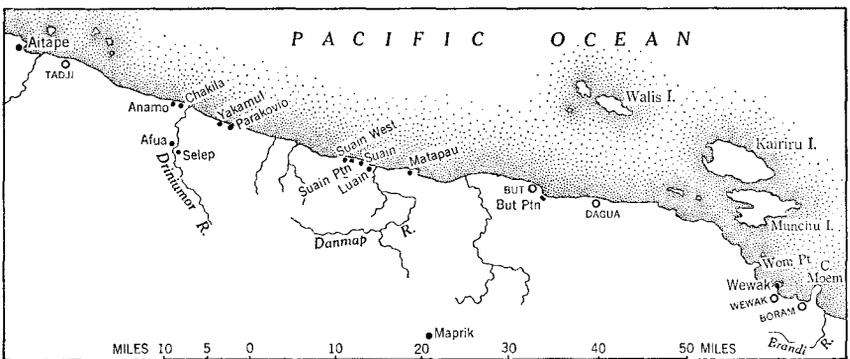
R.A.A.F.

- No. 8 Beaufort (Squadron Leader Hamblin)
- No. 100 Beaufort (Wing Commander Thompson<sup>2</sup>)
- No. 30 Beaufighter (Flight Lieutenant Sandford)

Fifth Air Force

- No. 110 Reconnaissance Squadron

Early in July American patrols clashed with Japanese parties some of which had as many as fifty men. The massing of enemy troops for the offensive presented many targets for the Australian aircraft. Moran sent



strike after strike against concentrations. Eight Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron raided the headquarters of the *20th Japanese Division* at Suain on 3rd July, dropping sixteen 500-lb bombs. On the same day four Beaufighters looking for targets of opportunity struck at barges on Muschu Island, stores and petrol dumps, trucks and staff cars. The Australian aircraft also attacked bridges, particularly the Brandi River bridge, in efforts to disrupt enemy traffic.

Immediately Adachi had learned of the Allied assault at Hollandia and Aitape, he made up his mind to recapture these bases. He soon realised, however, that this was impossible and had limited his aim to "retaining Allied strength towards the east and, if possible, to recapture Aitape". One reason, apparently, for mounting an immediate offensive was that

<sup>2</sup> W Cdr R. H. Thompson, DFC, 260285. Comd 100 Sqn 1942 and 1943-44, 14 Sqn 1944-45. Of Kirribilli, NSW; b. Sydney. 7 Jun 1918.

the *XVIII Army's* food would be very short by October and Adachi wanted to make a contribution to the overall war effort while there was sufficient food left. A total of 17,000 troops of the *20th* and *41st Divisions* were to be used. Before the assault could begin, however, some thousands of men engaged in building up supplies of food and material had been lost through malnutrition, malaria and other diseases.<sup>3</sup>

The launching of the attack had to be postponed until July because of the supply problem. Then at midnight on the 10th July the Japanese struck. They came in screaming waves at the thinly-held front of the 128th Infantry, 2,000 yards south of the Driniumor River mouth. American machine-gunners killed several hundred but the Japanese were willing to pay the high cost in lives and forced a penetration, overrunning American positions. By dawn on 11th July they had at least a regiment west of the Driniumor moving north towards Anamo on the coast.

The American ground commanders now called on Moran for a maximum air effort and at first light an almost-uninterrupted air bombardment by the Beauforts, Beaufighters, and the Airacobras of No. 110 Squadron began. The aircraft concentrated their efforts in the immediate battle areas, giving direct support by hitting at anything that moved on the ground, the Beauforts flying a total of twenty-nine sorties between dawn and dusk. Next day the Beaufighters machine-gunned troops from Afua to Selep while the Beauforts, flying fifty-one sorties, bombed along the Driniumor and near-by villages. Most of the targets were only from twelve to twenty miles from the airfield at Aitape and sorties took only half an hour's flying. Each Beaufort crew was flying four trips a day involving a tremendous effort by the overworked armourers, reloading the aircraft with bombs and ammunition after each flight. At the peak of their efforts the Beaufort squadrons were flying sixty sorties a day.

The Japanese barge traffic had long since been restricted to moving at night and one of the main tasks of the Beaufighters was to operate against these. Some of the pilots, including Sandford, the squadron commander, had flown on night-fighter operations in Britain and were therefore familiar with night flying. Strafing attacks at night were made only against waterborne targets, the strafing run being commenced from not less than 800 feet. On 13th July Sandford and Flight Lieutenant Satchwell<sup>4</sup> attacked a barge near Muschu Island and Sandford saw tracer ammunition from the barge hitting Satchwell's aircraft. Satchwell told Sandford on the radio, "I think I'm on fire", and then his aircraft crashed into the sea. An hour later another Beaufighter left Tadjj to attack barges and failed to return. At dawn two more Beaufighters took off to make harassing attacks along the coast towards Wewak and while over Boram, Squadron Leader Fenton's<sup>5</sup> machine was hit by anti-aircraft fire and

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col Tanaka, staff officer *XVIII Army* (interrogation, GHQ Historical Division, Tokyo).

<sup>4</sup> F-Lt C. A. Satchwell, 400736. 456 and 30 Sqns. Clerk; of Balwyn, Vic; b. Footscray, Vic, 3 Feb 1920. Killed in action 13 Jul 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr G. K. Fenton, 250666; 30 Sqn. Warehouseman; of Oakleigh, Vic; b. Carlton, Vic, 21 Oct 1915. Killed in action 13 Jul 1944.

crashed, killing the crew. No. 30 Squadron in one day had lost six men including their commander and three Beaufighters.

On 14th July a naval task force under the command of Commodore Collins,<sup>6</sup> R.A.N., and consisting of the cruisers *Australia* and *Shropshire* and the destroyers *Arunta*, *Warramunga*, *Ammen* and *Bache*, joined in the operations in support of the American ground forces, and bombarded enemy positions along the coast. Beauforts of No. 71 Wing spotted for the naval gunners.

Meanwhile, the Americans had withdrawn west of the Driniumor but a counter-attack on 13th July supported by artillery regained their lost positions and the task of destroying enemy forces cut off west of the Driniumor began. In the intense fighting that followed the Japanese executed a number of uncoordinated attacks. Their *51st Division* attempted to turn the south flank near Afua and attack the Aitape installations from the south and south-east but the manoeuvre was foiled.

By 25th July the bulk of the 43rd American Division had disembarked from New Zealand and was ready to take over the Aitape defences thus releasing garrison troops which then reinforced the Driniumor line. Information from prisoners indicated that the strength of the enemy regiments was seriously depleted and there were grave shortages of food and medical supplies. A large number of the men of the *51st Division* were ill with fever and malnutrition.

Moran's aircraft continued to hammer defence positions with fragmentation bombs, destroyed bridges, ammunition dumps and machine-gunned troops, huts, and barges. Sometimes they could see the enemy troops and targets and gain some idea of the results of their attacks, but in general the effect of their bombing could not be determined accurately because of the thick jungle which the Japanese used to advantage in hiding their positions and supplies. Results were sometimes established later by reports from ground troops. A Japanese prisoner of war said that seventy Japanese had been killed in a raid on Luain on 19th July when ten Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron, led by Squadron Leader Plenty,<sup>7</sup> had attacked this target with fragmentation bombs.

During July the aircraft of No. 71 Wing flew a total of 1,510 sorties and dropped 670 tons of bombs. The effort of each squadron was:

No. 8 Squadron	. . .	418	strike	sorties
No. 100 "	. . .	468	"	"
No. 30 "	. . .	120	"	"
No. 110 "	. . .	504	"	"

The fighting continued into August. On 2nd August the Americans attacked southwards and a week later turned west in an attempt to encircle the remnants of the enemy forces. By 10th August all organised

<sup>6</sup> Vice-Adm Sir John Collins, KBE, CB; RAN. (1917-18: HMS *Canada*.) Comd HMAS's *Sydney* 1939-41, *Shropshire* 1943-44, Aust Sqn 1944, 1945-46; First Naval Member and CNS 1948-55. B. Deloraine, Tas, 7 Jan 1899.

<sup>7</sup> W Cdr H. C. Plenty, DFC, 582. 21, 2, 8, 14 and 100 Sqns. Regular air force off; of Warnertown, SA; b. Port Pirie, SA, 7 Feb 1921.

enemy resistance in the Aitape area had ended. The *XVIII Japanese Army* had suffered a heavy setback.

General Hall considered that the action of Moran's squadrons during the fighting "in a large measure contributed to the success of the operation by continuous interruption of enemy lines of communication and bombing and strafing of enemy concentrations and supplies. . . . The officers and men of these squadrons have demonstrated their ability and determination to destroy the enemy."

The efforts of the Beauforts had reached their peak early in August. On the 7th, No. 8 Squadron carried out a total of sixty-four sorties against enemy troops—the highest number of sorties carried out in a day by a Beaufort squadron. The first sortie was at 10.45 a.m. and the last at 5.45 p.m., and the Beauforts dropped a total of 390 bombs.

Through August and September the Beauforts continued their daily bombardment of the enemy. They struck at Wewak, Boram, Maprik, Cape Moem and the Danmap River area and many other targets. On 26th August a heavy strike was carried out on the Boram airfield.

Early in September American Airacobras on reconnaissance discovered that the Japanese were filling in craters in the Wewak airfield and 2,000 feet of the runway was serviceable. Evidently the enemy planned to stage aircraft into the stranded garrison. Moran ordered a maximum effort against the airfield. On 11th September, No. 100 Squadron carried out an "all-out" operation against it. The crews called the operation the "Wewak Welter". Forty sorties were made throughout the day from 5.27 a.m. until 5.10 in the afternoon. Ten crews took part and all flew four sorties each. Eighty direct hits were seen on the runway by aircraft stationed to observe results, and the airfield was put out of action.