

CHAPTER 13

FIGHTER COMMAND IN 1942

IN January 1942, Fighter Command was in a unique position. Alone among the many commands of the Royal Air Force, it had sufficient squadrons, aircraft, trained pilots and ancillary organisations to pursue successfully its fundamental task of the air defence of Great Britain. The German night-bombing campaign had fallen away to a level of only 700 sorties during December 1941, compared with its peak of 4,445 during the previous April. Enemy effort was now mainly confined to coastal sectors, and German bombers had to face twenty-three night-fighting squadrons and well-equipped static defences designed to repulse far heavier raids. The principal English industrial areas thus enjoyed a high degree of immunity from attack at the time when general war needs called for the greatest possible production of munitions. Defence by day seemed even more secure, for, even had the Germans possessed an adequate bomber force, their fighters in western Europe were only one-third of the force assembled there in 1940 for the attempted assault on the United Kingdom. Fighter Command, which controlled seventy-five squadrons of single-engined fighters, had a distinct numerical advantage. Although operations in the autumn of 1941 had not achieved one of its objects, the forced return of German units from Russia, it had certainly wrested local initiative in the air from the enemy. Squadrons were progressively equipped with various types of Spitfire aircraft,¹ and operational training units were providing 350 pilots a month, far in excess of current battle casualties.²

Although Great Britain was adequately defended in the circumstances existing early in 1942, the best alternative employment for this powerful force was not clear. Paradoxically it had been strategic operations from Malta, and not Fighter Command's offensive, which had led to the first significant withdrawal of German air units from the Russian front. Fighter squadrons were required urgently in all other theatres of war, but once dispatched they could not quickly be recalled by sea to face any possible renewed enemy assault fed by squadrons withdrawn from eastern Europe along internal lines of communication. Thus, in December 1941, although seven squadrons destined for the Middle East had already been diverted to India, and many more were to follow during 1942, it was essential to retain in England a fighter force capable of meeting any emergency such as might follow a German victory in Russia. Accordingly, Fighter Command was authorised to continue with the same types of operations as during 1941 in a general offensive to exert pressure on German forces

¹ Modifications or "marks" of a basic aircraft design, represented sometimes the normal advance in performance through technical improvements, and sometimes the requirements of operating under special circumstances—ultra-high, high, medium or low levels—or Arctic, temperate or tropical climates. Similar changes were effected with the standard Me-109 which progressed through classifications 'D', 'E', 'F', 'G', etc.

² The monthly figure fluctuated according to weather. During 1941, 4,242 fighter pilots were trained.

in western Europe, thus relieving the air situation for the Russian allies. These offensive duties, spectacular but only partly successful in their main aim, had the important subsidiary objective of keeping the whole fighter force experienced in battle tactics. This was important, for not only were seasoned pilots continually withdrawn for oversea service, but approximately half of the total flying of Fighter Command continued to be concerned with coastal convoy protection and other necessary routine preventive patrols which evoked little or no action with the enemy.

The disposition of Australians within Fighter Command naturally reflected the counter-action of local aims and oversea requirements. The two *Article XV* Spitfire squadrons remained in England until the end of May 1942, when both (with an additional R.A.F. squadron) were withdrawn for service in Australia. In June, a third Australian squadron, taking the number plate of No. 453 Squadron R.A.A.F., which had disbanded after the Malayan campaign, began to form at Drem, near Edinburgh, and came into the line during August.³ The departure of Nos. 452 and 457 Squadrons, the only truly Australian-manned squadrons at that date, meant an inevitable hitch in the plans for concentration of R.A.A.F. effort overseas, because No. 453 could not possibly absorb more than a small fraction of the Australians already trained as fighter pilots. Accordingly, Australian pilots became as widely scattered in Fighter Command as in other commands, where crew composition was the divergent factor. This process was accelerated by the general abundance of pilots, resulting in the practice, in Fighter Command, of spreading available talent over all squadrons, and the natural highly-competitive desire of individuals to reach any squadron at all. Thus 240 Australians served for varying periods during 1942 on 51 day-fighter squadrons, 28 on 10 fighter-bomber and special-attack squadrons, and a further sprinkling of individuals among units conducting air-sea rescue, photographic-reconnaissance and army-cooperation duties. Numerical analysis alone, however, gives no real evaluation of the actual contribution, for by no means all these men were in action at the same time. There was a constant interchange of Australians and, during the year, 33 of these men returned to Australia; 48 were posted independently or with their squadrons to the Middle East; 26 went to India and 13 were transferred to R.A.A.F. squadrons. Several achieved local distinction, but the general background and purpose of their operations were identical with those of pilots in the *Article XV* squadrons. With so many variable factors operating, conclusive judgment is impracticable, but it is nevertheless plain that during 1942 Australians actually played a smaller part in Fighter Command than in Bomber, Coastal or Middle East Commands. The effort of Australians, including the squadrons, was never more and normally less than 4 per cent of the whole.

No. 456 Squadron remained at Valley throughout 1942. The airfield there had fine long runways and good approaches, and, because it lay

³ See D. Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force, 1939-42* (in this series) for details of 453 Sqn's early history.

on the very edge of the sea, was less affected by weather than inland airfields. It was, as previously stated, conveniently situated for the defence of industrial areas in Lancashire, especially from raiders approaching up the Irish Sea. These factors all played a part on 10th-11th January, when approximately thirty-five German bombers attacked scattered points in northern England. Six of these raiders made a westward approach towards Liverpool, but ground mist covered all airfields in No. 9 Group, except Valley. No. 456 was still not fully operational after converting to Beau-fighters, but Squadron Leader Hamilton⁴ (Observer—Pilot Officer Norris-Smith⁵) was sent up to intercept these suspected mine-layers. Hamilton was directed by a ground-control station to the position of several of the enemy bombers, but in each instance contact was lost through a breakdown in the radio-telephone set. Hamilton persevered, however, and followed the raiders into a neighbouring sector. Here at last he was directed towards an aircraft flying at 12,000 feet. Hamilton was well instructed by Norris-Smith, who followed on his radar set the enemy's evasive course, giving clear and timely directions. After a seven-minute chase, Hamilton came close enough to the Do-217 to shoot it down with two bursts of gun fire.

This initial victory was gratifying, but it was plain that enemy aircraft entered the area only when they considered the defences would be disrupted by the weather. As news from the Pacific grew progressively worse, it was galling alike to ground staff and aircrews that they should continue to guard such a quiet sector. Throughout February aircrews were kept in a state of readiness, expecting to fly at any moment, but no enemy aircraft were encountered during the fourteen patrols actually flown.⁶ During March these training and uneventful routine patrols continued, but the squadron fell into a slough of despond. Weather was bad but the enemy was inactive; most patrols were by day; new pilots were arriving but experienced ones were being sent away to other squadrons, so that a general feeling arose that No. 456 was just a "glorified O.T.U.". There had also been little increase in the national character of the unit, for although 188 of the total 352 members were Australians, only three additional R.A.A.F. pilots joined the squadron before the end of April, and, meanwhile, four had been posted to Australia. Wing Commander Olive himself was ill during March and no suitably qualified Australian was available to succeed him. Thus, on 27th March, when Wing Commander Wolfe⁷ assumed command of No. 456, the commanding officer

⁴ W Cdr J. S. Hamilton, DFC, AFC, 73752 RAF. 256 Sqn RAF, 456 Sqn, 23 Sqn RAF, 418 Sqn RCAF; comd 613 Sqn RAF 1944; W Ldr 138 Wing RAF 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Portsmouth and Swansea, Eng; b. Portsmouth, 1 Sep 1911.

⁵ Sqn Ldr D. L. Norris-Smith, 400309. 256 and 23 Sqn RAF, 456 Sqn, 96 and 68 Sqn RAF. Station overseer; of Deniliquin, NSW; b. Adelaide, 9 Oct 1916.

⁶ The state of readiness at Valley entailed long periods of waiting in the dispersal huts. Aircrew, in full flying kit, passed weary hours there, so as to be within a few moments run to their aircraft which were dispersed at intervals around the airfield, under any cover afforded by natural foliage or camouflage pens.

⁷ W Cdr E. C. Wolfe, DFC, 37705 RAF. 64 and 219 Sqn RAF; comd 141 Sqn RAF 1940-42, 456 Sqn 1942-43, 132 Wing RAF 1945. Regular air force offr; of London, Eng; b. Hong Kong, 11 Jun 1911.

and both flight commanders were English, while only ten of the twenty-three pilots were Australian. Another symptom of the general malaise was the strong desire of many of the ground-staff fitters to remuster to flight engineers for operations in Bomber Command. That this request was refused deepened the prevailing sense of frustration.

The weather began to improve in April and more flying was done than in any previous month. Twenty-nine operational flights, however, produced no contact with the enemy, who at this time was attacking chiefly Tyne-side and east-coast ports. May was a month of wind and variable weather, and the Beaufighters flew principally day sorties on convoy protection in the Irish Sea. This policy of superseding the day fighters on this duty during bad weather periods had begun in March, and was not without its compensations, for it was on bad flying days, when they hoped to avoid Spitfires, that enemy aircraft made their deepest penetration into these waters. The spirits of the squadron rose accordingly when Pilot Officer Wills,⁸ while on convoy patrol on 18th May, sighted a Ju-88 and shot it down after a twenty-minute chase in and out of cloud. On 20th June the next aircraft engaged during these patrols was also a Ju-88 but this time the fortunes were reversed. The Ju-88 fired first and damaged the port engine of the Beaufighter which had to put down in the sea although the crew was promptly rescued by a Walrus amphibian.

During April, May and June the *Luftwaffe* attacks, made as reprisals for the bombing campaign against Germany, had all been well clear of No. 9 Group area, but towards the end of July enemy aircraft twice made weak night raids in the Irish Sea area.⁹ On 28th July eight enemy bombers appeared over Cardigan Bay but unfortunately about thirty bombers from R.A.F. training units were also practising in the same area, and the Beaufighters intercepted three aircraft but found them all to be friendly. Two nights later, however, Wolfe obtained four radar contacts while on patrol. Two led to no sighting, the third to visual contact with a Ju-88 which escaped before he could attack, but the last ended in the destruction of an He-111. Wolfe's combat report gives a picture of the normal technique of the controlled night fighter at this period:

The second blip,¹ however, had not been lost [the other was the Ju-88] and now appeared ahead slightly to starboard and slightly above Beaufighter which was now flying at 8,000 feet. Beaufighter followed and enemy aircraft jinked making rate one, 50 degree turns.² Closing in I obtained a visual at 2,000-foot range, identified the enemy aircraft as an He-111, the exhausts on each side of the engines being very apparent. I closed in at an indicated air speed of 270-280 on enemy aircraft now descending slightly to port and fired a two-second burst with a slight port deflection at 250 yards followed by a second burst of one second at 150 yards' range.

⁸ F-Lt D. B. Wills, DFC, 115997 RAF. 456 Sqn, 68 Sqn RAF. Export clerk; of Heswall, Cheshire, Eng; b. Woodchurch, Cheshire, 16 Apr 1922.

⁹ The raids in Apr-Jun were mounted chiefly against non-industrial cities of historic importance: Bath, Canterbury, Exeter, Norwich, etc., and were popularly dubbed "the Baedeker Raids". Following Bomber C'd's raid on Rostock, Hitler on 26 Mar made a speech in which he threatened to take reprisals and cross out the name of each British city in Baedeker's Guide to Gt Britain as and when it was destroyed.

¹ Indication on radar screen.

² Evasive manoeuvre—in this case turning 50 degrees off course to right and left alternately.

No return fire resulted, the upper gunner having been shot through the head, the pilot's controls lost and the port engine put out of action during the first burst delivered. The He-111 now skidded off to port, jettisoning its bomb load of incendiaries and I broke away to starboard, closing in again to fire a two-second burst from 50 yards with no deflection, and breaking away violently to avoid collision. From this burst bright flashes and falling fragments from the fuselage resulted. A large dark object passed beneath the Beaufighter slightly to port. This is now presumed to be the port engine as this engine has not yet been found in wreckage. The enemy aircraft was well on fire by this time. Both aircraft were now losing height and I closed in to fire a final burst of one second at 150 yards' range with slight port deflection breaking off this last attack at a height of 4,000 feet, then climbed to starboard and levelled out. I saw the He-111 burning in fuselage and port wing and continuing to lose height very rapidly. It turned slowly toward Pwllheli . . . and when over beach at approximately 2,000 feet dived vertically, exploding and burning on the beach.

New improved Beaufighters (Mark VI with Hercules radial engines) were received by No. 456 during July, but there was little flying during the next three months and the only operational sorties were in daylight on convoy-escort³ or air-sea rescue duties. Some night practice flights were made in conjunction with searchlights to test a new technique by which searchlights were exposed in such a way as to silhouette a target against a "fan" background of light. This experiment was not popular with the pilots, but further successful exercises were then held in which the Beaufighters attempted to intercept, with the aid of searchlights, bombers from operational training units flying on cross-country trips.⁴ October was marked by a lamentable run of six accidents, including a fatal crash in bad weather at the neighbouring decoy airfield. Another crew failed to return from a night practice flight early in November. Winter conditions, combined with the absence of enemy activity, made a further reduction of the squadron's flying, and only a few precautionary patrols and air-sea rescue searches were flown before the end of the year. Although operationally disappointing, the squadron took comfort in the knowledge that it had eighteen well-trained crews, now predominantly Australian, and that the decision announced in December to re-equip No. 456 with Mosquito aircraft probably heralded a move to a more active sector.

The early months of 1942 were equally irksome for No. 457, also based in No. 9 Group. January and February were marked by uneventful convoy patrols and defence flights, while a big increase was made in the training program. Many pilots were posted to and from the squadron, which worked hard to keep its complement up to strength in anticipation of a move to No. 11 Group.⁵ At last these hopes were realised on 17th March, when news was received that the squadron was to replace No. 452 at Redhill.

³ Even this activity declined from 15 sorties during Aug to 5 in Sep, 3 in Oct and 3 in Nov.

⁴ These exercises which gave valuable practice to both fighters and bombers were called "Bullseye".

⁵ Apart from pilots transferred to 452, pilots destined for the Middle East and especially Malta were sent out at this time, with some mixed feelings of congratulation and envy among those who remained.

Alone among the R.A.A.F. fighter squadrons, January 1942 brought a freshening of interest for No. 452, but operations were mostly on a small scale compared with the impressive Circuses of the preceding autumn. On 3rd January Flight Lieutenant Thorold-Smith and Sergeant Williams⁶ made a Rhubarb attack against an alcohol distillery at Colleville and observed cannon strikes on the vulnerable top of the distillation tower and on storage tanks and other installations. Flight Lieutenant Truscott and Pilot Officer Sly made a similar surprise attack next day, the target this time being a canal lock at St Valery-sur-Somme. During the approach both pilots fired at a body of German troops and then damaged the lock gates with their cannon. Six Spitfires were sent to intercept enemy aircraft off Beachy Head on 5th January, and the same afternoon another two searched for enemy shipping off Le Havre, but neither sortie was successful. In an attempt to precipitate an air battle No. 452 took part in a Rodeo on 6th January, but although the wing "trailed its coat" off Mardick, no enemy planes took off to engage it. Four Spitfires were "scrambled" on 9th January to patrol between Dungeness and Beachy Head, but the expected raiders did not appear. Bad weather then interfered with operations until 22nd January, when No. 452 took off from Manston to give protection to mine-sweepers clearing an area where German bombers had recently been active. The patrol itself was successful but one of the experienced pilots, Flying Officer Lewis, had to bale out through engine trouble and was drowned.

Thorold-Smith and Pilot Officer Tainton discovered a small tanker moving northwards along the French coast on 25th January. The ship was escorted by four anti-aircraft trawlers and, before a large-scale fighter attack could be launched on the basis of this report, the ships had put into Boulogne. Later in the day the whole squadron was out with No. 485 Squadron R.N.Z.A.F. and a wing from Northolt, on an offensive sweep but only one Me-109 was seen and that was too far away to attack. This day, however, was an important landmark in the life of the squadron for Squadron Leader Bungey was posted to Shoreham and Flight Lieutenant Finucane left to command No. 602 Squadron R.A.F. Truscott took over command of No. 452 from Bungey and Pilot Officer Coker⁷ became flight commander of "B" Flight. The period of tutelage was now completely ended and, although Coker was posted next month to No. 41 Squadron R.A.F., another experienced Australian was immediately available, Pilot Officer Wawn being promoted to the vacancy.

An offensive sweep over the English Channel was made by No. 452 on 27th January, but no enemy aircraft were seen. Except for two defensive patrols, bad weather then kept the Australians inactive until 12th February, when they took part in the large-scale operations against the enemy naval squadron escaping from Brest. The feeling of baffled disappointment following this action was relieved somewhat by the destruction of a He-114

⁶ F-Lt R. R. Williams, 402675; 452 Sqn. Motor car valuator; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 26 Nov 1919.

⁷ F-Lt F. A. Coker, 402226. 457 and 452 Sqns, 41 Sqn RAF, 76, 75 and 85 Sqns. Electrical goods manufacturer; of Kogarah, NSW; b. Sydney, 18 Sep 1913.

float-plane encountered next day off Boulogne. This happened while eleven Spitfires, led by Group Captain Beamish,⁸ commander of R.A.F. Station, Kenley, were engaged on another offensive sweep. Truscott followed Beamish down and saw the Heinkel trying to alight on the sea. He saw shells from his cannon entering the cockpit and almost immediately the whole aircraft burst into flames. The remainder of the R.A.A.F. pilots followed and fired into the blazing mass which fell into the sea. This was perhaps too easy a victory to cause rejoicing, but it was the first since 8th November 1941, and indeed, the extreme caution of the German Air Force at this period gave little chance for any squadron to distinguish itself. Enemy fighter pilots made little attempt to challenge Fighter Command, except in circumstances where cloud and the technical superiority of the increasing proportion of the new radial-engined FW-190 would allow swift surprise attack. The Germans, as in the Middle East, often used decoys, and on 15th February two R.A.A.F. Spitfires on the Beachy Head patrol chased two Me-109's towards Cap Gris Nez only to fall themselves into a trap sprung by ten Me-109's and FW-190's which had been waiting in the clouds. One Spitfire escaped by taking violent evasive action and, using emergency engine power, outdistanced the pursuing Focke-Wulfs, but Flight Sergeant Harper⁹ was last seen still in hot pursuit of the original decoys.

After a fortnight of bad weather, Truscott led No. 452 on patrol on the morning of 28th February, but the formation was recalled early, though they were able to go out again the same afternoon when Kenley Wing flew a diversionary sweep, while other aircraft staged a fairly large-scale Ramrod against Ostend harbour. The Australians crossed the French coast, stepped up from 20,000 to 23,000 feet, and after penetrating some distance inland came out just south of Hardelot without encountering any opposition. Another week passed with no operations, but on 8th March four Spitfires performed the Beachy Head routine patrol while the squadron took part in a Rodeo between Berck-sur-Mer and Le Touquet. The same afternoon No. 452 flew with Kenley Wing as escort cover to six Blenheims which bombed railway marshalling yards at Abbeville. All these flights produced no incident, but the Australians welcomed the reappearance of Circus formations as likely to provoke more positive enemy reaction than the customary sweeps.¹ This hope was quickly realised, for the following day while returning with six Bostons from a Circus at Mazingarbe, No. 452 was attacked by ten Me-109's which dived on them out of the sun, and later in the action some FW-190's also appeared. Truscott and Wawn each shot down one of the Messerschmitts when they first attacked near Lillers, but the enemy continued to follow our formation and another skirmish resulted over Hardelot. Truscott turned and attacked

⁸ Gp Capt F. V. Beamish, DSO, DFC, AFC, RAF. Comd 504 Sqn RAF 1939-40, RAF Stns North Weald 1940-41, Debden 1941, Kenley 1942. Regular air force officer; of Coleraine, N Ireland; b. Dunmanway, Cork, Eire, 27 Sep 1903. Killed in action 28 Mar 1942.

⁹ F-Sgt F. G. Harper, 404664; 452 Sqn. Salesman; of Northgate, Qld; b. Brisbane, 29 Jun 1913. Killed in action 15 Feb 1942.

¹ The last Circus had been on 8 Nov 1941.

one of the shadowing Me-109's, opening fire at 600 yards and closing in to 100 yards, after which the enemy broke away in a steep dive apparently damaged. The Australians lost one Spitfire in the later stages of this combat.

A Circus of ten Bostons bombed Hazebrouck on 13th March, and again acting as escort cover, No. 452 had to protect the bombers from opportunist enemy attacks. Truscott fired at and chased away several Me-109's in a violent series of combats. Sly, by pulling his Spitfire into a tight stall-turn, managed to get within fifty yards of an FW-190 which was attacking another aircraft in his section. His three-second burst of cannon and machine-gun fire struck the enemy aircraft immediately behind its engine cowling and it staggered and flicked over in a vertical dive.

Kenley Wing again gave close escort to Bostons on 14th March, this time the target being an armed merchant ship sheltering in Le Havre. German fighters began attacking over the Seine estuary and Truscott shot down an FW-190 into the sea but then found himself alone with Sergeant Morrison.² They were followed for fifty miles out to sea by two Me-109's which made twelve determined attacks and shot away half the rudder of Morrison's Spitfire. Truscott turned several times to engage the enemy while Morrison came down low but found his aircraft fairly stable. In the last enemy attack Truscott almost rammed one Me-109 while Morrison courageously swung into a climbing turn from 50 to 300 feet and made a head-on attack against the other, which was claimed as probably destroyed.

Fighter Command had already made one sortie against this enemy ship earlier in the day, when Nos. 41 and 129 Squadrons R.A.F. were sent to escort Hudsons in a morning Roadstead operation. The Tangmere Wing found a 6,000-ton ship with an escort of mine-sweepers and anti-aircraft ships sailing one mile off shore near Fecamp and heading for Le Havre. After the Spitfires had circled for ten minutes, awaiting the Hudsons, enemy aircraft were seen approaching from Le Havre. No. 129 remained as top cover, while No. 41 dived to engage these planes, which were recognised as relatively slow Me-109E's. In spirited dog-fights which lasted for fifteen minutes, Coker and Pilot Officer Allen³ each claimed one victory. A second force of superior Me-109F's and FW-190's was engaged as it broke cloud by No. 129 and Pilot Officer Armstrong⁴ destroyed a further Me-109.

This week of combats, a brief recapture of the crowded hours of the preceding autumn, ended the career of No. 452 in No. 11 Group of Fighter Command. On 17th March Truscott, Wawn and four others were posted for return to Australia. Thorold-Smith took over command of the squadron which was, at the same time, withdrawn from the front line for a period

² F-Sgt J. McA. Morrison, 402522. 452 and 75 Sqns. Estate manager; of Grafton, NSW; b. Lismore, NSW, 1 Feb 1918. Killed in aircraft accident 28 Jun 1942.

³ F-O J. J. Allen, 404842; 41 Sqn RAF. Jackaroo; of Hughenden, Qld; b. Charters Towers, Qld, 21 Aug 1919. Killed in aircraft accident 20 Jun 1942.

⁴ Sqn Ldr H. T. Armstrong, DFC, 406022. 257, 129 and 72 Sqns RAF; comd 611 Sqn RAF 1942-43. Car salesman; of Perth, WA, and Sydney; b. Perth, 9 Jun 1916. Killed in action 5 Feb 1943. (Nephew of late Capt Hugo Throssell, VC, 10 Light Horse Regt, 1914-18.)

of rest and training. Sly was transferred as a flight commander to No. 457 Squadron which was to replace No. 452 at Redhill, but the remainder of the pilots had settled in at Andreas by the end of the month, and accepted philosophically the monotonous routine of uneventful convoy patrols and rigorous training which must ensue before the squadron again reached full efficiency.

No. 457 began to operate with No. 11 Group just after Fighter Command had been authorised to resume a full offensive. This decision was taken in the full knowledge that the enemy had experience of previous Circus attacks on which to model effective counter-measures, and in the FW-190 possessed an aircraft of superior speed, rate-of-climb and heavy armament which could turn the balance of advantage against the R.A.F. However, it was considered a worthwhile objective to contain in western Europe as many enemy fighters, especially FW-190's, as was possible even though it meant the loss of aircraft for aircraft. In this way not only would the main fighter force be kept gainfully employed and in position to ward off any sudden attack on England—but indirect assistance would be given to the Russian and Middle East air forces. To the individual fighter pilot these long-ranging considerations were subordinate to his natural desire to express himself in action, and to inflict as much damage on the enemy as opportunity allowed. He realised that the advent of the FW-190 made his task more difficult, but it did not blunt his determination to retain air supremacy, not only over England, but throughout normal fighter range from his base. It was in this spirit that No. 457 arrived at Redhill on 23rd March and waited impatiently for three days for its first offensive sortie against the Continent. The target was the same merchant ship at Le Havre which No. 452 had attacked twelve days before. Kenley Wing again acted as close escort for the twenty-two Bostons which bombed the dock area. Squadron Leader Brothers destroyed an Me-109 but Flying Officer Halse,⁵ second-in-command of "B" Flight, was himself shot down soon after leaving the French coast. Less satisfactory was a battle on 28th March, when, operating for the second time that day, Kenley Wing met between forty and fifty FW-190's and Me-109's near Cap Gris Nez. The twelve Australian Spitfires were flying at 17,000 feet and became engaged in a number of combats mostly with Focke-Wulfs. Sly claimed one victim which fell in flames, and other pilots scored hits on a second which was finally shot down by Finucane (No. 602 Squadron R.A.F.). Two Australians, however, failed to return, a third baled out in the Channel eight miles south of Dungeness and Sergeant Wright,⁶ badly wounded in one knee, had great difficulty in piloting his damaged Spitfire back to Redhill.

The scale of Fighter Command operations mounted rapidly during April reaching a peak on the 16th when over 1,000 sorties were flown.

⁵ F-O B. J. Halse, 402236; 457 Sqn. Clerk; of Bondi, NSW; b. Wellington, NZ, 10 Mar 1913. Killed in action 26 Mar 1942.

⁶ F-Lt W. H. Wright, 402270. 457 and 79 Sqn. Planter; of Samarai, Papua; b. Samarai, 8 May 1919.

The German Air Force countered this unremitting pressure with considerable skill, ignoring many sweeps and Circuses which, in any event, could cause only minor and temporary damage, but reacting violently and successfully at times when tactical and technical considerations were in their favour. The Australians flew an uneventful Rodeo on 2nd April, but two days later lost two Spitfires when they escorted Bostons to bomb the railway station at St Omer.⁷ Only a few defensive patrols were flown before 8th April, when No. 11 Group staged a large-scale Rodeo of seven wings (twenty-one squadrons). Nos. 457, 485 and 602 Squadrons (Kenley Wing) swept in company with Biggin Hill Wing over the Hardelot-Desvres-Guines triangle without becoming engaged, and the other wings met practically no opposition. Another combined Rodeo followed on 10th April but again no action resulted. From the Australian point of view, these parades in strength had the great value of familiarising the pilots with conditions over the Pas de Calais. Each flight averaged one hour and a half mostly over sea or over enemy-occupied territory, and individuals learned to appreciate enemy coastal batteries, the location and probable approach routes of German fighters, the problems of airmanship in conducting combats within a large fighter formation, and the best avenues of escape if hard pressed or damaged. These sweeps had the important subsidiary result of providing ceaseless reconnaissance and in restricting, during daylight, any important moves by enemy air, land or sea units within the patrolled area.

Rear cover was given by No. 457 to Bostons attacking marshalling-yards at Hazebrouck on 12th April, and although the Spitfires turned about and patrolled from Cap Gris Nez to Gravelines after the bombers had withdrawn safely, they encountered no pursuers. The same afternoon the Australians gave protection to rescue launches operating twenty miles east of Deal. On 13th April, ten defensive patrols and one Rodeo were flown, but impatience for combat was not satisfied until the following day, when the squadron was required to fly a diversionary sweep late in the afternoon to draw enemy fighters from a Circus sent at the same time to bomb the power house at Caen. Accordingly twelve R.A.A.F. Spitfires left Redhill at 5.40 p.m., joined Nos. 485 and 602 Squadrons, and then rendezvoused with Biggin Hill and Hornchurch Wings over West Malling at 10,000 feet. The whole formation crossed the French coast at Le Touquet, swept over Desvres and back over the coast between Calais and St Inglevert. The Australians flew at 22,000 feet as the middle squadron of Kenley Wing with both the other wings disposed above them. Ground opposition was very marked and a number of shells burst close to No. 602. No enemy aircraft were seen until the turning point towards the coast, when small formations of FW-190's, numbering from two to ten aircraft, penetrated the Rodeo formation. These enemy aircraft made repeated diving attacks on both No. 457 and No. 602, climbing back quickly to rejoin their own groups, without attempting to force a general battle with

⁷ In the whole operation 11 Spitfires were shot down while only 4 enemy aircraft were claimed as destroyed.

the numerically superior Spitfires.⁸ Many brief combats took place, some being head-on encounters with both aircraft firing at each other before passing one beneath the other. Nine of the R.A.A.F. pilots fired during one or more of these attacks without seeing any results. Pilot Officer MacLean,⁹ however, turned quickly after an FW-190 which dived past him to attack another Spitfire, and, closing in to within seventy yards of the enemy, MacLean scored many effective strikes with cannon and machine-gun fire and sent the Focke-Wulf spinning down out of control. Although the Australian formation became split up during this engagement, all the aircraft returned safely.

The pilots of No. 457 had now settled down well in their offensive role and joined eagerly and with confidence in the very large-scale effort which was made by Fighter Command. They shared in two operations on 15th April, flying in a Rodeo over Gravelines during the morning and then, with eleven other squadrons, giving target support to eight Hurricane bombers which attacked Desvres airfield. Kenley Wing was out again early next morning as top cover to Hurricanes sent to attack Dunkirk. While the actual attack was protected by North Weald and Biggin Hill Wings, No. 457 crossed the French coast east of Dunkirk, swept to Bergues and flew out over the Channel at Gravelines. After a few minutes, the wing turned and flew a second circuit of this cordon around Dunkirk.

Immediately after crossing the coast for the second time four FW-190's were seen getting into position for an attack on No. 485 Squadron, and to prevent this, some of the Australian pilots fired at long range, while Flight Lieutenant North,¹ who was leading No. 457, closed in on two of the enemy and claimed one as probably destroyed.

Perfect spring weather on the 17th enabled Fighter Command to mount seven large, offensive operations. In addition to the intrinsic value of these as part of the long-range struggle for air supremacy, they had the special object of exhausting enemy fighter endurance by the late afternoon, when the raid by Lancasters against Augsburg was to take place. The Germans, however, reacted cautiously against light-bomber attacks on fringe targets and were still able to oppose and inflict heavy casualties on the Lancasters. The Australians' part in the day's activity was small and uneventful. During the morning the Spitfires escorted Bostons against the ammunition factory at Marquise, and later in the day they acted as high cover to another force bombing a power station at Grand Quevilly, but on neither occasion did they encounter enemy aircraft.

A week of bad weather halted these impressive daily excursions of Fighter Command. From 24th April until the end of the month, however, the Australians flew two operations each day except on the 29th when only one sweep was carried out. Only once, on the 27th, did enemy

⁸ About 20 FW-190's were seen. The 3 RAF wings, had they all been free to engage, totalled 108 Spitfires.

⁹ F-Lt D. H. MacLean, 404652; comd 457 Sqn 1945. Planter; of Rabaul, New Guinea; b. Strathfield, NSW, 18 Dec 1916.

¹ F-Lt H. L. North, 41608 RAF. 43 and 96 Sqn RAF, 457 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Dunedin, NZ; b. Dunedin, 31 Oct 1919. Killed in action 1 May 1942.

fighters attack. On this occasion North was leading No. 457 in top-station of Kenley Wing as escort cover on the port side of twelve Bostons. The route employed was from North Foreland to a point ten miles east from Dunkirk, and then direct to Lille, the return track crossing the coast west of Calais to avoid enemy defences already alerted. At 3.40 p.m. as the bombers neared Lille they were intercepted by ten FW-190's which were successfully driven off by the Spitfires, North claiming one as damaged. The escort fighters were now somewhat mixed up and Sly, hearing the wing leader detail aircraft of No. 602 to protect a straggling flak-damaged Boston, fell back with two other pilots in his section as he was already close to the crippled aircraft. From St Omer to the coast repeated enemy attacks were made on this bomber, but Sly managed to intercept several of the FW-190's and claimed one as destroyed and another as damaged. The Boston was escorted safely across the coast but with one engine trailing smoke it then turned about to make a forced landing in France. The Spitfires themselves were now attacked but Sly after firing two short bursts dived down to sea level and made his escape. One Australian did not return and was last seen near Lille.

During the last week of April, enemy aircraft if they appeared at all, attacked squadrons on the fringes of the large fighter formations. However, over Campagne at 5.45 p.m. on 24th April, when No. 457 was flying at 23,000 feet, six FW-190's were seen below and Pilot Officer Watson² dived down and damaged one during a brief combat. The whole squadron became involved in a *mêlée* two days later, when No. 457 became separated from Kenley Wing during a sweep over Cap Gris Nez and fell in with ten FW-190's. Seven of the Australian pilots fired in a confused engagement and all returned safely, claiming damage to two Focke-Wulfs. On 29th April, in the same area, another battle developed during a diversionary sweep by nine squadrons in support of a Circus at Dunkirk. Twelve FW-190's appeared, but the Spitfires held the advantage of height and the enemy fighters were driven off, one probably destroyed by Brothers and a second one damaged by MacLean.

No. 457 had thus flown, during its first full month of operations, 376 sorties of which all except forty-four were flights involving penetration of enemy territory. The Fighter Command offensive continued on much the same scale during May, and in the first nine days, the Australians flew 7 sweeps and 6 Circuses besides providing a further 12 aircraft for coastal patrols. The pattern of operations, the areas patrolled, even the Circus targets, were in general the same as during April and on only two Circuses and one sweep did No. 457 meet any opposition. The sweep encounter on 4th May was a fleeting engagement but, on 1st and 9th May, bitter German attacks were made and on each occasion two Spitfires were shot down. This second reverse was again followed by a week of bad weather, and even on the 17th, when large-scale flying was again possible, the Australians conducted only protective coastal patrols and air-sea rescue

² F-Lt P. H. Watson, DFC, 402267; 457 Sqn. Accountant; of Sydney; b. Melbourne, 9 Feb 1915.

searches. Five more Rodeos, however, were flown before the end of May but these also were uneventful. On the 31st the squadron was withdrawn from No. 11 Group and was sent to Kirton-in-Lindsey, Lincolnshire. This move gave satisfaction to some pilots and ground staff as it was correctly guessed to be in preparation for return to Australia.³ Although, after waiting impatiently for so long a period, the stay of No. 457 in the front line of Fighter Command thus lasted only two months, altered circumstances both in Europe and the Pacific contributed to this satisfaction. No 457 had flown even more intensively than No. 452, but enemy caution and the technical superiority of the FW-190 had prevented it from achieving outstanding victories; at the same time Australia appeared in danger of imminent invasion.

On 18th June 1942, three days before Nos. 452 and 457 sailed for Australia, No. 453 Squadron R.A.A.F. began to re-form at Drem on the Firth of Forth. Twenty-three inexperienced or partly-experienced Australian pilots were available almost immediately but the first commanding officer was an Englishman, Squadron Leader Morello.⁴ Three English, one Canadian and three Polish pilots were also attached to the unit during its first formative months. No Australian maintenance crews were available at first, as almost all suitably qualified men had already been posted to Nos. 452 and 457. From August onward, however, Australians began gradually to replace men provided by the Royal Air Force. There was from the outset intense enthusiasm animating the new squadron which profited greatly, both in the air and on the ground, from assistance given by No. 242 Squadron R.A.F., a fully-operational unit with which the Australians shared the airfield. The first two months were employed in formation flying and gunnery exercises, camera-gun attacks and mock combats, comprising a total of 747 hours flying; together with ground instruction and lectures on tactics. By 10th July, No. 453 was able to provide emergency readiness sections, and five days later, fifteen of the Australians were classed as fit for day operations. Training, however, continued to be the main commitments of the squadron even after 12th August, when convoy and interception patrols began over the Firth of Forth. This very thorough preparation for battle ended on 14th September, when the unit was ordered to Hornchurch in No. 11 Group. After several changes, both flight commanders were now Australians, Flight Lieutenant Ratten⁵ joining "A" Flight on 4th August, and Flight Lieutenant Yarra, who had earned a fine reputation during the mid-summer battles over Malta, taking command of "B" Flight on 14th September.

The conditions which No. 453 met in the front line were very different from those experienced by No. 457, which in turn had operated in circum-

³ On 31 May, 457 Sqn operational record book commented "many are sad, some are happy".

⁴ W Cdr F. V. Morello, 39256 RAF. 501, 249 and 33 Sqn RAF; comd 112 Sqn RAF 1941-42, 453 Sqn 1942. Regular air force offr; b. Shillong, Assam, India, 21 May 1916.

⁵ W Cdr J. R. Ratten, DFC, 405111. 72 Sqn RAF; comd 453 Sqn 1942-43, RAF Stn Peterhead 1943-44, 11 PDRC RAF 1944-45. Mining engineer; of Launceston, Tas; b. Sheffield, Tas, 13 Nov 1912. Died on active service 27 Feb 1945.

stances markedly in contrast with those enjoyed by No. 452. Between May and September a revision of Fighter Command tactics had been necessary. Large-scale sweeps of up to twenty squadrons of Spitfires precipitated no widespread air battles. Indeed, these formations tended to be too rigid and the Germans made opportunist attacks against flank squadrons, shot down one or two Spitfires and retired quickly before they themselves could be brought to bay. These enemy tactics were generally successful when the FW-190 was employed, and from the end of June Fighter Command, in certain weather conditions, was forced to cancel operations. The desired effect of influencing Germany to retain her best fighters in north-west Europe had been achieved, but it was temporarily imprudent to seek battle merely for battle's sake while the FW-190 remained superior to current Spitfire models. The offensive was accordingly pressed by fleeting raids of the *Rhubarb* type in which only a few aircraft participated. These increased in number from 38 in June to 738 in July. The *Circus*, designed primarily to goad enemy fighters into action, was replaced by the *Ramrod*, an operation in which larger forces of more powerful bombers had, as their main objective, the destruction of a worthwhile ground target, and the fighters, although present in the same numbers as for the *Circus*, had a more purely defensive role.

On 18th-19th August Fighter Command was called upon to support an attack by naval and land forces against Dieppe. This reconnaissance in force was planned to provide information on which could be based preparations for a full-scale invasion of the Continent, the ultimate aim of Allied strategy. The air objectives were primarily to obtain and hold air mastery over the English Channel and the port of Dieppe so that surface forces could fulfil their tasks without interference from enemy bombing; secondly, to force the Germans into a heavy air battle; and thirdly, to gauge the tactical support it would be possible to give to landing parties. No. 453 was not ready to participate but it lent some of its aircraft to No. 242 which travelled south on temporary attachment to No. 11 Group, while the Australians undertook the main defensive duties of both squadrons in the Edinburgh sector. The contribution of individual Australians over Dieppe was thus relatively small because in all over 2,400 sorties were flown, but their operations illustrate the main features of Fighter Command activity. Flying Officer Brown⁶ of No. 140 Squadron R.A.F., flew several photographic sorties before the assault to discover the disposition of enemy ground defences. At 4.20 a.m. on the 19th, air operations began with light-bomber attacks against these known gun sites. Hurricane-bombers, Hurricanes and Spitfires then maintained strafing attacks against the same positions while other fighters escorted smoke-laying aircraft ahead of the invasion fleet. Flight Lieutenant Andrews⁷ led a flight of No. 175 Squadron R.A.F. in the early-morning offensive

⁶ F-O E. H. Brown, DFC, 402724. 140, 18 and 682 Sqns RAF. Bank clerk; of Upper Undulla, Tara, Qld; b. Toowoomba, Qld, 9 May 1918. Killed in aircraft accident 5 May 1943.

⁷ W Cdr D. G. Andrews, DFC, 404795. 615, 245 and 175 Sqns RAF; comd 453 Sqn 1943-44; W Cdr (Flying) RAF Stn Coltishall (W Ldr Aust Wing) 1945. Bank clerk; of Southport, Qld; b. Southport, 5 Sep 1921.

and dropped two 500-lb bombs on an enemy battery just as the assault boats were heading towards the shore. Later in the day, at 11 a.m., he made a second attack against guns firing at the naval force as it withdrew. Three Australians with No. 174 performed similar tasks, one of them, Pilot Officer Watson,⁸ being shot down into the harbour and captured. Escort was given by Spitfires on a lavish scale to these ground-attack aircraft, to the naval and troop-carrying ships, and to American bombers, which were sent to limit enemy activity from Abbeville airfield. At first German reaction in the air was slight until 9 a.m., when determined attempts were made by bombers and fighter-bombers to attack the shipping lying off Dieppe. Only one ship was lost, however, through enemy bombing, as the total German effort amounted to only 700 sorties and Spitfires held a numerical advantage throughout the day. A typical defensive success was gained during his third sortie for the day by Pilot Officer Mawer,⁹ when he shot down a Do-217 and drove off two others which attempted to bomb the convoy as it returned across the Channel. Fighter Command lost ninety-eight aircraft during the day but this, although double the enemy loss, was not inordinate in relation to the general success of the operation, which proved that German defences could be swamped.¹ The defence of the convoy was especially successful despite the fact that Air Commodore Cole, who accompanied the naval force as coordinating officer, was severely wounded when German fighters machine-gunned the bridge of H.M.S. *Calpe*, the headquarters ship from which he was directing air operations.

By September 1942, when No. 453 came into the front line at Hornchurch, some squadrons of Fighter Command had been re-armed with Spitfire IX aircraft. These were able to engage FW-190's on fairly even terms and consequently were employed, whenever possible, as close-support fighters during Ramrod operations. Another fighter of superior performance, the Typhoon, also appeared in small numbers and these were used to give withdrawal cover to bombers. Squadrons like No. 453, which were still equipped with Spitfire VB aircraft, were employed on high-cover duties or on diversionary sweeps, if indeed they were employed offensively at all.² This tactical factor, coupled with the natural reduction in operations during winter months, gave the new *Article XV* squadron

⁸ F-Lt C. B. Watson, 400849. 607 and 174 Sqns RAF. Salesman; of Elwood, Vic; b. Carlton, Vic, 23 Nov 1915.

⁹ F-O G. A. Mawer, 403112. 245, 501 and 54 Sqns RAF, 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Manly, NSW; b. Canterbury, NSW, 31 Oct 1919. Killed in action 26 Sep 1943.

¹ German appreciations made shortly after the raid showed general satisfaction with the defending bombers and fighters especially the FW-190's. However, *Luftflotte 3 HQ* on 28 Aug expressed some concern at the aircraft position:

"Do-217 losses were made good by the immediate dispatch of 27 aircraft from the Luftflotte aircraft forwarding centre. To replace lost FW-190's the last 18 aircraft were released from the forwarding centre at Wevelghem. By evening of the day of the landing only 70 of approx. 230 fighter aircraft available in the morning were still serviceable. By morning of 20 Aug serviceability had risen again to 194 aircraft as a result of repairs carried out and replacements brought up during the night. If the operation had been extended over several days, the operational strengths of fighter and bomber formations would have been reduced considerably as there were no further Luftflotte reserves available."

² The vast air armadas of the spring had given way to closely-knit complementary operations each day. Sweeps and small Ramrods against airfields were timed to preoccupy enemy forces while the main striking force attacked the chosen primary target.

little chance to distinguish itself. Indeed, although No. 453 flew 404 hours on 311 sorties during October, the greater part of this effort was applied to protective patrols off the North Foreland and in the Thames estuary. This defensive flying was increasingly necessary as the Germans, partly copying Rhubarb attacks, and partly developing their own economical nuisance tactics employed in the Middle East, sent fighters and fighter-bombers on hit-and-run raids at widely separated points on the English coast. In cloudy weather, when it was difficult for fighters to operate, small numbers of German long-range bombers operated singly over widespread areas of England in daylight. These enemy flights were directed at causing the maximum possible disturbance to industry, not so much by physical damage to factories, but by alerting air raid sirens and thus enforcing loss of time while workers sought shelter. As these intruders could approach anywhere on a broad front, they were very difficult to oppose except by heavy standing patrols which would have halted the R.A.F. offensive. In practice, therefore, some extra patrols were flown but the risk of occasional enemy penetration was accepted as the price for continuing operations over the Continent.

On 2nd October, offensive operations began for No. 453, the day on which it moved for a week's detachment to an airfield at Southend. Coordinated bombing attacks had been planned for Bostons against Le Havre, and for Fortresses against an aircraft factory at Méaulte and the airfield at St Omer. Ratten led eleven Spitfires as part of Hornchurch Wing which flew as high cover to the St Omer attack. The Australians swept between Ostend-Ypres-Dunkirk at 28,000 feet without being engaged, although at lower levels the North Weald and Debden Wings giving close escort to the Fortresses met bitter opposition. Ratten also led No. 453 on a low-level search for enemy shipping between Boulogne and Cap Gris Nez on 6th October, but no targets were found.

Hornchurch and North Weald Wings flew a sweep over St Omer on 11th October, and, on this occasion, the Australians were shadowed on the return flight by six FW-190's. No actual attack was made, but two Spitfires which were keeping rearguard watch collided and both crashed into the sea. Next morning Whirlwind bombers were escorted against German E-boats reported off the French coast but these were not found, nor was there any air reaction. Weather prevented any further large-scale operations and, although No. 453 took off on 17th October to escort Bostons to Le Havre, the Spitfires were recalled and the attack was cancelled. The only other offensive sortie of the month was a Rhubarb flown by two aircraft on 27th October, but even this was abortive.

Defensive flights were likewise uneventful, except on 31st October, when eighteen sorties were made on the standing patrol off North Foreland and to escort a convoy in the same area. One Spitfire developed engine trouble and crashed into the sea, but the afternoon was otherwise uneventful until 5 p.m. Then, just after Pilot Officer Barrien³ and Flying

³ F-Lt J. Barrien, 407747; 453 Sqn. Engineering student; of Toorak Gardens, SA; b. Adelaide, 5 Apr 1919.

Officer Galwey⁴ had been relieved on the convoy patrol and were returning to base, they saw a mixed force of enemy fighters and bombers approaching the coast. The two Spitfires immediately rose to attack a group of eight FW-190's and Barrien fired, head on, at one before diving away and returning to Manston. Galwey attacked four enemy aircraft but was himself shot down into the sea, whence he was rescued at dawn next day after an uncomfortable night in his dinghy. The two Spitfires maintaining the Forelands patrol also saw this enemy force crossing the coast near Deal. Pilot Officer Blumer⁵ damaged a Ju-88 and then turned with Sergeant Swift⁶ to attack an FW-190 which they chased half way across the Channel before they, too, had to return through shortage of fuel. Two pilots arriving soon after to relieve Blumer and Swift also fired, from long range, at two FW-190's which turned tail and headed out to sea. The enemy raid was mounted against Canterbury.

On 1st November, Ratten was promoted to command No. 453, so that the aircrew complement was, for the first time, wholly Australian. Consistently bad weather, with low cloud and thick ground haze, severely limited all flying during November while the seasonal decline in offensive activities made this a very quiet period. Two uneventful sweeps, two abortive Rhubarbs, and a moderate effort on defensive convoy patrols, a total of fewer than 100 operational hours flying, was all that could be attempted before the Australians moved, on 24th November, to engage in an air-firing course at Martlesham. Here they remained until 6th December, gaining the best average squadron score since the inception of this special training, with Swift breaking the previous individual record for hits on the target.

Instead of returning to Hornchurch, No. 453 was ordered to move to Southend, but came back into the line too late to join in the large-scale attack on 6th December against Philips' radio works at Eindhoven, Holland, which marked a new development in joint fighter and bomber attacks. This experiment of using the new force of Ventura bombers (together with the Bostons and Mosquitos) was not immediately repeated and No. 453 was given only three sweeps to perform during December. No contact was made with enemy aircraft. The fighter squadrons, however, were ordered to take special notice of enemy shipping attempting to move under the cover of the prevailing bad weather, and it was while on shipping reconnaissance that No. 453 engaged in its only combat for the month. On 10th December Yarra was leading six Spitfires when he sighted four small coastal vessels in convoy with an anti-aircraft ship, ten miles north-west of Flushing. The Australians attacked immediately and were met by accurate concentrated fire from all the ships. Many of these gun posts were silenced and fires broke out on one ship, but Yarra

⁴ F-Lt G. G. Galwey, 404811. 453 and 79 Sqns. Grazier; of Ravenshoe, Qld; b. Sydney, 19 June 1910.

⁵ F-Lt A. G. B. Blumer, DFC, 411733. 453 Sqn, 601 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Croydon, NSW; b. Gosford, NSW, 5 May 1922.

⁶ F-O N. F. Swift, 411404. 453 Sqn, 80 and 137 Sqns RAF. Departmental manager; of Warrawee, NSW; b. North Sydney, 28 Jun 1920.

and Pilot Officer de Cosier⁷ were themselves shot down and killed during the initial attack against the flakship.

The varying operational conditions experienced by the three R.A.A.F. squadrons coincided with the normal activity of Australian pilots serving during 1942 on R.A.F. Spitfire units. Air fighting had become far more complex than in the early days of heroic single combat, and the individual was now submerged in his squadron, itself part of a wing which was only a fraction of the total force sent out often with indirect quasi-political, rather than direct military, aims. These mass demonstrations proved that, with bearable losses, local and temporary air superiority could be achieved over enemy territories within range of Fighter Command bases. This ability could have no final military result in itself, for the attrition of German fighter strength, during heavy battles in spring and summer, led only to temporary weakness, which could be overcome from as yet untouched training and industrial resources during the months of bad weather. Therefore, although Fighter Command could not succeed as a vital offensive weapon, the experiments with increasingly-large bomber forces and the invasion attempt at Dieppe defined its major role in creating an air situation in which other forces, more likely to produce decisive military results, could operate safely.

Even though dwarfed by the large formations in which he flew, and which necessarily limited his freedom of action, it remains true that the fighting spirit, airmanship, instinctive reaction and shooting ability of the individual pilot, had a large part to play in the success or failure of the struggle for air supremacy. Outstanding among R.A.A.F. pilots was Armstrong, who served successively with Nos. 129, 72 and 611 Squadrons R.A.F. during 1942. Armstrong's keenness to engage the enemy brought him early prominence while flying with Tangmere Wing and he was quickly elevated to be a flight commander of No. 129 Squadron. His judgment and skill as a leader brought further successes, and by May he was credited with the destruction of five enemy aircraft. After similar service with No. 72 Squadron, he was posted to command No. 611 Squadron and by the end of the year had claimed another four enemy victims. Perhaps his greatest attribute was his ability to control his flight or squadron to best advantage on escort work, so that he always had a tactical advantage over enemy fighters which tried to break through to the bombers; he never overlooked defensive responsibilities but, once battle was joined, he showed, in the highest form, the courage, initiative, judgment and skill which marks the truly-great fighter pilot.

The onerous patrols maintained by all Fighter Command groups, although they lacked the excitement and popular appeal of the main air battle, served the vitally important purpose of restricting to a minimum enemy offensive and reconnaissance flights. Here again R.A.A.F. contribu-

⁷ P-O M. H. I. de Cosier, 405575; 453 Sqn. Student; of Sutton's Beach, Qld; b. Melbourne, 3 Oct 1922. Killed in action 10 Dec 1942.

tion was isolated and episodic. On 27th May Allen of No. 41 Squadron, who had already distinguished himself on offensive sweeps, was patrolling between St Catherine's Point and Selsey Bill when he saw an Me-109F fighter-bomber attempting to sneak into the Solent at wave-top height. He chased the enemy who attempted to turn out to sea but was finally engaged and shot down over the Isle of Wight. Another typical successful interception, this time against a reconnaissance plane, came on 5th September, when Flight Sergeant Creagh⁸ and Sergeant Gregory⁹ of No. 610 Squadron R.A.F. were sent up from Ludham (Norfolk) in No. 12 Group to patrol at 23,000 feet. They were then vectored on to two high-flying enemy aircraft, one of which dived and flew away as soon as the Spitfires approached. The second aircraft, now seen to be a camouflaged Me-210, was chased for ten minutes; first Creagh and then Gregory attacked from very close range before the Messerschmitt, with one engine on fire, turned on its back and crashed into the sea thirty miles east of Southend.

⁸ F-Lt S. C. Creagh, 405123. 610 Sqn RAF, 457 Sqn. Clerk; of Malanda, Qld; b. Sydney, 22 Jan 1920.

⁹ F-Lt R. H. W. Gregory, 401944. 610 and 84 Sqs RAF, 457 Sqn. Pharmaceutical chemist; of Brighton Beach, Vic; b. Yarragan, Vic, 15 Oct 1915.