

CHAPTER 24

FIRST T.A.F. AND NORTH-WESTERN AREA, JANUARY-APRIL 1945

IN January 1945 the Japanese forces in New Guinea, the Solomons, the Indies, and Burma, were in a critical situation which was growing daily worse. They had made their major counter-thrust in the Philippines, employing their utmost resources, and yet had not managed to do more than cause a slight delay in the American operations. The Japanese air forces had been reduced to suicide squadrons, Japan's navy had been sunk or immobilised, her merchant shipping had been almost wiped out. Whole armies were isolated, and Japan's domestic production was sliding rapidly downhill. Yet in January the Japanese people had not abandoned hope of victory.

At an Imperial conference during the month the Japanese leaders had decided on a "bloody and protracted struggle in the homeland, the Nansei Shoto, Manchuria and China".¹ The SHO-GO plan which had failed to achieve its objectives in the Philippines and had led to the defeat of the Japanese navy and the destruction of most of the air force employed, was replaced by the KETSU operation, the principal purpose of which was to engage the Americans in strategic areas, exacting heavy casualties, and through this blood-letting, breaking their will to continue the fight. The Japanese believed that Okinawa would be the next point invaded and this was one of the strategically-important areas in which American blood would be made to flow. Desperate measures were planned. The suicide-plane operations would be fully employed and by this means it was hoped that between 300 and 400 American ships would be sunk. There was talk of defending Tokyo to the last, especially the area around the Imperial Palace where it was hoped that soldiers would hold out in underground positions for more than a year.

After 1st March no further supplies were sent to ground forces outside the home islands. There was no fuel for the navy, so the remaining ships were put out of commission and navy personnel turned over to aviation.² Admiral Toyoda³ felt strongly that to continue the war would be extremely difficult. The turning point, he believed, was the loss of the Philippines when the fuel situation became acute because American control over the South China Sea completely cut off the shipping lanes to the south. After March, the Japanese no longer attempted to send tankers through this sea. In the latter part of March all the northward-bound convoys had been sunk and Superfortresses were laying mines in the Shimonoseki Strait, causing the suspension of sea traffic even in the Inland Sea area. There had been a catastrophic drop in domestic production of war

¹ Colonel Hattori (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

² US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol I, p. 284, Vice-Adm Weneker.

³ US Bombing Survey, *Interrogations*, Vol II, p. 315.

materials and supplies, caused by the lack of materials from overseas, and the Superfortress raids from the Marianas which were destroying factories and disrupting communications. By withdrawing fighters from overseas, however, the Japanese were able to put up strong fighter opposition to American air attacks on the home islands. During five raids on Nagoya the Superfortresses were met by a total of 1,731 fighter attacks and suffered severe losses. First priority had been given to the bombing of the Japanese aircraft industry, and the Japanese, realising that the Americans intended to destroy the aircraft industry, attempted to disperse the factories. However, the dispersal was delayed because of the necessity of providing more and more planes for the Pacific war, and when dispersal could no longer be avoided, it was too late. The drop in aircraft production was precipitous.

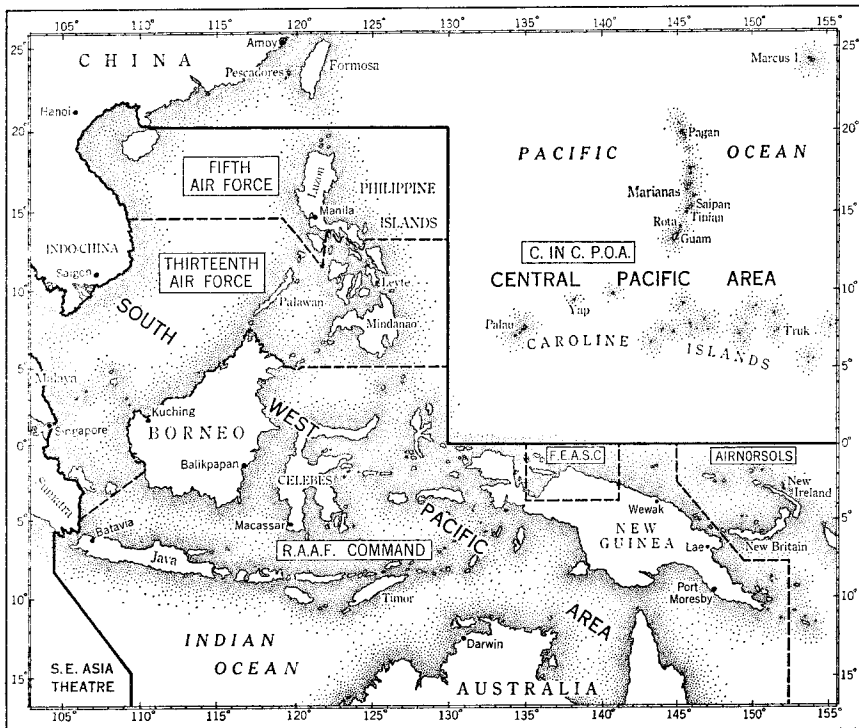
On 16th February an American naval task force stood off Japan and sent 1,200 carrier aircraft into the Tokyo area, where air reaction, although heavy, was largely ineffective. Some 300 enemy planes were destroyed for a loss of 29 American. Three days later the American V Marine Corps landed on Iwo Jima, a small island 775 miles from the main Japanese island of Honshu.

While the Superfortresses continued their assault on Japan proper, the aircraft of First T.A.F. continued to range over the Moluccas, Celebes and elsewhere in the Netherlands East Indies. At this time enemy air strength in the whole of the South-West Pacific Area had fallen to an estimated 161 aircraft, the lowest level since the beginning of the war. Against this the R.A.A.F. had 663 and the U.S. Far East Air Force 2,791.

With the main battle of the Philippines over, MacArthur was developing a series of moves which aimed to free the southern Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies and British Borneo of hostile forces and re-establish "constituted government" there. The basic plan for these operations became known as the MONTCLAIR plan. The starting time for each operation was dependent on progress made in the operations in Luzon. Progress there was so rapid that the first of the MONTCLAIR operations was launched against the island of Palawan on 28th February. After two days of heavy air bombardment over Palawan itself, the southern Philippines and other near-by enemy-held areas, elements of the Eighth American Army landed at Puerto Princesa. Besides the town, two airfields were captured from which Allied aircraft could patrol across the South China Sea. These two airfields had been an important Japanese link in their system of air communications between the Philippines and Malay-Singapore. In January, Liberators had heavily bombed other links in this chain—Miri and Jesselton, in Borneo. Throughout February, the two airfields at Balikpapan, Manggar and Sepinggang, as well as Labuan, Tarakan, Sanga Sanga and other Borneo targets had been visited by bombing planes which increased their blows as assault day at Palawan approached. On the day before the landing both the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces "saturated" the target area with explosives and fire bombs. The result of all this

preparation was that an American regimental combat team was able to land unopposed.

The Thirteenth Air Force, the advanced headquarters of which had now been established at Leyte, was the air assault force for the Palawan operation and, after the landing, it established squadrons and service units at Puerto Princesa. The Fifth Air Force assisted the Thirteenth, but the R.A.A.F. was given no direct part, being ordered merely to continue "its present missions in the Netherlands East Indies".



Ten days after the landing at Palawan the next stage of the Philippines operation was mounted. This was the seizure of Zamboanga on the south-west tip of Mindanao. The purpose of this landing was to control the approaches to north-east Borneo and to support the consolidation of central and eastern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. This operation was preceded by a three-day naval bombardment and heavy air strikes. In the fifteen days before the landing, American bombers dropped about 950 tons of high explosives and 15,000 gallons of napalm mixture on the town and its immediate vicinity. There was evidence that enemy ground forces could strongly resist a landing and it was therefore necessary to eliminate this expected resistance by air bombardment. The bom-

bardment was successful and the 41st American Division met only light opposition, though heavy fighting followed in the foothills for some weeks.

There was no change in the role allotted to First Tactical Air Force in February. General Streett's orders⁴ at the beginning of the month were:

Continue the neutralisation and destruction of the enemy and his installations in the Celebes, Ceram-Ambon and Halmahera areas.

Attack targets in the Mindanao and Sulu archipelago areas as requested by this [13th Air Force] headquarters.

Assist in the air defence of Morotai by providing daylight air cover and alert and sufficient night interceptors to augment night air defence system.

Support the 31st Infantry division on Morotai as requested.

In the main, Australian Kittyhawks and Spitfires were used against Halmahera and Morotai targets while the Beaufighters handled Celebes and Ambon-Ceram.

On the 1st February, eight Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron attacked a Japanese army personnel area at Tomohon. This attack was carried out at about 12.40 p.m., the aircraft dropping depth-charges and 500-lb fragmentation clusters. The Japanese succeeded in shooting down a Beaufighter piloted by Flight Lieutenant Taylor⁵ with Flying Officer Packham⁶ as navigator. This aircraft was seen by the others to crash on a plateau about one mile south of the town and break up. Anti-aircraft fire was so fierce during the attack that the leader of the mission, Flight Lieutenant Provost⁷, ordered the rest of the formation to rendezvous at a point some distance from the target from where course was set for base. Another Beaufighter in this attack (Pilot Officer McGuigan⁸ and Flight Sergeant Lewis⁹) was also lost. It was last seen heading over the target area but failed to return to base. A third machine was hit in the fuselage behind the navigator's cockpit. Later in the afternoon twelve Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron accompanied by twelve from No. 80 attacked the same targets, dropping incendiaries and napalm bombs. The crews reported seeing the wreck of Taylor's aircraft.

One of the biggest batterings by Australian squadrons in a one-day series of attacks was inflicted on the town of Tondano in Celebes on 11th February. This massed attack was delivered by 60 Kittyhawks and 28 Beaufighters using depth-charges and fragmentation, high-explosive and napalm bombs. The object was to destroy Japanese ground forces. Because of the continued bombardment by Allied aircraft, the Japanese

⁴ Letter of Instruction No. 10, Thirteenth Air Force, Feb 1945.

⁵ F-Lt D. R. Taylor, 416465; 31 Sqn. Draftsman; of Prospect, SA; b. Port Lincoln, SA, 13 Jan 1920. Killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

⁶ F-O K. Packham, 436776; 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Swanbourne, WA; b. Perth, 1 Sep 1923. Killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

⁷ F-Lt R. A. Provost, 406060; 31 Sqn. Civil servant; of Mt Lawley, WA; b. Perth, WA, 5 Mar 1919.

⁸ P-O W. R. McGuigan, 427717; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Wickepin, WA; b. Narrogin, WA, 30 Jul 1924. Killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

⁹ F-Sgt A. E. Lewis, 431362; 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Camperdown, Vic; b. Red Cliffs, Vic, 22 May 1925. Killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

had begun to move from the big centres to smaller towns and villages. Natives had given information that there were a large number of Japanese in Tondano.

Six squadrons of First T.A.F.—Nos. 22, 30 and 31 (Beaufighters) and Nos. 75, 78 and 80 (Kittyhawks)—took part, attacking in five waves and dropping twenty-six tons of explosives and incendiaries. The first wave, comprising forty Kittyhawks, led by Wing Commander Atherton, silenced anti-aircraft positions. Ten minutes later, another part of the town was hammered by nineteen Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant Andrew. These aircraft obliterated their target with high-explosive bombs. Then followed twenty-eight Beaufighters, led by Squadron Leader J. C. Black,¹ in three waves, dropping high-explosive and napalm bombs which added new fires to those already started by the Kittyhawks. Nine of these aircraft were from No. 22 Squadron which was making its first strike since December, after its conversion from Boston aircraft.

Many Beaufighters had been destroyed or damaged during January and February as a result of anti-aircraft fire or accidents. The high accident rate was attributed to difficulties in changing over from English-made to Australian-made machines. The Australian-made aircraft was fitted with non-locking tail wheels which caused them to swing to one side on landing.

On 16th February, when Beaufighters bombed a steel bridge at Gorontalo, direct hits sent a thirty-foot section crashing into the river. The attack was to have been made by fifteen aircraft, but six from No. 22 Squadron had to turn back to base because of heavy cloud and rain, and the raid was carried out by nine Beaufighters from No. 31 Squadron.

Squadron Leader Holloway² of No. 22, with Pilot Officer Genders³ as navigator, crashed on 27th February when four Beaufighters attacked a bridge at Isimu, near Gorontalo. No hits were scored although several bombs fell close to the bridge. Holloway had just arrived at Morotai to command No. 22 Squadron. While making a particularly low attack at the head of his flight his wing tip hit some trees. The aircraft half rolled and crashed, the wreckage being scattered over 300 yards. It appeared certain that both men were killed but Genders survived the crash only to die, while a prisoner of war, some ten weeks later.

The intensity of attacks on Halmahera began to fall in early February. For the week ending the 9th, 193 Kittyhawks, 24 Spitfires and 2 Beaufighters attacked supply dumps, barges and buildings.

On 3rd February Nos. 78 and 80 Squadrons sent 53 Kittyhawks to Halmahera. Sixteen of them bombed Wasile pier area and eight dive-bombed anti-aircraft positions at Lolobata. At the latter, extremely heavy

¹ Sqn Ldr J. C. Black, 470. 12 and 30 Sqns; comd 31 Sqn 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Tranmere, SA; b. Adelaide, 29 Mar 1920.

² Sqn Ldr J. Holloway, 2631. Comd 22 Sqn 1945. Regular airman; of Glen Iris, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 7 Apr 1916. Killed in action 27 Feb 1945.

³ F-O D. E. Genders, 437919; 22 Sqn. Article clerk; of Burra, SA; b. Mt Gambier, SA, 16 May 1925. Died while prisoner of war 10 May 1945.

anti-aircraft fire, prevented the results of the attacks being seen. During the attacks on Halmahera on this day Wing Commander Atherton had his aircraft hit by anti-aircraft fire north of Hatetabako airfield. He managed to ditch the plane into Kau Bay. While in his dinghy he was subjected to fire but the shots fell short. A mortar shell fell harmlessly only seventy yards from the Catalina which came to his rescue. Another Kittyhawk in this mission was holed by anti-aircraft fire in the port mainplane, petrol tank, starboard mainplane and tyre, but the pilot, unhurt, returned to his base making a normal landing.

Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron carried out their first operations from Morotai on 10th February when Group Captain Caldwell led them on a reconnaissance over Halmahera. They strafed an enemy aircraft at Galela. The move of this squadron had been constantly delayed. Twenty-four aircraft had left Sattler on 6th February, twenty-three of these reaching Morotai on the 8th. The rest of the squadron came by air transport aircraft and by boat. The third squadron (No. 79) was also moved to Morotai during February, and before the end of the month had carried out a number of operational sorties.

The relative scarcity of payable targets, and a shortage of ammunition and bombs towards the end of February, dictated a reduction in the operational effort of First T.A.F. On 28th February the force had flown 1,324 sorties for the month, compared with the January total of 2,037. The reduction in the average effort for individual pilots is all the more pronounced by reason of the fact that in February twelve squadrons were engaged, compared with nine squadrons in January. No. 81 Wing, still at Noemfoor, did very little operational flying and Group Captain Arthur reported that although morale was "good", he considered that "a much higher standard will be achieved when active operations commence and personnel realise that they are taking an active operational part in the war".

On 20th February Cobby reported to Air Force Headquarters that the bomb-stock position had become critical. First T.A.F. had been forced to augment its supplies from Thirteenth Air Force stocks, but the Thirteenth Air Force was also running short. Under present operational intensity, said Cobby, explosive stocks were reduced to 7 days for 250-lb bombs and 40 days for 500-lb bombs, and, in order to place the supply position on a sound footing, a large supply of bombs from R.A.A.F. sources was essential. Air Force Headquarters replied that the bomb-supply situation had been critical for months because of the extremely heavy commitments in the European theatre. The latest advice from R.A.A.F. Overseas Headquarters, London, indicated that allocations of bombs to the R.A.A.F. for the six months from February would be less than estimated needs, but that negotiations were being continued on a high level.

During March, while the American Twentieth Air Force bombed Tokyo, the Fifth hit the China coast and aided in the mopping-up in Luzon; the Thirteenth Air Force struck at Borneo and the southern Philippines, and First T.A.F. continued its garrison duties from Morotai.

Statistically, First T.A.F.'s effort in March (1,341 sorties) was slightly greater than in February (1,324 sorties). However, a greater portion of the burden was now being carried by the Spitfire squadrons of No. 80 Wing, which mounted 521 sorties for the month, thus enabling the Kittyhawks and Beaufighters to prepare for the coming operations in Borneo.

Although no enemy planes were seen in the air by raiding Australian planes, the enemy anti-aircraft defences were still strong and numbers of aircraft were shot down, limped back to base in a damaged condition, or ditched in the sea from which the pilots were rescued by Catalinas.

From the 18th March, the air defence of Morotai, which until then had been the responsibility of the Thirteenth Air Force, was assigned to First T.A.F. This was in addition to the normal neutralisation raids and destruction of enemy facilities in Halmahera, Celebes and the Ceram-Ambon area, where there were upwards of 50,000 enemy troops, more or less isolated.

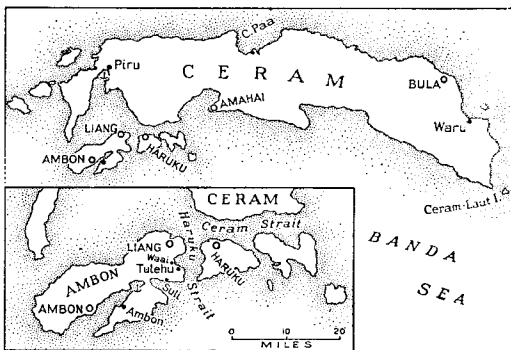
During this rather barren period, when few important targets could be found, First T.A.F. aircraft operated mostly in pairs or in threes and their operations took them daily over wide areas. The Beaufighters made many of their sorties south to the Ambon-Ceram area, as well as north to the Talaud and Sanghi Islands and westwards to Celebes. It is difficult to describe these operations or even a percentage of them without repeating similar details over again. Occasionally the routine nature of this work was high-lighted by an act of bravery or a particularly successful strike, but for the most part the action was stereotyped, and became monotonous to the crews.

On 22nd March the enemy air force sent two aircraft to raid Morotai. It was a rarity for the enemy to carry out bombing raids south of the Philippines at this stage. The two enemy planes approached Morotai from the south-east at a height of 18-20,000 feet and dropped seven bombs which landed at the north-east end of Pitu airfield, damaging a mess hut and wounding an American. Anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the raiders but without result. There were no night fighters in the air because of the adverse weather. On the same night, enemy raiders came over Biak Island and dropped bombs which killed thirty-four men and destroyed three aircraft. Allied Intelligence came to the conclusion that the attacking aircraft probably followed the earlier practice of staging in through Celebes and other forward bases, remaining at the staging points for only brief periods. Again North-Western Area aircraft were diverted to a series of harassing raids on enemy airfields in the Kendari-Ambesia area, while six aircraft of No. 77 Squadron were ordered from Noemfoor to Mokmer airfield in Biak to provide defence against further attacks.

Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron on armed reconnaissance over Ambon on the 26th March attacked and destroyed three twin-engined enemy aircraft at Liang. The Beaufighters, led by Provost, had begun by strafing Haruku where they encountered intense fire from the ground. They made only one run over this airfield. But at Liang they made twelve runs. In addition to attacking the three enemy aircraft which burst into flames and were destroyed, they hit two motor transports there. Two of the Beau-

fighters were damaged by the anti-aircraft fire but returned safely to their base.

At Noemfoor, Kittyhawks of No. 81 Wing continued their daily patrols round the island and after the enemy raid on Biak, carried out a number of sorties against targets on the Vogelkop peninsula, where, however, they found little activity. Of 84 of the wing's sorties over the Vogelkop peninsula only 36 found targets. During a sweep on the 29th March Pilot Officer McClintock⁴ came down to 600 feet over Babo and his aircraft, being apparently hit by anti-aircraft fire, burst into flames. With some difficulty McClintock baled out, his parachute opening just above the tree tops.



Landing uninjured on a small peninsula he quickly slipped out of his parachute harness and, using his compass to keep in a northerly direction, moved from the area through marshy ground. After thirty minutes walking he reached a creek and using his dinghy paddled to the sea and thence to a small island. Shortly afterwards he again put to sea where some hours later he was picked up by an air-sea rescue Catalina and was returned, little the worse for his experience, to his base at Kamiri.

On the 30th March Beaufighters attacked the Liang airfield again and the pilot of one (Warrant Officer Hart⁵) was wounded in both legs by anti-aircraft fire. The navigator, Flying Officer Wilson,⁶ helped the wounded pilot to steady the aircraft while he applied emergency bandages to his legs and, in spite of pain from his wounds, Hart flew the Beaufighter across 350 miles of sea to make a perfect landing at Morotai.

Next day, off the same island, there was tense action when an attacking Beaufighter (Warrant Officer Roberts,⁷ pilot, and Flight Sergeant Phillips,⁸ navigator) was shot down. This aircraft and another (Flying Officers Sounness⁹ and Cant¹) set off from Morotai before 5 a.m. to sweep the

⁴ F-O R. G. McClintock, DFC, 412626; 76 Sqn. Student; of Lane Cove, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 4 Apr 1921

⁵ W-O W. J. Hart, 415653; 22 Sqn. Orchardist; of Roleystone, WA; b. Victoria Park, WA, 31 Oct 1925.

⁶ F-Lt D. B. Wilson, 431158; 22 Sqn. Engineer's pattern maker; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Brunswick, Vic, 28 Apr 1919.

⁷ P-O R. K. Roberts, 428805. 22 and 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Armidale, NSW; b. Armidale, 7 Dec 1923.

⁸ F-Sgt B. W. Phillips, 430969. 22 and 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Kaniva, Vic; b. Unley, SA, 24 Feb 1925.

⁹ F-O K. W. Sounness, DFC, 427359; 31 Sqn. Farm hand; of Mt Barker, WA; b. Mt Barker, 22 Apr 1923.

¹ F-O G. R. Cant, 433178. 73 and 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Nyah West, Vic; b. Nyah West, 6 Jul 1922.

north coast of Ambon. The two machines were strafing anti-aircraft positions at Tulehu when Roberts' aircraft was hit. Both engines stopped and the pilot had to "ditch" in Haruku Strait. The Beaufighter sank in fifteen seconds and the men had barely enough time to scramble out and get into their dinghy.

Sounness decided to stay overhead to protect them until the arrival of a rescue Catalina for which he had signalled, or until other covering aircraft could be sent. This might mean he would have to ditch his aircraft because petrol supplies would last only until 10.30 a.m. A native craft came out to the stranded airmen and a lone native invited them to come ashore but they refused. Fortunately for Sounness two Beaufighters now arrived and he was able to leave the area, arriving at Morotai with only fifteen gallons of petrol left. So far no opposition had been met from the Japanese ashore, but it seemed certain they were leaving the dinghy as a decoy for bigger game.

Flight Lieutenant Mills² of No. 113 Air-Sea Rescue Flight arrived in a Catalina at 10.45 a.m. and found the two airmen 300 yards off shore from Waai village. As he approached, flying his aircraft just above the surface of the water, he was met by heavy fire from both sides of Haruku Strait. Back at base a tense crowd had gathered round the signal office listening to the drama. Roberts and Phillips, now swimming alongside their dinghy, came under fire from the Japanese in Waai village. As quickly as possible Mills put the Catalina down, lowering his wheels to keep the aircraft stationary; as he did so, the enemy opened up with machine-guns, rifles and even field pieces.

While returning this fire from the unprotected blister of the Catalina Flying Officer Hastie,³ gunnery leader and fire control officer, was severely wounded in the stomach. He carried on until he was able to hand over the gun to Sergeant Ballinghall.⁴ Sergeant Maberry, an American medical orderly in the Catalina, attended to Hastie's wounds while still under fire.

Meanwhile, the two covering Beaufighters concentrated their efforts in attacking the enemy on shore to distract their attention from the Catalina. In a low pass, Flying Officer Ellis⁵ aircraft was hit and one of his engines failed, but flying on one engine he continued his strafing runs until the survivors were picked up and the Catalina had taken off. The take-off was accomplished by Mills in spite of the rough water which caused structural damage to his aircraft.

The No. 113 Air-Sea Rescue Flight which Mills commanded had been formed at Cairns in January 1945. Air-sea rescue units were a great morale booster for aircrews in the Pacific theatre where long stretches of ocean had to be crossed. Rescue organisation had become so efficient that air-

² F-Lt W. R. Mills, DFC, AFC, 412170. 20 Sqn and 113 ASR Flight. Veterinary student; of Paeroa, NZ; b. Thames, NZ, 29 Jan 1917.

³ F-Lt N. W. Hastie, DFC, 402706. 11 and 20 Sqns, 113 ASR Flight. Clerk; of Vaucluse, NSW; b. Kew, Vic, 25 Jan 1921.

⁴ Sgt R. C. Ballinghall, 41266; 113 ASR Flight. Textile mechanic; of East Brunswick, Vic; b. Brunswick, 26 Jul 1922.

⁵ F-O T. W. Ellis, DFC, 420868; 31 Sqn. Civil servant; of Rabaul; b. Creswick, Vic, 5 Sep 1914.

crews in trouble preferred to "ditch" rather than "bale out" over enemy territory. So bad was the record of the Japanese in their treatment of Allied servicemen who fell into their hands that immediate escape and evasion was the one thought in the minds of airmen who were shot down or otherwise stranded in enemy areas. Escape procedures were constantly drilled into aircrews, so much so, that one pilot, who had not become conscious until an hour after his aircraft had hit a tree, found that he had carried out all the initial evasion procedures.

No. 113 Flight began its duties in February, when, on the 4th, a Catalina covered a strike by the R.A.A.F. at Tondano in Celebes. On 7th February, Mills, while reconnoitring Macassar Strait, was attacked by an enemy aircraft—a Rufe—which made several passes, firing cannon, but without scoring any hits. The varied duties of these aircraft during February, March and April included the delivering of medical supplies to Tawitawi Island in the Sulu Archipelago for guerillas; taking a party of Australian soldiers to Tahulandang Island and picking up natives for movement to Morotai; visiting Tarakan to pick up natives needed for questioning about conditions there, and covering many missions by R.A.A.F. squadrons.

North-Western Area's operational duties in January 1945 were similar to those of First Tactical Air Force. It provided an air garrison in the Northern Territory and bombing strikes against enemy shipping and installations in the Netherlands East Indies, including long-range missions to eastern Java. By January, another Australian heavy bomber squadron (No. 21, commanded by Squadron Leader I. O. Black⁶) had arrived in the area from Queensland, and was based at Fenton, in the Northern Territory. No. 23 Squadron, also armed with Liberators, was expected to arrive from the south in February, while No. 25 Squadron, based at Cunderdin, in Western Australia, was being rearmed with Liberators and would be available for reconnaissance or strikes in the Netherlands East Indies. To carry out operations in the N.E.I. it was planned that this squadron would stage through Truscott and Corunna Downs in the north-west.

No. 21 Squadron and No. 24 Squadron, which had been controlled by the American No. 380 Bombardment Group, now came under the control of the R.A.A.F.'s No. 82 (Heavy Bomber) Wing Headquarters, commanded by Group Captain Kingwell. The R.A.A.F. Wing was to take over the duties carried out by No. 380 Group, which was under orders to move to the Philippines, where it would join other formations of the Fifth Air Force. For nearly two years, firstly under Colonel Miller and then under Major Brissey, the No. 380 Group had provided the main offensive strength of North-Western Area and it had established a fine record of flying hours and accuracy for bombing. The group had operated under Australian control and except for minor friction, perhaps inevitable in the circumstances, the relations between Americans and Australians

⁶ Sqn Ldr I. O. Black, 248. 13 and 6 Sqns; comd 21 Sqn 1944-46. Regular air force offr; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Camberwell, 12 Jun 1917.

were an excellent example of Allied cooperation. Two other Australian squadrons, Nos. 12 and 99, were being equipped with Liberators and it was intended that the R.A.A.F. would then form another heavy-bomber wing.

No. 82 Wing began to function on the 11th January, and on the 12th, a Liberator captained by Flight Lieutenant Court⁷ of No. 24 Squadron scored the first victory for the wing when it strafed a 100-ton diesel-powered vessel and set it on fire from stem to stern. No. 24 Squadron had been operating in the Northern Territory since May 1944, but neither it nor any other squadron had lost a Liberator as a result of enemy action until 23rd January, when an aircraft captained by Pilot Officer Richards⁸ and with a crew of nine others, was shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Cape Chater, Timor, while on its way to the Flores Sea to carry out an armed reconnaissance.

During January preparations were completed for an attack on power installations in east Java. Painstaking work went into this task and the basis was a preliminary technical survey made by the Central Intelligence Unit in Brisbane. The targets were pin-pointed and the distribution system of the power plants studied. Then Mosquito aircraft of No. 87 (Photographic Reconnaissance) Flight photographed the area, although results were not good because of the bad weather. From photographs, approach and target maps were then produced in Brisbane. Crews of No. 24 Squadron, who were to carry out the attack, went into two weeks concentrated training. Altogether, hundreds of R.A.A.F. personnel between Brisbane and North-Western Area worked on the plan.

On the day of the first attack, 27th January, however, only two of the six Liberators assigned got through to the power stations at Siman and at Mendalan on the Konto River in east Java. The two aircraft were captained by Kingwell and Flight Lieutenant Kirkwood⁹ and staged through the operational base at Truscott in Western Australia. The two Liberators approached the Java coast at minimum altitude and after a dummy run over the target at Mendalan, Kingwell dropped six bombs which trailed through the transformer installation. The target was very well camouflaged and a dummy power house had been set up north of it. Kingwell's aircraft was not fired on either over the target or in any part of Java and no enemy aircraft were seen. Observation showed that the transformers had been destroyed. Kirkwood bombed and severely damaged the generators at Siman. Four other Liberators were unable to penetrate the cloud which had closed down to ground level and they were forced to jettison their bombs in the sea and abandon the mission. These aircraft took off much later than the first two and the weather had deteriorated. Kingwell and Kirkwood experienced excellent weather on the outward journey, but a

⁷ Sqn Ldr W. Court, 2633; 24 Sqn. Regular airman; of Sydney; b. Gillingham, Kent, Eng, 25 Feb 1912.

⁸ P-O K. H. Richards, 407253. 8 Sqn RAF; 24 Sqn. Clerk; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 24 Dec 1915. Killed in action 23 Jan 1945.

⁹ F-Lt W. W. Kirkwood, 411497; 24 Sqn. Engineering student; of Parramatta, NSW; b. Port Kembla, NSW, 10 Apr 1919.

rude shock awaited them when they were returning. Conditions at the home base were bad and it was impossible to warn them because of the need to maintain radio silence. They ran into thunderheads and in one aircraft the navigator hit the roof with the first bump. Another member of the crew severely bruised his face and twice the aircraft was nearly turned over. Another aircraft flew for nearly two hours in the storm. The gyro instruments went "haywire" and the electrical activity in the storm made both the radio compass and the magnetic compass entirely useless.

On the 5th and 8th February No. 24 Squadron attacked these electrical installations again. Staging through Truscott, Wing Commander Bell¹ led a flight of four Liberators on the 5th February. The flight succeeded in cutting the penstock lines, causing spectacular water spouts, but apart from this there was little additional damage. Three days later another four Liberators, captained by Bell, Squadron Leader Nichols,² and Flight Lieutenants Ford³ and Court attacked the targets for a third time. They came in at minimum altitude and this time completed the destruction of the power installations at both Mendalan and Siman. It seemed certain that the plants would not produce power for a considerable time. Over Java, Court's aircraft was attacked by two enemy Oscar fighters. One of them lowered its undercarriage so as to reduce speed to that of the Liberator and then dropped two phosphorus bombs which burst 500 feet above. Streamers of white smoke shot out from the explosion in all directions. The second Oscar then made three passes but scored no hits. Court's waist gunner claimed possible hits on it. The attack was broken off when Court turned south. He reached base safely.

The operations of No. 79 Wing, which were usually employed against enemy shipping within range, were seriously affected by the weather during January.

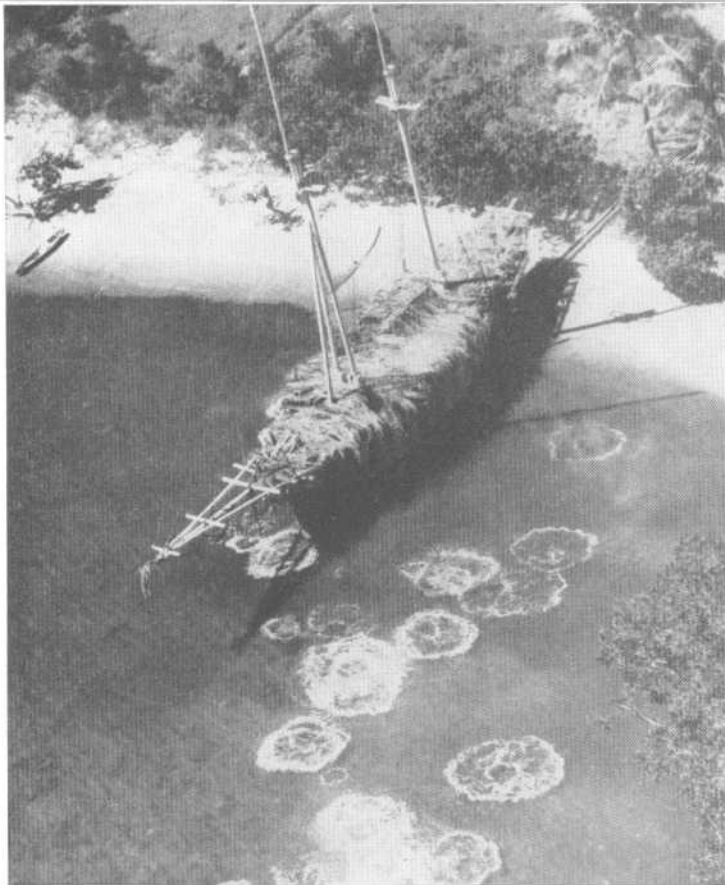
As a counter-propaganda measure Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons carried out a series of widespread raids on villages in Timor on 1st January, a day on which the Japanese usually held festivities in Timor towns. Seven targets were successfully bombed and strafed.

No. 1 Squadron had been ordered to move to Kingaroy, Queensland, where it was to be re-equipped with Mosquito aircraft and proceed north again as part of an attack wing in First Tactical Air Force. The squadron ceased operations on 9th January and moved rapidly to its new base at Kingaroy. This threw a larger burden on No. 13 Squadron which was now required to provide all convoy cover. This squadron lost two aircraft in January. One struck the ground while on an operational travel flight and all members of the crew were killed. The same day (27th January) another Ventura engaged on a training exercise at Gove crashed into the sea. There were three survivors from this crash but one of them died later.

¹ W Cdr R. E. Bell, MVO, DFC, AFC, 268. 100 Sqn; comd 22 Sqn 1942, 24 Sqn 1945. Regular air force offr; of Darling Point, NSW; b. 10 Feb 1917.

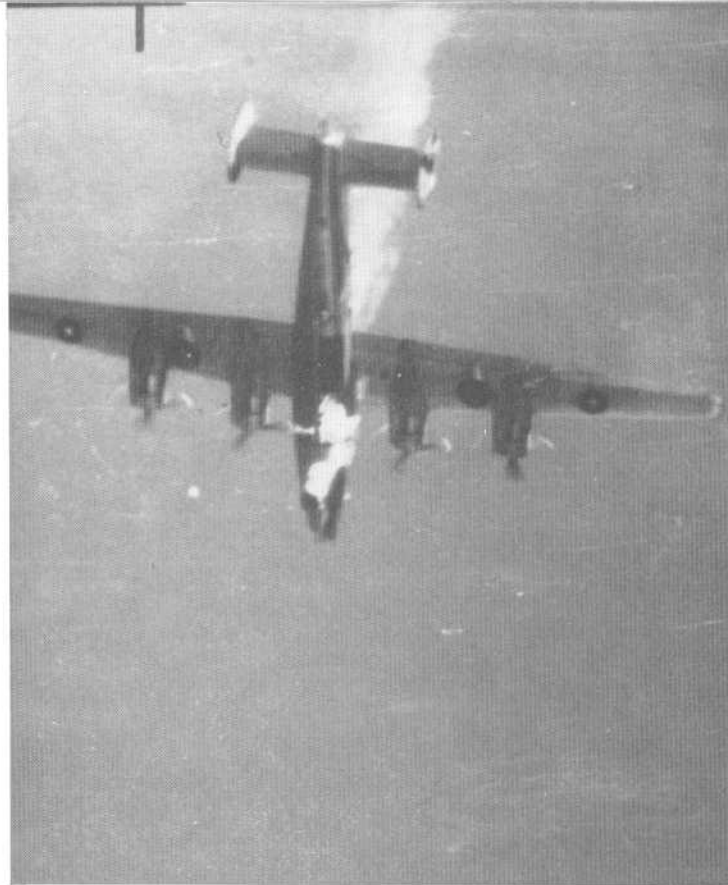
² Sqn Ldr A. W. Nichols, 483. 14, 460, 13 and 25 Sqns; comd ACH Pt Moresby 1945. Regular air force offr; of Wagin, WA; b. Wagin, 18 May 1917.

³ F-Lt E. V. Ford, 255138; 24 Sqn. Motor engineer; of Northcote, Vic; b. London, 14 Feb 1911. Killed in action 6 Apr 1945.



(R.A.A.F.)

A lugger west of Tanjampea, in the Flores Sea, being bombed and strafed by a Liberator of No. 12 Squadron on 19th June 1945. The photograph taken from 200 feet shows the manner in which the Japanese camouflaged this type of small craft.



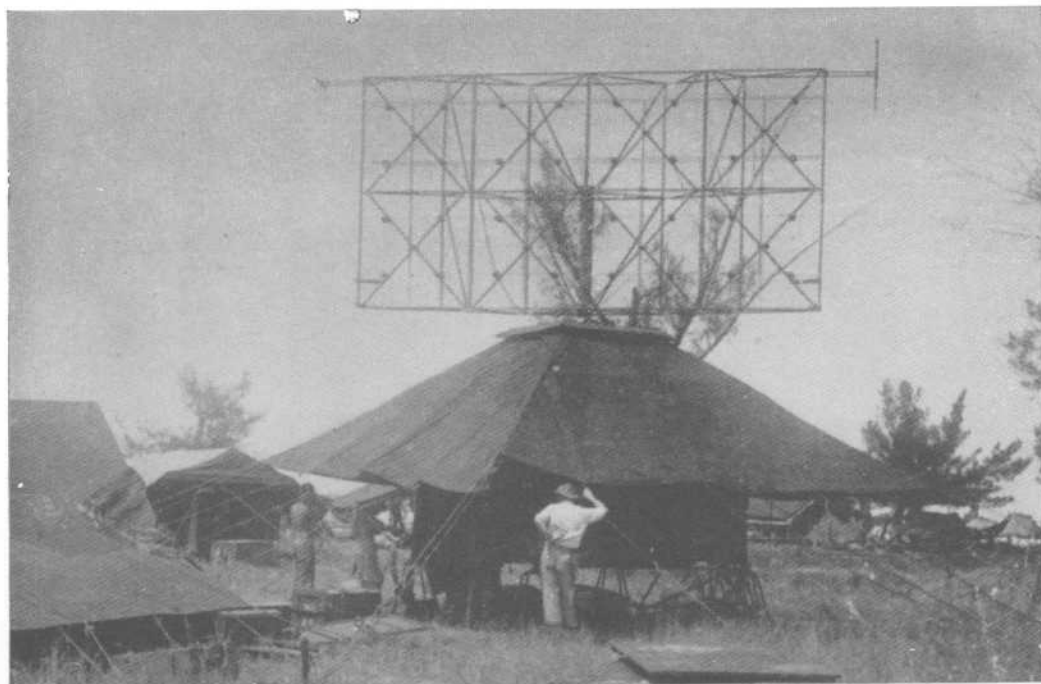
(R.A.A.F.)

A Liberator of No. 24 Squadron which was shot down while attacking the Japanese cruiser *Isuzu* near Sumba Island on 6th April 1945. Because of the necessity for precision bombing, the intense anti-aircraft fire, and the heavy fighter escorts, operations against enemy naval units were often carried out at a bitter price.



(R.A.A.F.)

Fires caused by rocket-firing Beaufighters at Brunei, North Borneo, in June 1945. The photograph was taken by an R.A.A.F. Liberator another one of which can be seen in the foreground.



(R.A.A.F.)

A radar station at Labuan, Borneo, in mid-1945. This was one of the last radar stations to be erected by the R.A.A.F. and camouflage was not considered necessary.

In February there was a considerable increase in enemy shipping activity and No. 79 Wing alone destroyed or damaged for the month a total of thirty-eight vessels. Of these about half were the result of attacks by No. 13 Squadron operating around the coast of Sumbawa. Wing Commander Keenan,⁴ the commander of the squadron, destroyed a "sugar dog"⁵ by direct bomb hits. On the 21st February Flying Officer Ware⁶ destroyed a 400-ton vessel off the east coast of Sumbawa.

The enemy was losing from 25 to 50 per cent of all shipping sighted by North-Western Area aircraft, but persisted in his movements. The week from 12th to 19th February produced a flood of ship sightings and it looked as though orders from higher authority were behind the enemy determination to press on with these movements. It appeared that they were trying to move food, fuel and supplies eastward from Flores and Sumbawa and also from Timor. Altogether during February the enemy in this area lost 29 ships and another 32 damaged.

The assumption made by Allied Intelligence that the enemy desired to withdraw troops from the area north of Australia was correct. The enemy in the Netherlands East Indies was in a weakened condition. Garrisons in the Ambon-Buru-Ceram-Kai-Aru Islands were out on the end of a limb where they could be of little strategic value to the Japanese. The heavy losses of shipping the enemy suffered in February did not deter him from intensifying his efforts to withdraw his forces from these bypassed islands. "In the early part of 1945," said Lieutenant-General Sakuma,⁷ a staff officer of *Second Area Army* which had its headquarters in Celebes, "it was decided that it was unnecessary to have troops in the area north of Australia. The *Second Area Army* decided it was a waste of men and equipment to keep them in this area. The opinion was that the enemy might make a landing on Chinese soil before going on to Japan, so we planned to send these troops in the area north of Australia to where they were most needed in Malaya and Indo-China. The *Second Area Army* was de-activated."

The Japanese had big guns on the Aru and Tanimbar Islands where the *5th Division*, one of the best-equipped divisions in the Japanese Army, was deployed. Fifty heavy and light tanks had been brought to Timor to combat any attempted attack from Australia—an attack which never came except from the air. To get the tanks out of Timor, the enemy dismantled them and placed them on small vessels for movement to Indo-China, but only a few could be got away. The Japanese planned to withdraw about 21,000 men by the end of 1945. The units in the Aru-Kai-Tanimbar Islands were to be concentrated first in the Ceram area and at the first opportunity transferred to Java. However, the withdrawal

⁴ W Cdr W. J. Keenan, DFC, 131. 1 Sqn; RAAF LO RAF Java 1941-42; comd 13 Sqn 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Corowa, NSW; b. Corowa, 12 Oct 1913.

⁵ A "sugar dog" was a code name used for consistency in reporting a small type of Japanese supply vessel (with one hatch) of 150 to 300 gross tons used between major ports and outlying bases. Larger vessels (with two hatches) and of 300 to 1,000 tons, were known as "sugar Charlies".

⁶ F-Lt F. R. Ware, 427367; 13 Sqn. School teacher; of Subiaco, WA; b. Perth WA, 1 Nov 1919.

⁷ Lt-Gen Sakuma (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ Tokyo).

could not be effected as planned because of the unrestricted activities of Allied aircraft and submarines.⁸ Afraid of the Allied threat from Australia, the Japanese had held important army units just north of Australia until it was too late to get them back to where they could be of use in the defence of their homeland, now under direct threat.

In spite of heavy losses of shipping off northern Australia in February, the enemy persisted, in the following month, in attempts to extract his ground forces for redeployment in Malaya and China. Early in the month he changed his tactics, and provided greater anti-aircraft fire and fighter aircraft to cover convoys. In March, more than fifteen interceptions were made, but they failed to shoot down any Australian aircraft. However, on 22nd March, two fighters which attacked a Liberator, captained by Kingwell, severely damaged the bomber and wounded two crew members including Kingwell. The following day a Liberator captained by Squadron Leader Straus⁹ took off from Truscott leading a formation of four aircraft on a shipping sweep. Shortly after take-off the Liberator crashed into the sea killing the crew.

Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons were under orders to move from North-Western Area to Jacquinot Bay, where they were to support the Australian ground forces operating in New Britain. For this reason the activities of No. 79 Wing were on a reduced scale. Nevertheless, this wing managed during the month to destroy or damage a total of twenty vessels. The Venturas of No. 13 Squadron operating from Truscott were responsible for twelve of these vessels, all of which were attacked off the north coast of Sumbawa Island.

Liberators of No. 82 Wing flew a total of 1,706 operations hours and sank seven Japanese vessels during March. Most of the flying was on standard searches, but, in addition, six shipping sweeps were flown by flights of between two and seven aircraft over the Bali-Lombok-Sumbawa area.

On 13th March six Liberators of No. 25 Squadron joined with six from No. 82 Wing to carry out a strike against Mapin, a barge staging point on Sumbawa Island. This was No. 25 Squadron's first operation with Liberator aircraft, and the crews obtained a good bomb coverage of the target. The six aircraft staged through Truscott and all bombed the target.

When, on 22nd March, the Japanese, in order to divert attention from their shipping movements during their withdrawal, sent aircraft of the *7th Air Division* to bomb Morotai and Biak, they succeeded in their aim and North-Western Area heavy bombers were sent to carry out night harassing attacks on enemy airfields at Kendari and in the Vogelkop peninsula for the purpose of preventing the staging in of further raids on these bases. Air Commodore Charlesworth protested to R.A.A.F. Command, pointing out that it was useless to harass southern Celebes unless Ceram airfields were harassed simultaneously. "In previous raids on Moro-

⁸ Japanese Monograph No. 24 (Historical Div, GHQ Tokyo).

⁹ Sqn Ldr N. I. Straus, 250759. 7, 6, 32, 21 and 24 Sqns. Accountant; of East Malvern, Vic; b. Melbourne, 4 Nov 1912. Killed in aircraft accident 23 Mar 1945.

tai," he said, "it has been shown that raids were staged from both areas and that if only one area is harassed, such harassing is ineffective."¹

The attacks on Japanese shipping were in full swing until the night raids on Morotai and Biak when they were discontinued temporarily. For the cost of two sorties the enemy bought for himself some immunity from attack for eight days. However, on 28th March, No. 25 Squadron sent out six Liberators which came up from Cunderdin to Coronna Downs and from there took off on a shipping sweep to Alas and Lombok Straits. They sank one vessel and damaged two others. Over Blongas Bay three of the Liberators (Squadron Leader Rosevear,² Flight Lieutenant Taylor³ and Flying Officer Rivers⁴) were intercepted and attacked by an enemy fighter which dropped one phosphorus bomb over each aircraft without causing any damage. The Australian gunners fired on the enemy fighter but did not see any hits on the aircraft which then made off towards Den Pasar.

The Japanese *Southern Army* staff had set the end of April as the deadline for the preparations in French Indo-China⁵ and in this month the clash between aircraft in Charlesworth's command and the Japanese attempting to withdraw from the islands north of Australia reached a climax.

On the evening of 4th April an Allied submarine operating in the Flores Sea reported a convoy consisting of a *Natori*-class cruiser and four smaller vessels steaming at 15 knots in a south-easterly direction. Later that night another submarine confirmed this report and early next morning the convoy was seen to be just south of Sape Strait. R.A.A.F. Intelligence anticipated that the convoy was making for Koepang, Timor, and Charlesworth decided to attack it with all available aircraft.

The cruiser was the 5,700-ton *Isuzu*, and the intention was to pick up troops and equipment at Timor. It was a direct challenge by the Japanese Navy to Allied aircraft in the Northern Territory. To give some protection to their convoy the *7th Air Division* was to provide fighter cover from island bases en route.

Unfortunately for the R.A.A.F. twelve Mitchells from No. 2 Squadron and seven from No. 18 Squadron were striking against the Tanimbar Islands on the 4th April and the time was too short to allow the convoy to be attacked by these squadrons on the inward course to Koepang. Therefore it was planned to strike the convoy early in the morning of the 6th April, when it was expected that it would be outward-bound from Koepang. The striking force was to consist of all available Liberators from No. 82 Wing and Mitchells from No. 79 Wing.

¹ North-Western Area Tactical Appreciation, Feb-Mar 1945.

² Sqn Ldr W. H. Rosevear, 408025. 8 Sqn RAF, 454 Sqn, 203 Sqn RAF, 25 Sqn. Salesman; of Launceston, Tas; b. Launceston, 2 Jun 1921.

³ Sqn Ldr G. A. Taylor, 2335. 6, 25 and 24 Sqns. Regular airman; of Kurrawong, WA; b. Kurrawong, 16 Sep 1913.

⁴ F-Lt J. B. Rivers, 32001. 36 and 25 Sqns. Sales manager; of Sydney; b. Warwick, Qld. 18 Dec 1910.

⁵ Japanese Monograph No. 65 (GHQ Historical Div, Tokyo).

On 5th April two Mosquitos of No. 87 Photographic Reconnaissance Flight took off from Coomalie with orders to check on the movements of the convoy. The two Mosquitos found the vessels and took photographs from 21,000 feet as they weaved about, heading in the general direction of Koepang. The Mosquitos then flew to Truscott and after refuelling there returned to Coomalie.

During the night three Catalinas of No. 43 Squadron were engaged in shadowing the convoy. It was thought probable that the convoy would leave Koepang under cover of darkness and this proved to be the case. At 1 a.m. Flight Lieutenant Ortlepp, who had located the convoy on his radar, signalled that it was steaming west at a speed of 18 knots. The Catalinas had to leave the area before dawn because it was considered highly probable that fighters would be escorting the convoy at first light.

In order to keep in contact another Mosquito was sent from Coomalie, but did not find the convoy until the Mitchells arrived on the scene for the attack. Anti-aircraft guns from one of the smaller vessels opened fire on the Mosquito and a few minutes later Flight Lieutenant Phillips⁶ and Flying Officer Bradbury⁷ saw two Japanese fighters at 19,000 feet (2,000 feet below them) climbing to intercept. Phillips increased the speed of his Mosquito to 400 miles an hour and the two Japanese fighters were left behind. (The Mosquito was unarmed, as it was used solely for photographic reconnaissance.)

Meanwhile, the bombing force, consisting of twenty Mitchells (ten from No. 2 Squadron and ten from No. 18 Squadron) and Liberators (four from No. 21 Squadron and five from No. 24 Squadron), had taken off with the intention of meeting off the south-east tip of Sumba and then, in company, bombing the convoy. However, the Liberator aircraft, owing to the difficulty of getting in formation in the early-morning darkness, arrived twenty minutes late at the rendezvous point. The Mitchells were expecting to attack at the limit of their range and could not wait. They therefore proceeded in close formation to attack the convoy. No. 18 Squadron's ten Mitchells attacked first from 10,000 feet. They dropped 500-lb bombs and claimed two direct hits and many near-misses. Japanese fighters attacked them but did no damage. Two minutes later No. 2 Squadron attacked, in three formations, concentrating on the *Isuzu*. The first formation of four aircraft led by Wing Commander Ingledew⁸ attacked from 10,000 feet from the starboard quarter. The second formation of three led by Squadron Leader Hannah⁹ followed, attacking on the port

⁶ F-Lt A. J. Phillips, DFC, 401172. 236, 227 Sqns RAF, and 87 Sqn. Clerk; of Nth Carlton, Vic; b. Reservoir, Vic, 11 Apr 1916.

⁷ F-Lt D. C. J. Bradbury, 13176. 107 and 87 Sqns. Architectural draftsman; of Elwood, Vic; b. Melbourne, 21 Feb 1911.

⁸ W Cdr T. S. Ingledew, 139. Comd 67 Sqn 1943-44, 1 Sqn 1944, 2 Sqn 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Burwood, NSW; b. Sydney, 11 Aug 1915.

⁹ Sqn Ldr D. H. Hannah, DFC, 404551. 55 Sqn RAF and 2 Sqn. Station overseer; of Tanby, Qld; b. Orange, NSW, 13 Jan 1913.

beam from 11,000 feet. The last formation of three led by Squadron Leader McMillan¹ attacked at 10,000 feet from the port quarter.

During the three attacks by No. 2 Squadron the vessels weaved violently and no bomb hits were seen. The nearest bombs fell about fifty yards away, with the majority of the other bombs undershooting. Two Japanese fighters attacked them almost head-on and although fire was exchanged there was no damage either to the enemy planes or to the Mitchells. Both Mitchell squadrons were fired on by the cruiser and other vessels, but, although the fire was accurate for height, it was trailing.

Twenty minutes later the nine Australian Liberators, led by Group Captain Parker, attacked from 12,000 feet. This time the anti-aircraft fire was extremely accurate and bursts were seen all round the third element (Squadron Leader White,² Flight Lieutenant McDonald³ and Flight Lieutenant Court) during its first run over the target at 10 a.m. As it did so, enemy fighters attacked the formation, one closing to within twenty feet of Court's aircraft, in spite of which the Australian gunners did not appear to have scored any hits on it. Two fighters attacked McDonald's aircraft, closing to within 50 feet and breaking away underneath. Cannon shells burst under the flight deck of the Liberator, near the nose wheel. Fire broke out immediately and spread very quickly. McDonald then ordered the crew to bale out.

During the second run over the target, the enemy fighters attacked again and Flight Lieutenant Ford's aircraft was hit. A Japanese fighter also appeared to be hit. One of the Liberator's motors caught fire and flames were coming from the nose wheel compartment. Flames were licking around the feet of Warrant Officer Vickers,⁴ the second pilot, when Ford gave the order to abandon the aircraft. The back hatch was jettisoned and five of the crew managed to jump as the aircraft was held on a level course by Ford. However, the Liberator then rolled over and, with Ford still at the controls, plunged into the sea, exploding on impact.

A few days after this action, Warrant Officer Shilling⁵ wrote this account of events beginning just before McDonald gave the order to jump:

The fire drove the engineer into the bomb bays. I did not see him again. The captain (McDonald) ordered the crew to bale out. The second pilot escaped through the bomb bays. I followed thirty seconds later. About two minutes later another member jumped. He did not appear to have a parachute. I went out of the bomb bays head first, counted six and pulled the release cord. It took me about twelve minutes to come down, during which time I counted six members parachuting from Flight Lieutenant Ford's Liberator. An additional member appeared to drop without a parachute. McDonald's aircraft disintegrated about 3,000 feet above the sea. It

¹ Sqn Ldr J. A. McMillan, 400726. 60 and 2 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Inverleigh, Vic; b. Geelong, Vic, 13 Nov 1916.

² Sqn Ldr G. J. White, 280541. 1, 6 and 21 Sqns. Radio engineer; of Broadview, SA; b. Adelaide, 25 Apr 1915.

³ F-Lt S. L. McDonald, 411524. 7, 6, 2 and 24 Sqns. Agricultural inspector and instructor; of Leeton, NSW; b. Glenfield, NSW, 30 May 1916. Killed in action 6 Apr 1945.

⁴ W-O C. G. Vickers, 401867; 24 Sqn. Railways employee; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Elmore, Vic, 24 Mar 1917.

⁵ P-O K. R. Shilling, 406816. 2 and 24 Sqns. Draper; of West Midland, WA; b. Narrogin, WA, 18 Jul 1923.

did not explode. Ford's Liberator exploded on impact with the water. Enemy fighters did not attack parachutists. My legs were entangled in the shroud lines and I had to cut away the lines with a bowie knife. Although I had seen someone land about 50 yards away heavy seas prevented my seeing him. The seas were running at about four and a half feet. I never saw any member of my crew again. About fifteen to thirty minutes later the enemy cruiser came within 100-200 yards of me. She was heavily laden with troops. Equipment under tarpaulins was clearly visible on the decks. A machine-gun opened fire at the position I had been making for. I deflated my "Mae West" and sank. At this time the bullets hit the water within six feet of me. The cruiser then passed on. Some fifteen minutes later an escort vessel of about 1,000-2,000 tons passed within a hundred yards of me. This vessel was also laden with troops and equipment. It continued on for five minutes, turned and came directly towards me, passing close enough for the bow wave to throw me sideways. I could hear voices from the deck. No attempt was made to pick me up or shoot me. Some minutes later, a Zero passed overhead low and appeared to be looking for survivors. I deflated my "Mae West" again and sank to avoid detection. About ten minutes later seven Liberators circled low and after some five minutes dropped me a dinghy which landed fifty yards away. Twenty minutes later a Catalina (of No. 112 Air-Sea Rescue Flight, captained by Flight Lieutenant Bulman⁶) arrived and taxied close enough to pick me up. Sergeant Sayer⁷ from Flight Lieutenant Ford's crew was aboard, having been picked up earlier. I was exhausted and cold. I had swallowed a lot of salt water. We taxied around and picked up Warrant Officer Vickers, also from Flight Lieutenant Ford's crew. The Catalina took off, landing again about thirty minutes later to pick up another survivor, whom I believe to be Flight Sergeant Faichnie.⁸ He was completely exhausted and was being pulled in over the gun blisters when the Catalina was attacked by a Zero from 12 o'clock. The Catalina caught fire immediately and sank three minutes later. I had undressed, as ordered, and was going to bed in a bunk in the waist. I had been called forward for the landing and was in the navigator's position when the attack was made. The order was given to bale out and I made my way aft. On the way a fuel line burst above me, pouring blazing fuel on to my back. This was extinguished by Sergeant Sayer who smothered the flames with a sleeping bag. I escaped out of the port blister, naked and with no Mae West. I do not remember much for a few minutes and when I regained my faculties I was being kept afloat by two members of the Catalina crew, Flight Lieutenant Bulman and Flight Sergeant Scholes.⁹ These two men had to let me go after fifteen minutes owing to their Mae Wests coming undone. Flying Officer Becke¹ helped me for the next forty-five minutes. Through the fortitude of these men I was saved from drowning. A few minutes after the Catalina was hit, the air-sea rescue Liberator (Flight Lieutenant Byfield²) dropped two large dinghies and one supply canister. After an hour's struggling we reached one of the dinghies. Another Catalina (Flight Lieutenant Corrie) was directed to us by the Liberator. It landed after half an hour's battle with heavy seas and wind. We were eventually picked up. One dinghy was cut in half by the port wing float. As the last survivor clambered aboard (nine men were rescued, six from Bulman's Catalina and three from the Liberators) an Irving was sighted making for us. The enemy made his first attack as we were taking

⁶ F-Lt C. R. Bulman, DFC, 416145. 9, 20 and 11 Sqns, 112 ASR Flight. Accountant; of Westbourne Park, SA; b. St Peters, SA, 28 Apr 1915.

⁷ F-Sgt W. T. Sayer, 30337. 453 Sqn, 1 Commn Flight, and 24 Sqn. Plumber; of Burnie, Tas; b. Launceston, Tas, 26 Feb 1913.

⁸ F-Sgt I. Faichnie, 431408; 24 Sqn. Clerk; of Ivanhoe, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 19 Jun 1925. Killed in action 6 Apr 1945.

⁹ W-O A. J. Scholes, DFM, 19191. 20 Sqn and 112 ASR Flight. Motor mechanic; of Bendigo, Vic; b. Maryborough, Vic, 3 Jun 1915.

¹ F-Lt R. E. Becke, 425585. 11 Sqn, 112 ASR Flight, 20 Sqn. Cane farmer; of Home Hill, Qld; b. Ayr, Qld, 19 May 1922.

² F-Lt N. H. Byfield, 406173. 1 Commn Flight, 2 AAU, and 24 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Maylands, WA; b. Northam, WA, 12 Dec 1920.

off and scored hits. Our return fire did no visible damage. A running fight ensued for about twenty minutes. The attacks ceased and we headed for Darwin, reaching there about 2230 hours. . . .

After the Australian attack, the *Isuzu* had suffered some damage, including direct hits from bombs dropped, but the speed of the convoy had not been reduced and it continued on its way. However, that night one of the smaller vessels was sunk by a submarine, and next day the *Isuzu* suffered the same fate.

After this action there was some criticism of the standard of gunnery shown by the Liberator crews and steps were taken to improve the standard. One of the difficulties was the lack of fighter aircraft that could be employed for bomber-versus-fighter exercises. However, Spitfires were made available for these exercises, even at the risk of leaving the area unable to intercept air attacks on Darwin.