

# 31 SQUADRON

R.A.A.F.

## WAR HISTORY 1942 — 1946



### COMMANDING OFFICERS

Squadron Leader B.F. ROSE

Wing Commander C.F. READ

Wing Commander F.W.B. MANN

Squadron Leader D'ARCY WENTWORTH

Squadron Leader J. BOYD

Squadron Leader J.C. BLACK

## NARRATIVE OF No. 31 SQUADRON

No. 31 Squadron was formed at Wagga, New South Wales, within the command of Eastern Area, on the 14th August 1942. It was to be a long range fighter squadron equipped with Beaufighter Aircraft, the first of which was received from No. 2 Aircraft Depot on the 23rd August 1942.

Squadron Leader B.F. Rose, D.F.C., was appointed to temporary control of the new unit, until Squadron Leader C.F. Read assumed command on the 1st September 1942.

The squadron recorded its first casualties on the 21st September, when Beaufighter A19-61 crashed at Cootamundra, New South Wales, killing Flight Sergeant Jenkins and Sergeant Sutherest.

The arrival of the squadron at Batchelor in the Northern Territory on the 27th October improved the R.A.A.F.'s fighting potentialities in North Western Area. After a few weeks of intensive training and familiarisation flights, No. 31 Squadron moved to its operational base at Coomalie Creek on the 12th November.

Beaufighters, later to be known to the Japanese as "whispering death", joined the offensive for the first time during the early hours of the 17th November, when two flights of three aircraft each strafed Moabisse and Bobonaro in Timor. In the latter attack, Squadron Leader Riding and Warrant Officer Clarke were casualties, when their aircraft crashed into the sea while evading an enemy fighter a few miles off Cape Batoe Poeti.

At this time the R.A.A.F. were implementing a policy of bombing and strafing hostile native concentrations in Timor and encouraging resistance to the Japanese authorities. This policy was translated into action by the combination of Hudson and Beaufighter attacks daily stepping up the number of sorties in Portuguese Timor, culminating on the 26th November in the biggest R.A.A.F. operation in this theatre to date, when ten Hudsons and six Beaufighters from No. 31 Squadron bombed and strafed Hatolia and Beco districts, starting a number of fires in the villages of Nova Lusa and Beco.

In the first two weeks of operations, the Squadron had recorded 53 sorties into enemy territory, the majority of which were strafing attacks. On the 30th November, there were three missions covering the H.M.A.S. "Armidale" and "Castlemaine", then approximately 200 miles from Darwin out in the Arafura Sea. Beaufighters drove off two of the several attacks by the enemy aircraft, damaging two bombers and one fighter. One aircraft, whose crew were Flight Sergeant Morrison and Sergeant Forrest, was missing after this round of engagements which concluded a fortnight's baptism of fire for No. 31 Squadron as a fighting combination.

Despite the constant protection provided, the "Armidale" was finally sunk on the 5th December, and the Squadron was called to assist in the ensuing rescue operations.

During December, top cover was provided on the 6th for the corvette "Xaigoorlie" and for the Dutch destroyer "Djerk Hiddes" between the 10th and 20th when eight missions were flown. Towards the end of the month, No. 31 Squadron protected the convoy, which included the "Wilcannia", "Babinda" and "Darvil".

In a most successful attack on the 2nd December, No. 31 Squadron gave Penfesi aerodrome a thorough strafing, pounding machine-gun posts, searchlight positions, personnel and fuel dumps and damaging or destroying by fire approximately three fighters and fifteen twin-engined bombers out of twenty-five on the ground. On the same day, other squadron aircraft searched the Timor Sea for a possible enemy warship. December the 15th witnessed the day on which the squadron completed its 100th operation.

An unusual assignment was completed on the 18th December by two aircraft, which attacked an enemy sailing vessel, believed to be carrying spies to Saumlaki. When the aircraft left the scene, the boat was burning and in a sinking condition.

The Timor ventures did not divert attention from the islands to the north of Darwin and enemy activities were observed and impeded to a material extent.

The aerial offensive from North Western Area against Fuiloro and Laivai - Laga districts - the latest advancement of Japanese activities at this time - was stepped up from the 20th December. No. 31 Squadron participated in this major burst with five attacks against the aerodrome and other installations at Fuiloro on the 22nd, 23rd, 24th, 27th and 28th, and three on the 25th, 26th and 27th against the bivouac and storage areas in the Laivai-Laga districts. On the latter two occasions the squadron put ten aircraft into the air. In the attack on the 23rd, one Jap fighter was shot down and one damaged, while one of the Beaufighters whose crew were Sergeant Hand and Warrant Officer Smith, was posted missing, having turned back from the target due to engine trouble.

All possible weight was mounted into these attacks, culminating on the 29th in a strafing attack against Betano. The four Beaufighters briefed for the mission to Betano experienced several misfortunes; one returned to base unserviceable, a second with Sergeant Webb and Flight Sergeant Wilkins as crew was posted missing, and a third crashed into the sea near Cape Helvetius and the crew were later rescued.

In most of these operations, the Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron were the spearhead of sustained blows against enemy preparations in the new area. By the end of 1942, the squadron was equipped with twenty-four Beaufighters.

The pressure against Portuguese Timor, commenced in December, was maintained into 1943. Fuiloro, Laivai and Baucau, on the 4th January, received further strafing attacks from the Beaufighter aircraft, resulting in one grounded zero being destroyed at Fuiloro.

A fault was evident in the work of this aircraft. Timor was mountainous and heavily timbered. The aircraft was fast and in most operations skimmed the tree tops. For these reasons when motor transport was discovered on the roads, it was impossible to turn quickly for a strafing attack, leaving the enemy ample time to disperse under cover.

Operations by the Beaufighters in their hunting grounds, Fuiloro, Laivai - Laga and Baucau areas were outstanding and paid dividends for light casualties.

Between its strafing sweeps, the squadron flew many missions over the seas on convoy cover and searches for enemy shipping. This hardworked squadron, also opened a devastating campaign against floatplane bases, in the Aroe Islands. In its first attack on the 28th January it destroyed a grounded plane at Dobo.

No. 31 Squadron added to its already spectacular record, a strafing raid on Penfoei Aerodrome on the last day of the month. A probable ammunition dump exploded hurling fragments to 1200 feet, damaging one of the six aircraft engaged. Two buildings were fired, three grounded aircraft destroyed by fire and four bombers and one fighter probably destroyed on the ground. Motor transport was also strafed. One airborne fighter vainly attempted to intercept, but the attacking aircraft escaped on account of superior speed.

The Beaufighters co-operated with Hudsons and Mitchells during the next few weeks in a concentrated move against Dobo. Considerable damage was inflicted on stores, buildings, installations and the jetty.

Single strikes by Beaufighters in succeeding weeks made the use of Dobo by floatplanes a losing proposition. Still Fuilloro and the surrounding district was always kept on No. 31 Squadron's schedule.

At Dobo, on the 4th February, another floatplane was damaged on the water, and one Beaufighter outmanoeuvred an attack by another floatplane, escaping safely. When the squadron revisited Dobo on the 10th, the site seemed deserted. On the 13th, four of the squadron's aircraft returned to shoot up Fuilloro. Buildings and huts near the strips were strafed. The strip, however, seemed deserted.

Among the tasks allotted to the squadron at this time was shipping protection reconnaissances, anti-submarine patrols and fighter cover, all of which were shared with Nos. 2, 13 and 18 squadrons. Out of 57 sorties for the month of February, 45 were devoted to monotonous hours in this necessary duty over ships at sea. Only on one occasion was the mission spiced with action against enemy aircraft. On the 20th bombs were dropped close to the Beaufighter's brood and in the ensuing action one of our aircraft was damaged.

February closed with the highlight of the month, an attack on Penfoei by eight Beaufighters. This onslaught probably caused a serious hold-up in enemy plans, as the R.A.A.F. harassers destroyed nine fighters and four bombers on the ground and inflicted damage on nine other aircraft, in addition to silencing one ack-ack and one machine gun position. Interception was made by two or three Zekes, one of which was possibly damaged. Unfortunately, two of the attacking Beaufighters sustained damage.

The squadron's base was not without attention from the enemy. On the 2nd March one solitary attacking aircraft strafed Coomalie airfield, destroying Beaufighter A19-31 and causing minor injuries to two airmen.

Convoy work again absorbed most of the squadron's flying activities. On the 30th March when contact was made, H.M.A.S. "Inverell" reported: "Made contact with definite submarine in position 11° 37' S, 139° 39' E at 1151Z, 28th March 1943, made three attacks, oil and bubbles seen. Results uncertain".

On the 8th March, No. 31 Squadron returned to its hunting ground at Fuilloro. Four aircraft set out, but only two attacked. One grounded enemy aircraft was left smoking. On the 12th, Beaufighters and B25's joined forces for the first time, when six of each type of aircraft were directed to attack Fuilloro. Only three B25's and two Beaufighters got through the bad weather and after flying through a formidable front at 250 feet bombed the target with unobserved results. After this the aircraft set out for Lautem, where some fifty Japanese and motor transport were strafed near a wharf. A beached lugger was also strafed. One aircraft, damaged by ack-ack, reached base safely.

A further composite attack was staged on the 15th, the target this time being Dobo, where three vessels of small tonnage and crowded with personnel were strafed prior to the bombing run by the B25's. Two direct hits were scored, leaving one vessel on fire. One Beaufighter, hit by ack-ack, crashed into the sea, killing Flying Officer Longoni and Sergeant Dale. No. 31 Squadron launched a further attack next day, staging through Millingimbi, where a lugger was destroyed and various installations strafed.

A raid staged for the 17th with Penfoei as the target proved abortive. Two aircraft set out, but on account of extreme weather both became separated in the vicinity of the coast of Timor and turned back. One of the two force-landed in the Darwin area through lack of fuel, but the aircraft was undamaged.

Weather conditions were bad through March, but these conditions deteriorated further in April, thereby hampering No. 31 Squadron's efforts. Only thirty-seven sorties resulted for March, but through a determined

effort in spite of the weather forty-nine were recorded in April. Convoy patrols were the main preoccupation, however, several offensive reconnaissance flights were carried out, during which only one inconclusive attack was made on two enemy floatplanes over the Aroe Islands on the 25th April. Beaufighter A19-59, on the 26th, failed to return from a reconnaissance in the same area, and Flight Lieutenant Greenwood and Sergeant Thompson were posted missing.

No. 31 Squadron opened its score for May with an attack on the 2nd directed against Penfoei. Aircraft, personnel, and the barracks area were strafed for a bag of two bombers and two fighters caught on the ground.

These renowned strafers increased their tally on the 6th May to the extent of another ten floatplanes, destroyed on the beach and on the water at Taberfane in the Aroe Islands, as well as strafing other targets in the neighbourhood. The price paid for this effort was the loss of one of the six attackers. From this operation Flying Officer Budd and Pilot Officer McQueen were missing.

A mixture of success and disaster was experienced by the squadron on the 10th May. Of the six Beaufighters briefed to strafe Taberfane, two were unserviceable, and two returned owing to adverse weather conditions. The other two aircraft completed their mission, destroying two enemy motor boats on the Seratoe River, but, as they were landing at Millingimbi to refuel, were caught by ten Japanese fighters on the ground, one Beaufighter being destroyed and the other damaged. Revenge was prompt. Three Jakes, threatening a convoy off Wessel Island on the 11th May, were intercepted by an equal number of Beaufighters. One of the Jakes was destroyed.

There seemed to be no limit to the success of No. 31 Squadron, which accounted for three fighters on the ground at Langgoer on the 17th May.

The activities of the Beaufighters were never without thrills, as was demonstrated again by an assault on grounded aircraft at Penfoei on the 18th. Two bombers were destroyed and two other aircraft damaged. Of the seven participating aircraft, one returned to base through engine trouble, a second collided with a tree over the target, but reached base safely. Three others failed to return. One was seen to go into the sea, South-East of Koepang, another crashed four miles from the target, the fate of the third was unknown. In the action the squadron lost Flying Officer Frith, Pilot Officers McLennan and Taylor and Sergeants Cobern, Armstrong and Robertson.

Again on the 31st May, the squadron aircraft, five in number, damaged one and destroyed another aircraft on the ground at Langgoer. In the ensuing dogfights with six Zekes, the Beaufighters claimed one destroyed, while two of our aircraft sustained damage.

The weather was still holding up operations early in June. This, however, failed to deter No. 31 Squadron, which made one of its now frequent visits to Taberfane on the 4th June. Warning of their arrival had apparently been received, as two enemy aircraft were airborne and several were trying to take off, when the Beaufighters approached. One Japanese plane was probably destroyed and two damaged on take-off.

The squadron increased its veritable cricket score at Taberfane on the 12th June with six floatplanes destroyed and two damaged at their moorings. One Pete was destroyed in the air. Machine gun and small arms fire, however, damaged three Beaufighters. On the way out, luggers were strafed south of Taberfane off Cape Ngomi.

Frequent reconnaissances revealed considerable constructional activity by the enemy on the island of Selaroe. So much so that in June the squadron was directed to make every effort to deter the enemy from achieving his objective of constructing an airstrip there by constant

- 5 -

heavy attacks. As a result six Beaufighters escorted No. 12 Squadron's Vulture Vengeance dive-bombers to the target on the 18th June. This was the only offensive strike by No. 12 Squadron in North-Western Area. When the dive-bombers completed their work, the Beaufighters carried out strafing attacks on the strip and shot up the villages of Lingat and Werain.

On June 22nd, ninety minutes after three B.24's had attacked, nine Beaufighters battered the now familiar scene of Taberfane. They had to fight off as many as twelve fighters. The R.A.A.F. aircraft damaged two fighters in the air and two floatplanes on the beach. Two Beaufighters were damaged by ack-ack, but reached base safely.

Again on the 24th, Salaroe was visited by six of the squadron aircraft, and two grounded twin-engined bombers were caught and destroyed. Before leaving the island, the 'drome and the villages of Lingat and Werain were strafed.

Beaufighter attacks on Salaroe and Taberfane during the first five days of July employed reasonably large dispositions of aircraft. In the first attack on Salaroe, while three acted as top cover, the other three attacked stores, motor transport and suspected areas. In the other attack against Taberfane, adverse weather interfered with the operation and resulted in strafing attack on a two-mast supply vessel about 100 feet long, which burst into flames giving off heavy black smoke. Again on the 15th, six aircraft set out for Taberfane, but only two reached the target due to the prevailing weather. The result was one "Pete" destroyed.

Flying through heavy weather on the 24th, twelve of the squadron aircraft reached the target area, again Taberfane, where a total of thirteen floatplanes were observed on the water and in the air. Consequent clashes with the airborne aircraft resulted in four enemy aircraft damaged. The price to the squadron for this effort was one Beaufighter missing through ack-ack fire and two others damaged. Flying Officers Gillespie and Cameron did not return from this mission.

During July, the long-range fighters of No. 31 Squadron were also deployed to escort surface vessels and to afford protection against enemy air attacks. This was evidenced on the 2nd, when two unidentified twin-engined aircraft were warded off from a convoy by the alert Beaufighter cover. Again, the following day, two "Haps" were forced away by the escorting aircraft. On this occasion, one Beaufighter's guns jammed. Two days later, a further attempt was made on the convoy by a "Rufe" and two "Jakes", and once more the guns on the same Beaufighter jammed. Besides all this activity, there were searches for missing aircraft and navigational training flights.

The month ended with a raid on Tanimbar Island, carried out by six aircraft. Villages were strafed and bombed and a small native craft and jetties shot up.

During August, specific instructions were issued that aircraft were to be employed in accordance with the roles of the squadron to which they were allotted. Hence No. 31 Squadron, being a long-range fighter squadron, its Beaufighters were escort for surface vessels, for use in the destruction by low-flying attacks of enemy aeroplanes, particularly floatplanes at bases within range and stores, fuel barges and small surface craft, concentrations of personnel and motor transport.

Taberfane was the target for the squadron throughout August. Five missions were flown, involving thirty-five sorties, besides four abortive ones through aircraft failing to reach the target.

In the attack staged on the 11th, eight Beaufighters damaged one "Pete" in aerial combat and another at its moorings, besides sinking three small vessels without loss to themselves.

At this time it was noticed that floatplanes now in use had better performance than those previously encountered and could keep pace with the Beaufighter flying capacity.

On the 17th August, not entirely through the spectacular nature of their assignment, the Beaufighters burst again into the limelight. Briefed to attack floatplanes at Taberfane, eight aircraft strafed a lugger containing troops on the Serwatoe River. The craft was set on fire and forty to fifty Japanese in the water were killed. At the same time, a thrilling dogfight ensued with five enemy aircraft - three "Rufes" and one "Pete" being destroyed and the remaining "Pete" damaged.

Four days later, over the same area, Beaufighters in dogfights destroyed two "Rufes" and claimed one "Pete" as probable. Two of our strafers collided in mid-air and were lost, killing Flight Lieutenant Gardiner and Flying Officers Lyne, Leithead and Graves.

On the 26th and 30th August, similar tasks increased the squadron's bag in the air and on the ground. In the latter attack No. 31 Squadron lost one aircraft. It was last seen being pursued by two floatplanes. Flight Lieutenant Willard and Sergeant Butler failed to return.

Early in September, the enemy attempted retaliation against the squadron by two weak night raids on Coomalie Aerodrome. Both, however, failed to effect any damage whatever.

On the 13th September, Wing Commander F.W.B. Mann assumed command of No. 31 Squadron from Wing Commander C.F. Read, D.F.C. This was the first change of command since the squadron's formation.

September was marked by wing strikes in which the Beaufighters figured prominently. Throughout the month No. 31 Squadron's aircraft were deployed on harassing raids. Three were staged on Selaroe Island, chiefly on the strip located there, one armed reconnaissance was flown over Tanimbar Island, and one strike on the 16th at the old spot, Taberfane, in the Looe Group. In this latter raid, in which seven Beaufighters figured, one "Pete" was destroyed. On the return trip to base one aircraft, damaged by ack-ack, made a forced landing in a swamp, fifteen miles from Millingimbi, while two others landed out of fuel in Arnhemland. There was another forced landing at the emergency strip on Bathurst Island a few days previously.

A characteristic incident involved six of the squadron's aircraft, briefed to attack Selaroe, early on the 9th October. While bombing the strip and suspected dump areas, the attackers shot down a bomber in the act of landing. Two twin-engined aircraft attempted interception and were engaged by one Beaufighter piloted by Squadron Leader Gordon. He first jettisoned its load of bombs, and closing to 25 yards shot one of the interceptors into the sea. Shortly after he saw another enemy aircraft attacking his formation; again, he attacked and sent this aircraft spinning into the sea.

No. 31 Squadron was now concentrating on sweeps for enemy shipping in and around the various islands scattered throughout the Arafura Sea.

Six Beaufighters, on the 19th October, in their endless searches for floatplanes, barges and enemy shipping, happened on some small vessels moving along the Serwatoe River. These were strafed and left in a damaged condition. Accurate rifle fire from the vicinity of the old Krei Village cost the squadron one aircraft missing from this attack. It was seen to crash into the sea fifty miles south of Trangan Island, killing Flying Officer Gridland and Pilot Officer de Pierres. On this particular mission, a barge, approximately 400 feet long, and a small single-mast vessel with personnel aboard were strafed, causing damage and casualties.

On the 18th October, No. 31 Squadron's aircraft moved up to the R.A.A.F. Aerodrome at Darwin.

Six Mitchells and six Beaufighters bound for the Serwatoe River on the 24th October failed to locate the target due to a navigational error; returning to the same scene two days later they successfully strafed villages and barges in the same strength. During these sweeps a new airstrip was discovered and duly reported.

Similar raids were staged on the 29th when missions visited Tanimbar Island.

November 1943 opened with the usual shipping reconnaissance cover over the Arufura Seas. Most of the offensive operations during this period were composite missions, in which the Beaufighters escorted Mitchell bombers.

In one such characteristic mission on the 2nd, six of each aircraft raided Trangan Island uneventfully, except on turning for home, three "Rufes" attempted to intervene near new Krei Village. One of the enemy aircraft sustained damage, together with one Beaufighter which received cannon fire damage in the port wing.

Raids were staged in Tanimbar Island on the 6th and the 11th. In the first attack a large sailing boat and two other vessels were sunk, while a forty-foot barge, a ketch and a number of small canoes were severely mauled. Japanese soldiers on Selaroe strip were subjected to a strafing run. In the latter attack Selaroe strip was again strafed, but the Beaufighters also turned their guns on to ack-ack positions and strafed the neighbouring villages, Adoat, Lingat, Weraim, Foersoei and Kandar.

Two days later, three Mitchells and three Beaufighters accounted for a small vessel in the vicinity of Fordate Island. This vessel was camouflaged to resemble a small island and had slowed down to eliminate the wash. The Beaufighters started a fire on board, before the Mitchells dealt the final blow. Before leaving the scene, the Beaufighters strafed the sinking ship and personnel.

On the 14th all squadron aircraft returned from Darwin to Coomalie Aerodrome.

Few Japanese ships could move untroubled in the Timor, Banda and Arufura Seas, the areas controlled and reconnoitred by No. 31 Squadron, as was evidenced on the 17th November, when a corvette type of vessel near Dawador Island was strafed and bombed by a composite force, causing it to run aground. This vessel was listed as "probably destroyed".

Again on the 21st, six Beaufighters and six Mitchells attacked the anchorage at Maikor. One vessel received two direct hits from the Mitchell bombers. It broke into two and sank. The Mitchells shot down one enemy fighter. The covering Beaufighters warded off three "Rufes" over Sabertane, destroying two. Other "Rufes" were seen, but did not intervene. One Beaufighter had a wing tip shot off, the observer's cupola damaged, and the observer's parachute holed. One Beaufighter failed to return from this operation. Pilot Officer Jones and Flight Sergeant Gaunt failed to return to base after refuelling at Millingimbi.

Tanimbar Island received yet another unwelcome Beaufighter visit on the 5th December, when the squadron delivered one of its all too frequent harassing attacks. Nine aircraft were briefed for the operation. En route, the structure of the jetty at Adoat on the island of Jamdena was severely damaged.

On the 15th, eight Beaufighters set out on yet another harassing attack on Japanese shipping off the coast of Timor. The aircraft strafed and damaged six schooners and sunk two 80-foot power barges off Manatuto. In this sweep a convoy consisting of two 4000/5000-ton vessels loaded with troops and equipment, and escorted by a 200-ton destroyer, was sighted and



reported to base. All three were strafed causing damage and casualties. At Vila de Liquica the attackers strafed warehouses and sank a 500-ton cargo vessel.

The following day eight of the squadron aircraft set out to attack this convoy. It was located in Lautem Harbour. One of the transports was still burning fiercely, having been attacked the previous evening by No. 18 NEI Squadron. As the force swept into the attack, the undamaged vessel was unloading. Eight direct hits were registered and before leaving the area it was noticed that the vessel was uncontrollably on fire and in a sinking condition. On the way home, four "Nicks" were sighted. The aircraft, piloted by Squadron Leader Gordon, D.F.C., at once climbed to intercept. After the skirmish one had been destroyed and another damaged. One enemy aircraft followed the flight for eighty miles out over the Timor Sea, prior to turning for home.

The turning of the spotlight once more on Timor was accented on the 24th December by a joint mission against Atamboes, engaging five Mitchells and four Beaufighters, which acted as top cover. On the 30th, the squadron briefed eight more aircraft to harass targets along the coast of Timor between Menatuto and Atamboes.

With the close of 1943, No. 31 Squadron had recorded 1137 sorties, resulting in 18 enemy aircraft destroyed in aerial combat and 49 grounded aircraft destroyed, together with two probables. There were also 13 damaged in the air and 32 damaged on the ground, as well as four ships destroyed.

No. 31 Squadron's account for 1944 opened on the 2nd January, when eight aircraft carried out a harassing attack on Trangan Island. The aircraft made a complete reconnaissance of the island without enemy interference. The ack-ack from known positions was slight and inaccurate.

On the morning of the 4th, eight Beaufighters, led by Squadron Leader Gordon, D.F.C., were briefed to cover six Mitchells of No. 18 NEI Squadron attacking known enemy shipping in Tenau Harbour, Timor. Approaching the Timor coast, Gordon intercepted and shot down a "Betty". Heavy rain over the target made observation of the bombing raid impossible, but it was thought that one bomb struck the side of one of the vessels sighted. Gordon strafed and blew up a barge in Semaoe Strait. Three other Beaufighters strafed a 50-foot prahu which did not burn. Later on that same day four aircraft covered three Mitchells from the same squadron to Tenau and saw direct hits with resulting fire on a merchant vessel of considerable tonnage.

No. 31 Squadron with eight aircraft on one of its periodical assaults on Timor on the 14th January succeeded in sinking a 1200-ton transport freighter and damaging a 500-ton vessel off Atapoepoe. Lautem, Atamboea, Manatuto and Atapoepoe were strafed by the same force.

Of the 111 sorties carried out during January, 59 were offensive strikes, 22 convoy cover, 8 rescue operations, 12 searches and 10 navigation training flights.

Throughout February, the ever-watchful Beaufighters continued their devastating strafing missions in the Kai, Aroe and Tanimbar Groups.

The high standard of co-ordination, previously witnessed, was again markedly present on the 19th February, when six Mitchells were covered by eight Beaufighters, briefed to attack the Mina River Bridge. They were led by the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Mann. The aircraft approached the Timor coast at the usual zero altitude, making landfall at the mouth of the Mina River, and approached the bridge at tree-top height. The bridge and surrounding structures were strafed prior to the bombing attack. Though the damage could not be estimated immediately, photographic reconnaissance revealed damage to the superstructure and the wooden span of the bridge.

The ubiquitous Beaufighters visited Selaroe on the 22nd and sank a 50-foot lugger, and three days later nine aircraft, heading for a second attack on the Mina River Bridge, missed their objective, having mistaken the Benain River for the Mina River, and strafed observation posts between Cape Wetch and Namfaloea.

On the 29th, of the six aircraft briefed for Roti Island, two failed to take off and two returned to base through engine trouble. The remaining aircraft attacked two two-masted and one single-masted luggers at the head of Pepela Bay, destroying one two-masted lugger. Later, at Kodi Island the aircraft strafed and destroyed a 50-foot two-masted schooner.

The raid on the 8th March, a possible barge hideout in a mangrove swamp near Saumlaki, was unspectacular and disappointing to the participating crews, as observation of the result of the mission was not possible.

On the following day, fourteen Beaufighters and nine C47's, carrying 124 personnel and equipment, departed for Potshot to take part in the defence of the West Australia coast. This was part of the counter measures taken against the anticipated move of the Japanese Task Force, through the Indian Ocean possibly towards Perth. The fleet had recently withdrawn to Singapore. All aircraft and personnel returned to Coomalie on the 23rd March.

A few days after their return, No. 31 Squadron set out for Roti Island. At Oenggae Bay, after strafing runs, three single-masted prahus were left damaged and smoking. This raid cost the squadron one aircraft and crew, which crashed in flames at the head of Pelela Bay after striking the mast of a prahu, killing Flight Lieutenant Fitten and Flight Sergeant Foyle.

On the 30th March the squadron set out and attacked shipping off Tenau. The returning aircraft claimed a 500-ton oil tender as sunk, another smaller vessel probably sunk, also a barge loaded with oil drums.

The month of April saw the offensive rise to a fury, hitherto unapproached, the overall object being to keep the enemy tied down in Timor and his Arafura sea bases, whilst contributing to a terrific softening of Dutch New Guinea in preparation for the Allied Advance along the north coast of New Guinea.

The squadron shared in this intense assault, flying approximately seventy sorties, harassing Timor, Tanimbar and Semoea Islands and the villages of Lautem and Soe in particular.

Comparatively fortunate in their rate of casualties, No. 31 Squadron suffered a setback on the 15th April, one Beaufort being claimed by flak over Soe and another crashing on return from the same mission. During this raid buildings were destroyed and Japanese machine-gunned. From this mission Flight Sergeants Ashbolt and Hiskins failed to return.

Using Bathurst Island as an advanced base, on the 18th April two of the squadron's aircraft accompanied twelve Spitfires of No. 54 R.A.F. Squadron on an offensive sweep to Barbar Island. Strafing runs were carried out on all the given targets. The W/T station collapsed after a combined run by all aircraft.

During April and May the squadron possessed only thirteen serviceable aircraft, which figure rose to sixteen in June. In spite of this adverse position the squadron continued its operational offensive to the best of its ability.

On the 1st May, eight aircraft were airborne to attack targets in the Aroe Islands, followed on the 4th May by six which made a sweep from Cape Chantre to Manatuto on the North East coast of Timor. On this

occasion casualties were inflicted on some 40/50 Japanese, and strafing runs made on three 4-ton trucks and a 40-foot barge.

Two days later, six Beauforts attacked the strips at Doka Barat. A suspected W/T station was strafed as well as mechanical equipment, watercraft and Japanese personnel. A similar mission was flown by a detail of seven aircraft on the 9th.

Squadron Leader Wentworth, a member of the Squadron, assumed command of No. 31 Squadron on the 24th May from Wing Commander Mann, who departed on posting.

June was perhaps the squadron's quietest month. Only 28 sorties were mounted. These were mainly convoy covers and rescue operations.

From an operational point of view, July was very satisfactory, even allowing for the fact that the squadron was far below establishment in aeroplane strength and that many new crews were still in the process of being "broken in". Five hundred and forty three flying hours were recorded for the month.

Many and varied were the missions. On the 1st, four aircraft reconnoitred Barbar Island, shooting up an assortment of buildings, thought to include the Japanese commanding officer's house and a W/T station. A similar detail, the following day, flew an uneventful sweep over Tanimbar Island.

Several strikes were made without interference from the Japanese. But on the 16th, while engaged on a strafing attack on Maumere aerodrome, four Beaufighters led by Squadron Leader Boyd surprised the enemy by attacking early in the morning, and destroyed two enemy aircraft which were just about to take off from the airfield. Boyd also destroyed another which had become airborne. Then single-handed he fired two bursts at a distance of 200 yards and the enemy aircraft, a "Nick", went into a vertical dive and crashed into the sea. Boyd then attacked another "Nick" which he hit, but the Japanese pilot broke off the engagement and escaped. The flight then turned their attention to the shipping in the harbour. They strafed five motor vessels and two naval craft in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire, but the enemy scored no hits. Again on the 22nd three Beaufighters caught and destroyed a "Topsy" on the ground at Lingat strip.

Besides attacks on enemy shipping throughout July, the most important observation of the month occurred on the 27th, when a large Japanese army encampment in the vicinity of Bokong River, Timor, was observed and estimated to be approximately 600 acres. Accordingly, next day two Beaufighters acted as pathfinders for a large force of bombers, which inflicted considerable damage.

From the 15th till the 24th, seven of the squadron's aircraft were at Broome engaged in covering "She-Cat" operations.

Probably the greatest obstacle of all to the squadron at this time was the flying distance. The Japanese had moved North and North West to extreme range. On the 16th, for example, when the squadron attacked Maumere, on landing it was found that the aircraft had only sufficient fuel left for a few minutes flying time.

A new camp area was also discovered in the Haliloelook area as well as the important discovery that pack horses and mule trains were being used as a means of transport. During August the equipment for rocket projectile strikes began to arrive.

September was a quiet month, due to the fitment of rocket projectile equipment to the squadron aircraft. Three offensive sweeps, however, were flown over Timor - one on the 3rd and two on the 17th, resulting in the destruction of two luggers, two motor transports, an armoured cycle

unit, casualties to Japanese and further destruction of buildings. The sweep to the Aroe Islands on the 1st of the month was disappointing but on the last mission of the month when four crews swept the Banda Sea area the destruction of one ketch and two luggers were added to the score board.

Escort was provided between the 23rd and 26th to Catalina aircraft operating on special missions to Serova and Wila Islands on four successive days. Unfortunately two aircraft were lost returning to base on the 24th - one crashing in the vicinity of Brooks Creek and the other disappearing when only 60 miles from Coomalie. The navigator of one plane was the only survivor to return to base.

Four Beaufighters were based at Broome during the last half of the month to cover Catalina operations - one aircraft and crew being lost on the 18th.

The highlight of the month was the arrival of four Beaufighters and their crew of Rocket Projectile Instructors. The intensive training programme of converting squadron personnel to the use of rockets was conducted and successfully completed in ten days. In the first mission flown on the 29th, no suitable target was observed and the rockets were discharged into the sea while returning to base.

During September, Squadron Leader Boyd received the immediate award of the D.F.C. for his part in the action of the 16th July, and became Commanding Officer from the 1st October 1944.

On account of the projected move to Noemfoor Island, the squadron was grounded early in October to achieve full serviceability of all squadron aircraft. When the move was deferred, the squadron once more became operational, but was grounded again due to faults in the fuel line system.

In all, five sweeps and one strike were flown over Central and Eastern Timor. On one mission by two Beaufighters, captained by Flight Lieutenants Strachan and Sippe on the 13th near Lautem strip, some 200 Japanese were seen crossing a river bridge. The aircraft could not line them up because at the time they were in a tight turn, but the Japanese were observed jumping off the bridge in great confusion. Continuing on they destroyed two well-camouflaged "Dinaks" parked in disperse bays. This attack was carried out in spite of an intense barrage of ack-ack, heavy, medium and light.

Another good score against the enemy was achieved on the 23rd, when six Beaufighters, led by Squadron Leader Tritton, discovered eight motor transport averaging 4-ton capacity, travelling along a road near Cape Wetch. These were totally destroyed. On making a second run to assess the damage a ninth was seen and promptly blown apart.

The balance of the trips, though not causing much damage, were of immense value to new crews, giving them their first experience of actual operations.

Early in the month some rocket projectile training was carried out. One aircraft engaged on such a flight crashed on the range, killing Pilot Officers Ingle and Way.

With the move to Noemfoor being imminent, No. 31 Squadron's operations were governed by the preparations involved. Until the 14th November the squadron was non-operational. Consequent upon orders being received for missions against targets in Timor and Tanimbar areas, flights were flown on the 15th, 16th, 18th and 21st of the month.

No. 31 Squadron was the first Royal Australian Air Force squadron to use rocket projectiles in the Pacific War Theatre. The targets selected were Japanese occupied buildings at Macassar (Wila) and Sifua on

the 16th, and at Baucau (Vila Salazar) on the 21st. In the first attack forty 60-lb HE R/P badly battered and gutted the target. In the second, thirty-two 60-lb HE R/P were used. This attack on the 21st closed the squadron's operational activity in North Western Area, and final preparations were made for the air move, which began on the 26th. Gear and personnel essential to operational requirements were moved by air transport, travelling via Merauke.

The squadron's 21 Beaufort aircraft, loaded with extra gear and each carrying four passengers, departed Coomalie on the 1st December, arriving at Noemfoor, where it came under the control of the First Tactical Air Force.

During its seven days' stay at Noemfoor only two operations were carried out, both being escort missions to Catalinas on Air Sea Rescue work. On the 7th the squadron moved to Morotai and was based on Wama strip. It was now integrated into No. 77 Wing.

The first operation from Morotai was staged on the 9th, when fourteen Beaufighters were briefed to strafe concentrations of troops and stores, and a jetty at Jolo Island, which was at extreme range. Other targets allotted throughout the month included Nanado, Goerooa, Sidato, Langgoan, Lelobata, Galela, Tansmon and numerous sweeps seeking targets of opportunity. Amongst other damage inflicted, three bridges were destroyed near Amoerang and one at Tansmon, also eight large buildings.

Bombs were being used more freely in this theatre, in the use of which the pilots acquitted themselves quite favourably.

Using rockets, three ack-ack positions were knocked out, a radar station was destroyed, many buildings crippled and three jetties in both North East Celebes and Halmaheras damaged.

Strafing accounted for two coastal schooners and four barges destroyed and three barges and one small enemy aircraft probably destroyed.

On the 26th December Squadron Leader J.C. Black assumed command of the squadron from Squadron Leader J. Boyd, D.F.C. and Bar.

The striking power of the squadron was increased in January 1945, by the use of 100-lb napalm bombs and 325-lb depth charges. As time went on napalm bombs proved to be an excellent Beaufighter weapon. They could be dropped accurately from very low levels. Their most suitable targets were buildings and inflammable installations. Depth charges, on the other hand, needed height and frequently resulted in poor accuracy. They were unsuitable against small targets, but produced good results on lightly constructed buildings grouped together.

Over Tondano on the 2nd a Beaufighter, piloted by Pilot Officer Soumness, was hit by ack-ack in the starboard motor and ditched in the sea between the Celebes and the Halmaheras. The ditching was effected efficiently by the pilot, both crew members emerging safely. They were later rescued by a Catalina.

Napalm bombs were used for the first time against the power house installations at Menando on the 5th. Twelve of the squadron's Beaufighters attacked with six napalm bombs and ten 500-lb GP bombs and this, together with an American rocket flight, inflicted heavy damage. The following day in similar strength struck at Likiepang Village with 72 napalm bombs, finishing the attack with many strafing runs. The town was completely obliterated.

On the 9th and 10th the squadron was engaged in a new role, naval spotting for the U.S. Navy, and on the 10th in a bombardment of enemy installations in the vicinity of Galela Bay.

The growing tempo of the air offensive was mounting daily. Throughout January the squadron flew 254 sorties, frequently with twelve aircraft. The Celebes was the main sphere of operations. A conservative estimate of the destruction caused includes 60 buildings, three coastal schooners, a bridge, one ack-ack position and W/T installations destroyed, and many other targets damaged. Forty-nine thousand leaflets were dropped by the squadron.

Activities for February were not as productive as in previous months. Prime cause was a series of mishaps - some due to enemy action, some to mechanical failures and others to causes unknown.

While attacking enemy emplacements at Tomolon on the 1st, the enemy ack-ack claimed one Beaufighter which was seen to crash on a nearby plateau with not the remotest chance of the crew surviving. In the same action another aircraft hit over this target disappeared leaving no trace. Consequently, Flight Lieutenant Taylor, Flying Officer Packham, Warrant Officer McGuigan and Flight Sergeant Lewis were posted missing. On the 2nd an aircraft crashed on take-off, while on the 12th during gunnery and bombing practice still another crashed into the sea and Sergeant Frost was killed.

Returning from Tondano on the 14th, one of the flight, damaged over the target, crashed on landing at base. During gunnery and bombing practice over the sea 20 miles from Morotai, still another Beaufighter crashed, killing Flying Officer Scarr and Pilot Officer Chester. To complete the chapter of accidents, on the 18th one aircraft belly-landed on Wema strip and another lost brake pressure whilst taxiing on the dispersal roadway and crashed into two Thunderbolts.

Searches instituted through losses and ditchings took up valuable strike time, whilst temporary grounding of aircraft pending technical investigation further reduced operational activities.

The most outstanding strike of the month, a composite one, was the attack on the 11th against personnel and bivouac areas and the electric generating plant at Tomolon and Tondano. The same target was bombed and strafed three days later.

On the 1st March, No. 77 Wing attacked Pagimana with 22 Beaufighters, dropping a total of fourteen 500-lb and eight 250-lb bombs. Three godowns were destroyed and two damaged and the neighbouring bridge severely damaged. Two days later the wing struck targets at Gorontalo. Two direct hits and many near misses were scored. One large barracks building was half demolished and a large double building left burning. Five strafing runs caused further damage and fires.

The operational activity for the month was of a varied nature. Most noticeable was the series of armed reconnaissances, twelve in all, over Ambon, Ceram and Boeroe. Besides, sweeps were flown over the Celebes, the islands to the north, Sangihe and Taland groups and the Baggai Archipelago and the Soela Islands to the south. Small surface vessels and motor transports were strafed on sight. The majority of these missions faced heavy opposition from the ground defences.

In sweeps over Haroekoe, Kairatoe, Nambua and Liang from the 25th to the end of the month, strafing accounted for three enemy twin-engined aircraft destroyed, one probably destroyed and two damaged. All these aircraft were cleverly camouflaged to resemble crashed or damaged machines; therefore, great credit reflected on the crew for their perception and resultant action.

Many of the squadron's aircraft were holed by ack-ack in this series. Two Beaufighters made the return trip of 400 miles over water on the motor.

On the 31st, while on a sweep over Amboina Island, one aircraft was ditched in Haroekoe Strait. The crew were rescued by the superb effort on the parts of the three covering Beaufighters and the rescuing Catalina in the face of intense opposition from both sides of the Strait. For this rescue two immediate D.F.C.'s were awarded to squadron members, Flying Officers Scunness and Ellis, and two to members of the rescuing Catalina.

April operational activity declined due mainly to the paucity of targets within range and to factors governing the impending new sphere of operations.

The principal missions were eight sweeps over Namlea, Haroekoe and Liang strips, together with armed reconnaissances of Mapanget, Sidate Langoan and Tanamon strips. A shipping search on the 4th in the vicinity of Amboina ended disastrously for the squadron. One aircraft was shot down in flames off Cape Noesanive, killing Flight Lieutenant Arbon and Pilot Officer Wood.

On the 18th, six Beaufighters unsuccessfully searched for an enemy gunboat in Arbon Bay. Instead, the aircraft discovered a lightly camouflaged barge which, after strafing, stopped and began smoking.

The most important operation of the month was low-level photography of the Tarakan waterfront by a B25 and four Beaufighters stooging through Zamboanga in Mindanao. During the mission No. 31 Squadron aircraft swept through the area effectively silencing ack-ack positions. The operation was carried out on the 19th and the aircraft returned to base next day.

The mission to Toli Toli on the 1st of the month was the last one from Wama Strip Morotai. On the 4th May, 10 officers and 131 ranks, with the adjutant Flight Lieutenant G.E. McGregor in charge, embarked on the "Manobra" and the "Westralia" for Tarakan, the equipment and vehicles following in another vessel. They disembarked on the 11th. Conditions were primitive until the equipment arrived, but by the 20th Squadron Headquarters was functioning. Meanwhile, another detachment, consisting of five officers and 95 ranks, left Morotai on the 22nd and arrived at Tawi Tawi on the 24th. All the squadron aircraft reached Tawi Tawi on the 3rd June to participate in air support work for Oboe VI operation of the Labuan-Brunei area.

Prior to the actual landings, operations were directed against targets in the Brunei area. Two buildings and one large boathouse used as a store room at Kuala Penyu were destroyed; besides, the area was thoroughly strafed.

Another assignment flown on the 4th and 6th June - not entirely new to the squadron - was the destruction of bridges and the consequent dislocation of rail traffic between Beaufort and Tenon. The bridge over the Parang River was destroyed and two others in the vicinity of Beaufort damaged.

From Invasion Day, the 10th, targets were allotted and dealt with as directed by the local air controller. Twice on the 11th and 13th they were directed to bomb and seal a number of tunnels in the area. Although hits were observed, it was not until the controller arrived later at Sanga Sanga that it was learnt that all except one was effectively sealed. Apparently, on this mission two aircraft collided on take-off and crashed into the sea. Flying Officer Cowley, Pilot Officer Hall and Sergeant Johnson were killed. Warrant Officer Holmes was saved.

July was discouraging for operations. Only 30 sorties were flown. During this period the squadron was divided between Morotai and Tawitawi. In the squadron records we find that on the 24th, 31

Beaufighters were scrambled from Tarakan to perform Army support work at Miri, which task was accomplished satisfactorily and evoked great praise from the A.I.F.

After escorting a flight of Spitfires from Tarakan to Balikpapan on the 15th, Squadron Leader Black was briefed to investigate reports of enemy aeroplanes using Asa and Melak aerodromes. The reconnaissance was carried out without incident. He landed at Manggar on the same day and was the first R.A.A.F. pilot to land there since the Japanese occupation. The only assignments were convoy cover and escort duties.

On the 30th, a detachment of squadron aircraft arrived at Labuan to operate under No. 86 Wing. On their first operation the following day a barge was hit and damaged on the Serawak River four miles east of Kuching. The squadron's last operation against the enemy was carried out on the 1st August, when two Beaufighters from Labuan conducted a rocket attack against a W/T station at Kuching, completely dislocating the station. During the remainder of the month aircraft based at Maroual operated on escort duties and leaflet-dropping missions over the Moluccas and the Celebes.

When hostilities ceased on the 15th August 1945, the squadron score board recorded:

- 20 enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and  
54 on the ground, with 2 probables in the air;
- 14 damaged in the air and 32 on the ground;
- 9 ships destroyed and 4 damaged;

Besides much equipment and numerous buildings and installations destroyed or damaged. The squadron had flown 2,660 offensive sorties against the enemy.

Towards the end of 1945, No. 31 Squadron moved by sea and air to the mainland of Australia, being first based on the 18th December at Deniliquin, N.S.W. On the 12th March 1946 it moved to Williamstown, where it remained until disbanded on the 9th July 1946.