

ALAMEIN TO THE ALPS

454 Squadron, RAAF 1941-1945



by

Mark Lax

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DEDICATION

*To those who fought with 454 Squadron
and those who waited for their return*



FOREWORD

I first joined No. 454 Squadron in February 1944 from RAF Shandur in Egypt until my tour expired the following January. My connection with the Squadron continued more recently as the Secretary of the 454/459 Squadron's Association and I was delighted to be asked to contribute to the foreword of this book. 454 was a wonderful Unit, with a mixture of Australians, British, South Africans, Canadians and Kiwis and both aircrew and groundcrew alike really pulled together to get the job done. This book certainly tells their story.

The Squadron was to fly four different mission types. After a few months training on obsolete Blenheims in Iraq, 454 moved to Egypt and commenced convoy escort and anti-submarine patrol work. Then, in late 1943, these became Greek Island reconnaissance and strike control missions where much enemy action was seen including a significant convoy attack which ended German hopes of supplying their Aegean outposts. After August 1944, the role again changed to formation daylight bombing and finally, night bombing northern Italian targets, including the Po River crossings, as the war drew to a close. During our time in the Middle East and Italy, we broke many records for aircraft serviceability and mission success.

454 Squadron was one of the RAAF's little known units and ran the risk of being relegated to a minor corner of history. Consequently, I am very pleased that a serving Air Force Officer, Air Commodore Mark Lax, has taken on the task of compiling the Squadron's short but eventful history aptly titled *From Alamein to the Alps*, the old Desert Air Force motto. It perfectly describes the Squadron's journey from the deserts of Egypt by way of a short period of remote training in Iraq, then back to Egypt on operations then finally working its way up the eastern coast of Italy, to the foot of the Alps. At the end of the war, we were the most northern Allied Squadron and had established a fine and envious record throughout the theatre.

Alamein to the Alps is also a people story and through a combination of official records, anecdotal accounts and narrative, the human side also comes out. We celebrated our successes but sadly, we also had some losses along the way. 96 names are recorded on the Squadron's Honour Roll as paying the ultimate sacrifice and many more suffered wounds and personal loss. To guide us through the harder times, we were blessed with good leaders and a strong spirit. This is also a record of the service of those we lost.

454 Squadron's story has finally been told and I hope you will agree with me that those who served in the Unit all contributed to make sure the Squadron's unofficial motto, *Nihil Impossible* – Nothing is Impossible – was well and truly lived up to.

George Gray
Sydney, 2005



PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book came about by chance. While writing sister squadron 464's story, *The Gestapo Hunters*, my co-author and I came across a name on the honour roll that did not fit. Mistakenly, an Australian, Pilot Officer Beresford Stanley Reilly was listed as being killed on operations with 464. In fact his loss was actually as a result of 454 Squadron's disastrous raid on Crete on 23 July 1943 and it got me thinking there was a new story to tell. So here it is.

I set myself three aims with this publication which is why it is presented the way it is. First, I wanted the book to be as faithful a record of the Squadron's life with all the stories, anecdotes and 'official records' combining to tell the tale. Second, it had to be a record of service for all and a commemoration of the 96 members who did not return. Third, and primarily, I wanted to present the story of what happened for the families of squadron members, and present it in a way they could understand what it was like. I hope I have succeeded.

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As readers will note from the bibliography, extensive source material has been consulted. I have endeavoured to check my facts with at least two independent sources (usually three) and where items could not be substantiated, comment has been made. Wherever possible, I have mentioned Squadron members by name, but it was just not possible to mention everyone. With 530 known officers and aircrew NCOs serving with 454 and over four times that many as ground crew, I trust the reader will understand my predicament. Having said that, omission does not infer the member did not contribute. Far from it, Squadrons such as 454 worked as a team – aircrew and ground crew alike.

For me it has been an absorbing journey of discovery, the most rewarding aspect of which has been meeting and communicating with so many ex-Squadron members who have openly shared their wartime experiences. This book is really the result of a huge collaborative effort by the many, many people who have contributed to its pages. I thank them for their warmth and the generosity with which they have invariably met my enquiries. However, I would like to pay credit to some of the principal agents here. First and foremost is the late George Gray, Secretary of the 454-459 Squadron's Association for many years. Without his help, this project would not have even started. For that reason, I felt it appropriate for him to write the foreword. Other contributions are credited in the bibliography.

From overseas, thanks go to former CO Jack Coates and Ken Rimmer in England, Professor Jack Breihan in USA. Tracking down names and personal details was a challenge and I thank Pel Temple in UK and Errol Martyn in NZ for their valuable



assistance. Finally, my thanks to the helpful staff at the RAF's Personnel Management Agency, the RAF Air Historical Branch, the SAAF Discharged Personnel Records Section and the RAAF's Historical Records Section. Ms Nannette Holliday can take full credit for design and layout, and I thank her most sincerely for her hard work and time spent on this project.

* * *

As a historical record, I have used some conventions which some may find cumbersome, but make no apologies for that. During the War, aircraft were each given a serial number at the factory and later, an alphabetical code letter was applied to the fuselage for visual identification and was used as the individual radio call sign. I have included these details for aircraft enthusiasts and used the convention serial:code letter (eg AG922:N). Place names used are spelt as they appeared at the time in the Operations Record Books (also called Unit History Sheets) and abbreviations for rank, use the modern format. Units of measurement have also been kept as those of the time or converted to metric where appropriate. Photographs are captioned and credited to the owner or source.

I have included extensive footnotes for the benefit of those readers and researchers who wish that extra detail. A number of abbreviations used in the footnotes refer to source material and locations and include; AA – Australian Archives (ACT), AHB – RAF Air Historical Branch, UK, AWM – Australian War Memorial, CRS – Commonwealth Record Series, PRO – Public Record Office and RHS – RAAF Historical Section. A † symbol denotes member was killed while at the squadron. A ‡ symbol denotes member became a POW.

* * *

Finally I want to pay a special tribute to my family who have again had to put up with an over-occupied husband and father for the time this took to produce.

* * *

I hope that you enjoy this publication



GLOSSARY

AA	Australian Archives
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
ASV	Air-Surface Vessel (Radar)
DAF	Desert Air Force
EATS	Empire Air Training Scheme
HQ	Headquarters
IFF	Identification Friend or Foe (Aircraft Equipment)
KIA	Killed in Action
KIAA	Killed in Aircraft Accident
LG	Landing Ground
MORU	Mobile Operations Room Unit
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institute (Canteen Service)
Nav(B)	Navigator/Bombardier
ORB	Operational Record Book (Unit History Sheets)
OTU	Operational Training Unit
POW	Prisoner of War
PRO	Public Record Office
RAFVR	Royal Air Force, Volunteer Reserve
SAAF	South African Air Force
SQN	Squadron
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
WIA	Wounded in Action
WOP/AG	Wireless Operator/Air Gunner

TABLE OF RANKS

Officer Ranks

ACM	Air Chief Marshal
AM	Air Marshal
AVM	Air Vice-Marshal
AIRCDRE	Air Commodore
GPCAPT	Group Captain
WGCDR	Wing Commander
SQNLDR	Squadron Leader
FLTLT	Flight Lieutenant
FLGOFF	Flying Officer
PLTOFF	Pilot Officer

Airmen Ranks

WOFF	Warrant Officer
FSGT	Flight Sergeant
SGT	Sergeant
CPL	Corporal
LAC	Leading Aircraftsman
AC	Aircraftsman



Map 1: 454 Squadron Mediterranean Bases 1942-1944

Place	From	To	Remarks
Williamtown, NSW, Aus	23 May 41	11 Jul 41	Ground Echelon only, Disbanded 11 Jul 41 at Williamtown and absorbed by 458 Squadron
Blackpool, UK	2 Apr 42	22 Jun 42	Ground crew nucleus formed Moved to ME by sea
Fayid, Egypt	22 Jun 42	25 Aug 42	Holding Camp
Aqir, Palestine	28 Aug 42	30 Sep 42	Became servicing echelon to 76 Sqn at Aqir. Officially reformed - 30 Sep 42
Qaiyara, Iraq	5 Oct 42	14 Jan 43	
LG227/Gianaclis, Egypt	24 Jan 43	16 Feb 43	With 10 days transit across the desert
LG 91, Amiriya, Egypt	17 Feb 43	10 Apr 43	
Gambut III, Libya	13 Apr 43	4 Aug 43	Det Misurata (21 Apr 43 – 30 Apr 43)
LG 91, Amiriya, Egypt	4 Aug 43	18 Oct 43	Det Lakatamia (10 Aug - 4 Sep 43) Det St Jean (4 Aug – 18 Oct 43)
St Jean, Palestine	18 Oct 43	7 Nov 43	Det LG 91
Berka III, Libya	3 Nov 43	25 Jul 44	Det Gambut (4-11 Jan 44)
Pescara, Italy	25 Jul 44	18 Aug 44	Transferred to DAF – 27 Jul 44
Falconara, Italy	19 Aug 44	19 Dec 44	
Cesenatico, Italy	20 Dec 44	3 May 45	Det Forli, Italy – 27 Jan – 4 Feb 45
Villa Orba, Italy	4 May 45	14 Aug 45	Some say disbanded on 20 Aug

Det - Detachment



The Baltimore - the mainstay of the Squadron's operations and a sturdy workhorse.

454-459 Association Collection



A typical Baltimore crew. Beside aircraft FA603:G or 'G for George', Flight Sergeant Vic 'The Champ' Mitchell (Pilot), Flying Officer Johnny Clough (Nav), Flight Sergeant Harry Worboys (WOP/AG) and Flight Sergeant Les 'Babe' Holley (WOP/AG) prepare for a reconnaissance sortie. The airfield was Gambut and taken in November 1943 just after a rain shower, unusual for the normally hot and dry desert.

Vic Mitchell Collection



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



The declaration of war by Britain on 3 September 1939 and Australia's rush to follow suit a day later caught both country's defences sadly lacking and ill prepared for the coming conflict. For all services, this meant mobilising from a peacetime cadre to rapidly building both defensive and offensive forces. Four days later, the British Government declared that the main weakness of the Allies *vis-à-vis* Germany was in air strength - and this included any contribution from the young and struggling Royal Australian Air Force.

Formed in March 1921 from the remnants of the Australian Air Corps, the RAAF then was little more than a small training organisation with obsolete World War I aircraft. Subsequent Government funding for the new Service had been so paltry that up to 1936 it was only enough for the RAAF to maintain just two composite squadrons, a flying training school and three rudimentary air bases. By 1937, several damning reviews forced the Government's hand but by the end of 1939, the RAAF still only had a total strength of 3,489¹. To meet the demands of war, 246 aircraft formed the operational strength of which only 164 were front line machines. At that time, the RAAF had three squadrons in Melbourne, four squadrons in Sydney and two at Perth. Darwin and Brisbane had a squadron apiece.

By late 1939, the RAAF had built twelve squadrons, yet only seventeen days after the declaration of war, Australia generously offered six of these squadrons for service with Britain. Initially, this proposal was left in abeyance and apart from the men of 10 Squadron already in England, another 450 Australians were serving with the RAF as part of a pre-war training arrangement. 10 Squadron aircrew had been sent to England in 1939 to take delivery of Short Sunderland flying boats then on order. Australia offered the Squadron's services and 10 Squadron remained in Britain for the remainder of the war. It was just the beginning.

Other RAAF squadrons were to follow. By 1940, 3 Squadron had been despatched to the Middle East and 1 Squadron to Malaya. By 1942, the RAAF was in action on three fronts – Europe, the Middle East and Pacific. When the

¹ Gillison, Douglas, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, AWM, Canberra, 1962, p 58.



European war ended, 15,000 Australians had been employed in the air war against Germany and Italy. In all, 6,636 RAAF men died in action in the European theatre, representing one-fifth of the entire Australian war deaths from all services and campaigns of the war.

There can be little doubt that the RAAF came of age as a fighting force during World War II. Although arguably the world's second oldest air force, it was little more than a flying club until the Second World War. At the height of that war, the service had expanded to a strength of 20,000 officers, 144,000 airmen and 18,000 airwomen. Over the war years, the RAAF grew to 50 Squadrons in the Pacific and 17 in Europe² - a remarkable achievement. It had over 3,000 operational aircraft and nearly 3,000 trainers. RAAF members served in every theatre of operations and by war's end the RAAF was considered the fourth largest air force in the world.

To achieve these amazing statistics from a country whose wartime population was around seven million, required sound organization and willing volunteers. Australia like Canada, New Zealand and Rhodesia contributed men to a new scheme - the Empire Air Training Scheme or EATS - a massive training organization set up to provide Britain with the men it badly needed to fly and fight. The EATS is a remarkable story on its own, but not for these pages. However, under the scheme, the RAAF also promised 18 fighting squadrons, known as Article XV Squadrons (from the respective Article in the EATS Charter). Seventeen eventually formed, and these saw service in Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific.

This is the story of one of those squadrons.



454 Squadron Baltimores on a mission over the Italian countryside. Formation daylight bombing missions such as this would not be started until August 1944. **454 Association Collection**

² This does not include 452 and 457 Squadrons which transferred from Europe to the Pacific under ITAF. The 17 Squadrons in Europe were the fifteen Article XV Squadrons remaining, plus 3 and 10.



CHAPTER 2

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS



False Starts and Changed Plans

Monday 26 May 1941 was just another normal working day at RAAF Williamtown, a large RAAF base just north of Newcastle, New South Wales. Early that morning, four RAAF airmen reported to the Base Orderly Room. They were to become the nucleus of a new fighting squadron – No 454. Or so they thought.

Flight Lieutenant John Pike¹, an administrative officer who had been appointed the new Unit's temporary Commanding Officer, met them. Pike, together with the Williamtown Station Commander, Squadron Leader John Paget², held the overall responsibility for bringing the ground crew component of several new Article XV EATS Units up to scratch. Between May and July six such units³ were in varying stages of formation, and all were at Williamtown. The four airmen were rapidly joined by many more, and by the end of the month the new unit had grown to include two officers⁴ and 111 other ranks.

Negotiations to construct the EATS agreement were commenced in October 1939 and while each of the Dominions pledged aircrew to Britain, the understanding was that squadrons with clear national character would be maintained. Australia's contribution would be numbered squadrons 450 to 467 inclusive. Although it took almost a year for the agreement to be signed, Australians embraced their commitment and many young lads were soon to find themselves members of a rapidly expanding all-volunteer force.

For these men at Williamtown, Article XV meant little. Their days consisted of drill, general service training and organised sport. On the weekends, the men often attended dances in the Newcastle Town Hall and concerts in the base recreation hut. Leave too, was a regular event. For them, the war must have

¹ FLTLT (later SQNLDR) John Edwin Pike, RAAF A&SD No 271018. b. 19 Dec 12 of Brisbane, Qld. Company Director. 454Sqn – 23 May 41 – 11 Jul 41.

² SQNLDR (later WGCDR) John Reginald Paget, RAAF No 60.

³ These were all EATS Units and headed for Europe or the Middle East. In camp with 454 were 452, 455, 456, 457 and 458.

⁴ The other officer was FLTLT (later SQNLDR) Desmond Les Peate, RAAF MO No 1262. b. Newcastle, NSW - 19 Jun 13. Medical Practitioner of Waratah, NSW. 454Sqn – 26 May 41 – 11 Jul 41.



seemed a long way away. One of the intakes, Jim Grant⁵ recalled his time at the Williamstown base:

I never anticipated that ten weeks of boredom and frustration would pass before my genuine final embarkation leave would be taken. After all, my colleagues and I had volunteered to join the RAF Infiltration Scheme, had been granted embarkation leave and therefore expected we would soon be on our way... At the time I was there, Williamstown was little more than a landing strip, with a few buildings, mostly of a temporary nature, stuck in an inhospitable bit of coastal scrub. The roads through the camp were lined with railway sleepers, so at least you could tell where the roadside finished and the sand dunes and scrub commenced. One of our regular jobs, when all else failed was to whitewash the sleepers.



*AC Jim Grant and fellow 454 recruits at kit inspection.
Grant Collection*

By June, the Squadron numbers had risen to 169 and bayonet and gas drill, kit inspections and rifle shooting had begun, but there was no technical follow-on training and nothing to prepare the men for their eventual destination. However, by July, 454 Squadron's very existence was in grave doubt as the RAF and RAAF authorities were arguing about its role and

its posting location. On 7 June, The Air Board received a signal from the British Air Ministry in the usual clipped style stating that 454 Squadron would⁶...

...probably [be] equipped [with] Baltimore or some other medium bomber type in Far East towards end 1941. Above decision regarding 454 Squadron may however be varied by change in the situation and Air Ministry considers advisable you should not yet arrange diversion ground personnel this squadron to Far East. Will advise as soon as any further information available.

Clearly, the RAF was at the time considering the use of 454 in Malaya or Singapore to allow experienced RAF units already there to be recalled to fill the void in the Middle East. Although the situation with Japan was deteriorating, the pressing situation in North Africa demanded air support for

⁵ LAC (later SGT) James Brodie Grant, RAAF No 15461. Instrument Maker. b. Rozelle, NSW, 8 May 17. 454 Sqn



31 May – 11 Jul 41.

⁶ AA. Series A2217 Item No. 22/37/ORG folio 2A.

the campaign that Montgomery was fighting against Rommel. Annoyingly for Australian authorities, the RAF had not consulted Air Vice-Marshal Frank McNamara⁷, an Australian Air Force officer appointed the Air Officer Commanding RAAF Overseas Headquarters in London, the duly agreed point of contact with regards Article XV squadron matters. While 454 existed on Air Ministry papers at least, other like squadrons formed up, drilled and departed for overseas locations while 454 languished. Apparently in limbo, 454 awaited a decision on its fate. What seems clear is that the RAF held their options open for this unit to go to the Far East and extended the timescale to between December 1941 and May 1942. As 453 Squadron had recently departed for Singapore, the RAAF felt it had supported the RAF's request and decided to re-post the men sitting idle at Williamtown while Whitehall made up its mind. Without further discussion and on direction from the RAAF Air Staff, on Friday 11 July, the members of 454 were divided up and posted to 456, 457 and 458 Squadrons respectively, the Unit Historian simply recording that '...454 [was] disbanded and dispersed'⁹. 454 had been in existence for just 47 days.

A Phoenix Rising

Anticipating a need to move large numbers of troops around the Middle East, particularly now that the Americans had entered the war, the RAF reviewed its requirement for transport aircraft as well as re-examined their force disposition. The British had an arrangement with the Americans for the supply of light bomber and



The Williamtown barracks - home for seven weeks in 1941.

Grant Collection

transport aircraft under Lend-Lease as British aircraft manufacture was stretched just meeting the demands of home defence. Aircraft on order destined for the Middle East included the Hudson, Maryland and the Baltimore. In considering options, the RAF HQ Middle East informed the RAAF authorities in London of their intention to establish six new transport squadrons, depending upon the date of arrival of the American planes¹⁰.

⁷ AVM Frank Hubert McNamara, VC, CB, CBE RAAF b. 4 Apr 1894, Rushworth, Vic. d. 2 Nov 61, Amersham, UK.

⁸ AA. Series A1196 Item No. 36/501/159.

⁹ Form A50 454 Squadron and Form A50 Headquarters, RAAF Williamtown, entry for 11 July 1941 respectively. The authority was S.A.S. 4591 dated 8 July 41.

¹⁰ AA Series No A11362/1 Item No Z1. Folio 1A dated 28 Nov 41.



By March 1942, Japan had not only entered the war but had defeated all in its path. Australia itself had been bombed and it seemed a very dark hour. Remarkably, Australia continued to honour its commitment to Britain to supply aircrew and ground crew and so on 26 March, the Air Staff received a secret telegram from the Air Ministry in London declaring the decision on the fate of 454. The war in South-East Asia had been lost for the moment but the signal still came as a shock to the Air Board as it stated that¹¹:

...it has now been decided that one of the two transport squadrons to be formed in Middle East Command is to be a RAAF Squadron. This will constitute one of the RAAF quota of squadrons to be formed under the EAT agreement. It will be numbered 454 Squadron...



Bayonet practise.

Grant Collection

Again, McNamara had not been consulted. Who had decided? The RAAF had always maintained that RAAF squadrons under the EATS agreement would be fighting units and had in mind a light-bomber squadron, particularly since the first correspondence received on the matter almost a year earlier indicated this to be the case. The RAF intention, however, was simply to form up squadrons as they were needed and replace RAF personnel with RAAF personnel as availability permitted. Without any ado, the Air Ministry signalled¹² RAF HQ Middle East that they were ‘...sending ground personnel for two transport squadrons 163 and 454’ and that the ‘personnel being sent for 454 RAAF Squadron are RAF’. The message also directed the RAF members were to be replaced with RAAF personnel when the latter became available.

Following that last cable, the official records from the RAF Air Ministry in London record the Squadron was formed (in name only) on 26 March 1942 as a transport squadron for the Middle East¹³. As a consequence, on a cold and cloudy 2 April 1942 morning, 343 RAF ground crew mustered on parade at Blackpool, England – they would become the next incarnation of 454. The Englishmen represented all trades with the exception of nursing orderly and armourers, but officers were absent from their ranks. Command of the group

¹¹ AA. Series A2217 file 22/37/ORG Folio 3A and AA Series A11362/1 Item No Z1 folio 2A dated Mar 42.

¹² AA Series A2217 Item 22/37/ORG Folio 4A dated 27 Mar 43.

¹³ AA Series A2217 Item 22/37/ORG Folio 23A dated 8 Nov 43 (comment in retrospect).



fell to Flight Sergeant ‘Polly’ Pollard¹⁴ who drilled the men and prepared them for squadron life. One of their number, AC2 Ken Rimmer¹⁵ recalled the experience¹⁶:

When we arrived at Blackpool, we were billeted at various boarding houses just off the promenade. Some of the landladies were good to the lads knowing we were going overseas, some were very strict – you had to be in by 11.00 pm, doors locked. We used to parade each morning on the promenade for lectures and one day we were taken to the Winter Gardens to be kitted out. Now we knew we were going to somewhere hot (you don’t get a topee for a place like Canada) but exactly where, remained a mystery.

They would not have long to find out. After about two weeks, the men travelled to Clydeside by train and boarded the *Aorangi*, a pre-war New Zealand cruise liner from P&O that had seen service in the Pacific. The ship sailed on 15 April and 454 made up just some of its military passengers. Again, Ken recalled the trip¹⁷:

We were lucky we had a cabin fitted out with bunks; the food was good as she had been provisioned in Canada. We sailed down the Clyde to cheers of the shipyard workers on both banks. We joined a very large convoy with a very heavy escort and sailed well out into the North Atlantic. After two weeks, we arrived off Freetown, Sierra Leone and anchored in the bay for a few days, the heat being terrible and [we were] not allowed ashore. From Freetown, we sailed to Durban, South Africa, [another] two weeks. A few days out we ran into trouble. At the time we thought it was a submarine attack, but later we found out we had run into a minefield. *The City of Sudan*, a cargo ship on our port side was holed and sank, *HMS Hecla* on our starboard was holed but managed to limp into Cape Town with a 90 ft hole. We were very lucky.



FSGT ‘Polly’ Pollard.
Author’s Collection

¹⁴ FSGT (later WOFF) Joseph. William ‘Polly’ Pollard, RAF ACH/GD 519318. Disciplinary NCO. 454 Sqn – 2 Apr 42 – 27 Mar 45. RAF records hold he was ‘officially’ posted to 454 on 24 Jun 42.

¹⁵ AC2 (Later LAC) Kenneth Rimmer, RAFVR Elec No 1510447. 454 Sqn – 2 Apr 42 – 14 Aug 45.

¹⁶ Interview with the author and notes – 4 Nov 00.

¹⁷ Ibid.



The ship arrived in Durban safely on 18 May, but the voyage was not without further incident. An airman¹⁸ with a case of diphtheria died on the journey and was buried at sea, the Captain taking no chances with the contagious disease. At Durban, the troops were given a welcome three-week break before completing the sailing to the Suez Canal.

We arrived at Durban after [nearly] five weeks at sea and we spent a very pleasant time in Durban, most of us being entertained by the local people. From Durban, we sailed for Egypt on the crack French liner *Ille de France*, unescorted as she was very fast, arriving at Port Tewfik. We all proceeded to throw our pith helmets over the side before disembarking. We stayed a few days in the transit camp and then to Aqir in Palestine.

The Squadron arrived at Port Tewfik in the Middle East on 22 June 1942, but without officers, and little knowledge of the RAF's future plans. Despite its Australian number designation, there were no Australians, no aircrew and no aircraft. Until now, the RAF intention¹⁹ was still to send them to Asmara to form a transport squadron, but all that was about to change.



454 Ground Crew servicing a Halifax, Aqir, Palestine.

RAAF Museum

¹⁸ Extant records do not disclose his name.

¹⁹ AA Series A11362/1 Item No Z1 folio 3A and 5A.



CHAPTER 3

IRAQ AND TRAINING



On to Ancient Persia

After their arrival in Egypt, the RAF ground echelon of 454 was held in a transit camp while arrangements were made to forward them to their operating base, but decisions as to the Unit's future were still being made. Monty's 8th Army had not yet won at El Alamein and Rommel's *Afrika Korps* were still giving them a good run. It would be the end of the year before the Germans had retreated into Cyrenaica (Libya). However, the RAF needed fully operational units in the desert theatre, so had no time to raise and train up a fledgling, untried assortment of Brits and Aussies. The posting to Asmara was cancelled two days after their arrival and the men were attached to the Middle East Pool¹.

By mid-1942 there was a growing threat to British oil interests in Iraq and Iran and concerns in Whitehall turned to a possible German thrust from Transcaucasia. It had become clear that Rommel intended to link up with General von Manstein's German Army Group South around the Black Sea to Sebastopol after conquering Egypt and included the capturing of the valuable Iraqi oilfields. In addition to this daunting prospect, the RAF now had the task of ensuring that the Lend-Lease route supplying American equipment through the Middle East and into Southern Russia would not be interrupted. To many, this sideshow now took on a new importance. Consequently, on 28 June 1942 the immediate fate of 454 Squadron and several other Units was decided when a Warning Order was issued from HQ RAF Middle East directing them to 'move forthwith to Aqir to prepare to receive Halifax aircraft'².

From Egypt, the Squadron gathered its belongings and formed a truck convoy to Palestine, essentially following the coastal railway laid across the Sinai by the British during the First World War. The destination was RAF Station Aqir, a large pre-war base established south of Tel Aviv. Here the men became a Servicing Echelon called 76/454 – really additional manpower for a Middle East detachment of 76 Squadron who were operating Halifax bombers there at the time.

¹ AA Series No A11362/1 Item No Z1 folio 5A dated 24 Jun 42. The Middle East Pool was a reserve of airmen who could be sent where needed.

² AA Series No A11362/1 Item No Z1 folio 9A dated 28 Jun 42.



By mid-1942 and at Churchill's request, two Halifax heavy bomber detachments (being 16 aircraft from 10 and 76 Squadrons) were dispatched to the Middle East to reinforce the RAF. They were intended to stay for only a few weeks to fly *Operation Barefaced*, the planned attack on the Italian Fleet. Unfortunately, no one in HQ RAF Middle East knew of the arrival and so plans were hastily put together to support the detachments with additional maintenance crews already in theatre. The men of 454 were combined with those of 76 Squadron, while others from 227 Squadron were combined with 10. Subsequently, the truck convoy with 454 arrived at their new base on 5 July 1942, the men no doubt ready and eager to start work. In the end, the Halifaxes remained longer than anticipated and the German encampment at Tobruk became their main target.

At least while awaiting some decision on their fate, the personnel were amongst airframes and they could get their hands dirty. As well as supplement 76 Squadron's ground staff, 454 also serviced Liberator bombers with a composite of the RAF's 159 and 160 Squadrons, and USAAF Liberators from their Halverson Detachment based at Lydda, another large air base not far away. Named after their commander, Colonel Harry A. Halvorson, the 23 USAAF B-24Ds were in transit through the Middle East, on their way to bomb Japan from forward airfields in China. But the gravity of the situation in Africa meant a change of plans and the B-24 detachment remained for a single, special mission – the bombing of the Ploesti oil refineries in Romania. For 454 Squadron ground crew, not only could their skills be put to use, but the men would see something of the Holy Land with further detachments spreading as far as Shallufa, LG224 west of Cairo and Fayid.

While in Palestine, the Unit came under the command of No 242 Wing, RAF, itself a subordinate of 205 Group and Air Headquarters Levant. 'The Levant' was the British term for Palestine, Transjordan and Syria, a leftover from the colonial policing role the RAF had in the 1930s. 205 Group was a heavy bomber establishment that had formed in late 1941. Meanwhile it was really 242 Wing who took steps to secure duties for 454 as they awaited aircrew and aircraft. With impending changes to 76 Squadron and on 20 August 42, the Wing ordered 454 to replace sister squadron 458 then under the same command and also based at Aqir³. 458 Squadron was directed to move from Aqir to Shallufa to make way for 454, the arrangements to be in place by 1 September.

On 7 September, the 10 and 76 Squadron detachments were combined and renumbered 462 Squadron, another RAAF Article XV unit. With a new RAAF unit in the theatre, it would only be a matter of time before either new ground

³ PRO Air 26/326 – Movement Order No 2 – HQ No 242 Wing, RAF dated 20 Aug 42.



crew arrived or the men of 454 Squadron would be absorbed and 454 as a formed unit would again disappear. Fortunately for the Squadron, the former was to be the case.

Meanwhile, RAAF authorities had protested the formation of 454 Squadron as a transport unit, without anyone in Australia having a say. After objections from McNamara in London, the RAF finally acquiesced and McNamara was able to send a signal stating that⁴: ‘...It is now confirmed that authority has been given to the ME Command to re-equip No 454 (RAAF) Squadron from Hudson (Transport) aircraft to light bombers’. He followed this up with another cable⁵ stating that he had been advised that re-equipment from Hudsons to light-bombers was not yet possible, so questions remained. However, within a week, HQ RAF Middle East finally clarified the matter, but posed several questions that would take some time to finally resolve⁶:

No 454 Squadron is to be equipped at once with Blenheim V and later with Baltimores. There are seven Australian crews available and additional crews will become available from OTU. There are no suitable Australian officers for appointment as squadron commander or flight commanders. Ground personnel are entirely RAF but action is being taken to post Australian personnel as available. These are technical musterings only. Can you provide officer suitable for Command? Will remainder of ground personnel be sent to this Command? Armourers especially are required. None available here either RAF or RAAF.

The Move to Iraq

It would be Blenheims, then Baltimores but where? On 29 September, a signal⁷ was received from Air Headquarters Levant stating the squadron was to ‘reform’ and move to Teheran in Iran. As such, the Unit officially ‘re-formed’ as 454 Squadron on 30 September 1942, because the men needed to retain identity in preparation for their next move. Consequently, all equipment was handed over to 160 Squadron and preparations were made for yet another long journey by road.

On 3 October, an Australian Flying Officer in his mid-thirties arrived, one that would be instrumental in moulding the new unit. He was George Barnard⁸ an

⁴ AA Series A2217 Item 22/37/Org. Folio 5A dated 16 Sep 42.

⁵ AA Series A1196 Item 36/501/159 dated 19 Sep 42.

⁶ AA Series 2217 Item 22/37/Org Folio 8A. dated 23 Sep 42.

⁷ PRO Air 27 Item 1894, 454 Sqn Form 540 – Operations Record Book. Signal O.157 of 29 Sep 42.

⁸ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) George Leon Barnard, MID, RAAF No 263132. A&SD. b. 19 May 1909, Trainee Manager of Kirribilli, NSW. 454 Sqn 3 Oct 42 – 28 May 44.



administration officer who would stay with 454 until mid-1944. George was to play a pivotal role in developing 454 Squadron as a later Commanding Officer Jack Coates⁹ would attest¹⁰:

As adjutant and elder statesman (he was some ten years older than most of us), George held the squadron together while the CO went flying, and kept us just about straight within King's Regulations and the requirements of Group and Middle East HQs. He knew everyone and managed to deal with domestic affairs in a manner which endeared him to all ranks.



Adjutant Flight Lieutenant George Barnard. He was with the Unit until May 1944.
Campbell Collection



Flying Officer Athol Calder
Campbell Collection

Together with equipment officer, Pilot Officer Athol Calder¹¹ who arrived two days later, they made up the entire officer complement. Fortunately, they did not have to wait long for company. Six days later, the first flyers arrived, four new Pilot Officers and 40 NCO aircrew¹².

The Squadron, now of six officers and 412 RAF and RAAF other ranks set off on 11 October 1942 in 48 trucks of varying states of repair for their tortuous journey – a journey of over 1000 miles across inhospitable country. Meanwhile, the Russian Reinforcement Command occupying Iran at the time forestalled the use of Teheran as a base so an airfield near Mosul in northern

Iraq was hastily selected and became the destination. The route would take them across the Trans-Jordan border and into the Iraqi desert country. Sergeant 'Pete' Stacey¹³, who had left Australia with the Yellow Draft and on arrival

⁹ SQNLDR (later GPCAPT) John Arthur Gordon 'Camel' Coates, DFC, RAF Pilot No 74699. b. 28 Sep 20. CO 454 Sqn – 29 Aug 43 – 5 Apr 44.

¹⁰ 'Dinner speech to 454 – 459 Squadron's Association – April 1992.

¹¹ PLTOFF (later FLTLT) Frank Athol Calder, RAAFA&SD No 263358. b. 25 Apr 1902, of Darling Point, NSW. 454 Sqn 5 Oct 42-3 Mar 43 (to 459 Sqn).

¹² According to the Unit History, the officers were PLTOFFs Lloyd Byrne, RAAF No 402273, Rex Bernard Beck, RAAF No 407024, Robert Parkin, RAAF No 403115 and Arthur Frederick Betteridge, RAAF No 400772. The 40 NCOs were not named in the record.

¹³ SGT (later FSGT) Jack McGregor 'Pete' Stacey, BEM, RAAF Fitter IIe No 5738. b. 18 Jan 19, Jamestown, SA. d. 1 Dec 04, Adelaide, SA. 454 Sqn – 8 Oct 42 – 14 May 45.



at 454 Squadron was posted to 'B' Flight as Senior NCO in charge of engine section, remembered the start of the journey:

The trek to Iraq was long, tiring and not very comfortable for most of us sitting on whatever in the back of the trucks, but we were all happy. It was a great adventure, a bit like going out on a scout camp for the first time. From memory the trip took about 15 days to cover approx. 100 miles per day. Our convoy was made up of about 30 vehicles,



The long trek to Iraq: 'The truck convoy stretched for miles'.
Rimmer Collection

consisting of a mobile cooker {most essential}, mobile workshop, office trailer, petrol tanker and water tanker in the form of a trailer. Our route was from Lydda to Jericho and then north over the River Jordan and across Trans-Jordan as it was known at that time, and then in a general north-east direction towards Baghdad. The first days were on sealed road and all went well.

By the 16th, they had arrived at RAF Station Habbaniya where they were met by an Australian destined to be their first Commanding Officer - Wing Commander Ian Campbell¹⁴. Campbell was a veteran of the eastern desert having come from 459 Squadron who preceded 454 overseas by several months. He would have the job of training up the Squadron before it would be sent on operations.

One of the Australian NCO aircrew arrivals was Ray Lawrence¹⁵, who also recalled their journey in his diary:

I joined 454 at Aqir on the 9th of October 1942. Two days later we boarded trucks and made our way through Tel Aviv, out over the hills, arriving at the Jordan River at 4pm. The convoy continued on to Mafraq, a petrol dump in the Syrian Desert. At 0645 Monday 12th we made our way across the Stony Desert, stopping at a dump known as H4 at 1400 hrs. It was 110 degrees in the shade, that is if there were any, but not a tree in sight. Next day we left the Stony Desert and travelled on the usual dusty sand desert. The Macadamized road ended and we followed tracks through the sand.

¹⁴ WGCdr (Later GPCAPT) Ian Lindsay Campbell, CBE*, DFC, MID, RAAF. Pilot No O368. b. 7 Oct 14. 454 Sqn & CO 16 Oct 42 – 4 Oct 43.

¹⁵ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Raymond Herbert Lawrence, RAAF WOP/AG No 406677. b. 23 Jan 19 of Perth, WA. d. 30 Nov 95.



We stayed the night at Rutbah.

Wednesday 14th – breakfast at 0500 and on our way, it wasn't long before we ran into a dust storm. We lost sight of the front half of the convoy, however the dust eased up about an hour later and we sighted the other trucks about a mile to our right. We joined them and soon got on to some good road. Staged the night at Ramadi, about 60 miles from Habbaniya. We arrived there at 0930hrs on Thursday.

RAF Station Habbaniya was an enormous air base some 30 miles west of Baghdad, and claimed by some to be the biggest RAF base in the world. Before the war, Habbaniya had been used to maintain air patrols and order amongst the warring tribes of this, the British eastern frontier. These so-called air control duties had earned the RAF many enemies amongst the tribesmen, the aircraft regularly bombing camps and generally harassing the natives. With the onset of war, Habbaniya took on an added importance. It would be vital for protection of the Iraqi oilfields, a fact not lost on German sympathisers. In a now famous battle in May 1941, the RAF held off constant attacks by Rashid Ali, the self appointed, pro-German dictator of Iraq. Ali, with German support, laid siege to and sought to capture the base to consolidate his political position. Despite the odds, the RAF held out and Ali's forces were forced to withdraw a month later¹⁶. After that battle had been won, Habbaniya took on an outpost mantle – a fortress on the edge of empire, yet it was still needed to maintain control of the desert frontier.

At Habbaniya, Ken Rimmer recalled...

We camped on the escarpment overlooking the base for two days so we could carry out repairs on the transport and go down to the main camp for a shower and use the NAAFI. We skirted Baghdad and several miles out, we hit a rather nasty dust storm. We just had to stop – just imagine doing your toilet in that, dust in your food - it was hell. At last we arrived at Al Quiyara – what a terrible place – 35 miles from Mosul.

After a week on the road, on 18 October, the convoy finally arrived at Quiyara¹⁷, their new home. Apart from a runway, a few dispersal areas and a couple of mud huts, there was nothing to indicate it was an airfield at all. Before the men lay a long, flat, desolate plain and it would be up to them to make it home. A

¹⁶ For an excellent description of these events, see Ch VII of *PAIFORCE: The Official story of the Persia and Iraq Command: 1941-1946*. HMSO, London, 1948.

¹⁷ Spelling of this site varies widely between texts. Quiyara, Qaiyarah and Quayara are common. Modern maps have it as Qayyarah, but for simplicity, I use the most common spelling and that most like the correct pronunciation – Quiyara.



camp was quickly established and one of the first priorities was the erection of both an Officers' and Sergeants' Mess. Soon CO's tent, canteen, and flagpole were erected. There were still no aircraft and not much else to do but wait. Quiyara was located well to the south-east of Mosul, along the



The convoy passes the Dead Sea. The poor roads made the going slow and tough.

Rimmer Collection

Tigris River and was about as far away from civilization as you could get.

The Squadron was to become part of 'D' Force – light bombers - and under the newly formed 217 (PAIFORCE) Group¹⁸. Paiforce stood for Palestine and Iraq Force. Here they would meet up with the rest of their promised aircrew and the unit would become a Blenheim light-bomber training squadron. However, war operations would be some time off. RAF Headquarters, anticipating the low readiness state of the untried Squadron felt that '454 must be considered on a training basis for some time to come owing to lack of specialist vehicles and discrepancies in personnel which cannot be met immediately. Building up Squadron will therefore be slow – number of aircraft 4-6 only available'¹⁹.

Meanwhile, as promised by RAF authorities, Australian ground crew who had been in the Middle East since sailing in mid-1941 did join the unit. Originally enlisted in Australia as volunteers for the RAF Infiltration Scheme, they were posted to RAF units across the Mediterranean theatre within a week of arrival. When the opportunity to serve with the RAF in the Middle East initially arose, over 500 jumped at it. They were called the 'Yellow Draft' because they were double kitted with khaki dress uniforms as their destination was 'a hot dry area'. A similar draft of 500 went to UK and was called the 'Blue Draft' as they were double kitted with blue uniforms since they were going to a cold and wet area. The 'Yellow Draft' could be distinguished by a yellow band painted on their kit bags. They consisted mainly of fitters, with several clerks, medical orderlies and instrument makers²⁰. Among them were Charlie Edwards²¹ and Merv Chivers²² from 70 Squadron, who were told to collect their kitbags, ensure they had extra

¹⁸ 217 Group had formed on 18 Sep 42 at Habbaniya.

¹⁹ AA Series AA111362/1 item No Z1 folio 40A dated 7 Oct 42.



blankets for the colder weather, and head to Mosul to join 454²³. Others²⁴ from Maintenance and Repair and Salvage Units were likewise posted in. Leading Aircraftsman Jack Lindsay²⁵ remembered his arrival²⁶:

We disembarked (from the *Queen Elizabeth*) and were sent to Kasfereet to wait for a posting to RAF units. I was posted with about thirty others of various musterings to 53 Repair and Salvage Unit (RSU). We were attached to 239 (Fighter) Wing, a mostly Australian turnout – 3, 450 and 451 Squadrons. Our term with the RSU was the most exciting. Our work was mostly in no-man’s land. After about a year, the time came to form [now] Australian Squadrons. Most of 53 RSU Australians were posted to 454. We were sent to join a convoy of about 50 vehicles at Heliopolis near Cairo. We were armed and set out over the Suez Canal up through Palestine, Jordan, Syria and into Iraq. We went past Baghdad and on to Mosul in Northern Iraq and found our allocated airstrip overlooking the Tigris River. We set up camp in this very isolated and lonely place, we had no radio etc. (The local bookmaker, Lloyd Roberts was taking bets on the Melbourne Cup weeks after the event).

Sergeant ‘Pete’ Stacey, was another of 52 Aussies at 107 Maintenance Unit at



Sergeant ‘Pete’ Stacey.
Stacey Collection

Kasfereet where he worked diligently until he and 20 others were posted to 454 Squadron in October 1942 – a 15 month wait. They were to join the Squadron at Lydda in Palestine. The Squadron began to grow with a scale of one Fitter IIe (engines) per engine to maintain and one Fitter IIa (airframes) per aircraft. However, the aircraft as yet were still non-existent.

Again, the camp must have felt the war had passed them by, but in late October, a rumour quickly spread that the Unit’s aircraft were actually on the way. Sure enough, on 1 November two crews proceeded to 56 Repair and Salvage Unit to collect their first ‘kites’.

Over the next few days other crews departed for aircraft collection. Their new

²⁰ Johnston, E.S., *The RAAF Ground Staff of the Desert Air Force Squadrons*, Self Published, Port Lonsdale, 1992, P 5, 16.

²¹ SGT Charles George Edwards RAAF No 15262. b. 28 Sep 17 of Seven Hills, NSW.

²² SGT (later WOFF) Mervyn Edward Chivers RAAF No 11001, Fitter IIe. b. 28 Jan 18.

²³ E.S. Johnston, *op cit*, p136.

²⁴ Included Jim Irwin, Alex May, Jack Stacey, Eric Dunshea, Geoff Cleland, Tom Azar, ‘Baldy’ Jackman, Gordon Milner, Guy Murray, Jack Maxwell and Gordon Mackay.

²⁵ LAC (Later SGT) Jack Herbert Lindsay, RAAF Fitter IIa, No 15345. b. 24 Apr 21, Ashfield, NSW. 454 Sqn – 10 Oct 42 – 15 Mar 45.

²⁶ Correspondence with the author – Feb 2002.



steeds would be the Bristol Blenheim, a light bomber designed in 1934 that had been hopelessly outclassed over European skies, but was deemed suitable for the farther outreaches of the war. Likewise, new arrivals included more aircrew including Sergeants Allan Davies²⁷, Paul Bayly²⁸ and Geoff Harnett²⁹ and their respective crews who arrived from 52 Squadron, then stationed at Mosul nearby. Allan recalled³⁰:

The nucleus of 454 Squadron was 52 Squadron reformed in the Middle East, with the ground crews from England and the aircrews off course from 70 OTU at Nakuru, Kenya, and [was] about 90% Australian. Our aircraft were old and I think came from other Blenheim squadrons. The squadron was formed in September 1942 and we took the aircraft over at Wadi-Sharia and flew them to Gaza satellite, thence to Habbaniya and finally to Mosul on the Turkish border.

These crews were to become known as the Squadron ‘early birds’. Another member, Sergeant Bill Hull³¹ an observer, remembered the circuitous, almost tourist route they took to get to Mosul³²...

We left 70 OTU Nakuru by passenger train for Uganda, our destination Kampala on Lake Victoria en route passing the source of the White Nile, the Rippon Falls. We travelled from Kampala to Cairo by BEA flying boat setting down at several historic places eg. Valley of the Kings and Khartoum then travelled Cairo to Damascus by train. We left Damascus by the then world renowned ‘Nairn Bus’. This was a company established by two New Zealand servicemen brothers after World War I. Because of the heat we travelled across the desert at night to Baghdad. The drivers who were probably Syrian, steered by the stars. There was no road. We staged at varying intervals at Beau Geste type forts manned by the French Foreign Legion and Iraqi troops. I checked to see if the driver or drivers had a compass or sextant but

²⁷ SGT (later FLGOFF) Allan Llewelyn Davies, MID, RAAF Pilot No 402733. b. 3 Sep 1918, Liverpool, UK, Clerk of Port Kembla, NSW. 454 Sqn – 15 Oct 42 - 10 Mar 43.

²⁸ † SGT (later WOFF) Francis Paul Bayly, RAAF Pilot No 407402. b. 9 Mar 1916, Broken Hill, NSW. School Teacher of Largs Bay, SA. 454 Sqn 15 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. KIA Crete Raid - 23 Jul 43. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery 5, D, 19 and Roll of Honour, Adelaide.

²⁹ † SGT (later WOFF) Geoffrey William Harnett, RAAF Pilot No 400987. b. 14 Apr 1917, London, UK. Jackeroo of Blackall, Qld. 454 Sqn - 15 Oct 42 - 23 Jul 43. KIA – 23 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁰ 454 Squadron Association Newsletter Christmas 1994 and correspondence with the author – 31 Dec 99.

³¹ SGT (later FLGOFF) William George Hull, RAAF Nav No 402161. b. 21 Jan 19, Mosman, NSW. Clerk. 454 Sqn – 15 Oct 42 – 19 Mar 43.

³² Correspondence Bill Hull and George Gray – 11 Dec 00.



could not see any. Their use of the stars was excellent. How we proceeded on to Mosul I don't remember – maybe by flying carpet!

Bill, who would only remain with the Squadron until March 1943, also remembered crews were issued a piece of paper printed in several languages and to be carried with them at all times when flying³³:

At some point during this time I was given what was colloquially known as a 'Ghouli chit' (I am not sure of the spelling but the term referred to one's testes). It was written in several dialects of the local tribes who were a bit 'off beat' to crashed airmen. The chit identified us as members of His Britannic Majesty's Forces. On returning us of sound body and mind they would receive a large amount of Dinars.

The men set up camp and lived in tents, making their own beds out of palliasses filled with straw. While awaiting the aircraft and action, Campbell faced another more serious problem with the men – boredom. The unit was regarded as mobile and consequently lived it pretty rough – tents, dust and flies all with few amenities. There was little to do but wait, and wait, and wait. There was no night life, no entertainment and no female company, so the men took it upon themselves to organise activities. At the same time, in early November, Campbell offered Air HQ to 'loan' some of his men to other units, an offer gratefully accepted and well regarded by the men.

The men organised a soccer match with a Division of the Polish Army who were camped nearby. They too had been sent to Iraq as a buffer against a possible German thrust south through the Caucasus. They had no love for the Russians either. Little did 454 expect the scratch team they put together would meet what amounted to the Polish national team. They were thrashed – beaten 13.0 – amidst a Polish cheer squad of over 3,000. Clearly outplayed, a further game was organised against the second eleven, but there were so many fights during the match, it was eventually abandoned and so much for harmonious relations between allies. Campbell too was not amused.

The Blenheims Arrive!

13 November 1942 became a red-letter day for the unit, when four, rather used, Mk V Blenheims (known as Bisleys) arrived in quick succession³⁴. They be the mainstay of flying until various Mk IVs and other Mk Vs could be delivered. The intention was to divide the aircraft equally between 'A' and 'B' Flight, hopefully providing six apiece.

³³ These chits were provided as the locals were no friends of the British who had used aircraft to bomb errant tribes in an air policing role between the wars. Downed airmen were often tortured and killed.



By 1935, the Air Ministry in Britain was faced with block obsolescence of a number of aircraft types, partly due to the political peace imperative and partly due to severe funding restrictions arising from the depression. Among the types due for equipment replacement were the RAF's light and medium bombers. One possible British candidate that appeared around this time was the Bristol Company's Type 142 design, a twin-engined six-seater 'executive' transport aircraft that had first flown earlier that year. Trials had produced a speed of 280 mph at 16,500 ft – better performance than most contemporary front-line biplane fighters such as the Hawker Hart and new Gloster Gladiator – and so a military variant of the 142 offered much promise.



A new light-bomber specification, B.28/35 was formally issued in September

The only photo I could find of the Squadron's first aircraft. This was one of several Mk IVs. Noyce Collection

1935 and the Bristol Aircraft Company's chief designer Frank Barnwell produced the Type 142M or military version of the successful 142. The Ministry placed an immediate order for 150. These would become the first of many Mk 1 Blenheims. However, by 1938, the design was already obsolescent, the military version lucky to cruise at 215 mph at 10,000 feet when loaded with 1,000 lbs of bombs – not the high-speed light-bomber the RAF imagined, nor what the company had promised.

Improvements were needed and after the Canadians approached Barnwell in 1936 for a longer-range version, the Type 149 with longer nose, larger fuel capacity and heavier undercarriage came into being. Later to be called the Blenheim Mk IV, the aircraft was ordered in quantity by the RAF and saw service across the world from early 1939 on. At least three appeared on the squadron register in 1942³⁵. The aircraft were ferried to the Middle East for operational service, but newer US types coming into theatre, a powerful *Luftwaffe* and the requirement for close fighter escort for Blenheim raids meant by late 1941, the Blenheim had seen its day on operations even on this front. By late-1942, most remaining aircraft were relegated to non-operational and training units of which 454 Squadron was then classified.

³⁴ These were serials BA400, BA606, BA677 and BA678 from 108 Maintenance Unit.



The Blenheim Mk V or Bisley also appeared about this time. Essentially a modified Blenheim IV under the Bristol Company classification of Type 160, this model had a new nose section (with improved armament), larger engines and about 600 lbs of armour plate around the cockpit. This made them heavy and sluggish and pilots found them tiring to fly. Consequently, in the hot weather, nobody liked them. They also had other annoying features. According to Sergeant Allan Davies³⁶:

You could always tell a Blenheim pilot. The undercarriage handle was worked by the right hand. It was so designed that no matter how you tried, when working the handle, you always ripped the skin off your knuckles. Each of us had no skin on our right hand knuckles!

Powered by two 950 hp Bristol Mercury XVI engines, the Bisley's specification was for a light bomber – general reconnaissance aircraft that could climb to over 30,000 feet and fly a range of 1,600 miles. While the prototype could meet this requirement, this was in the cool climate of Europe without a full bomb load of four 250 lb bombs. It was a different matter in the Middle East.



Ground crew working on a Blenheim. Upper: 'Taffy' Davis and Bill Noyce with unidentified head. Lower: Fred Turner and Frank Dowden.

Noyce Collection

The type design was a three-seater, the crew consisting of pilot, navigator/bomb aimer and an upper turret gunner. The pilot's position was obvious being up front on the port side, but the navigator was seated sideways in the nose, foot room being in the well for the under-nose gun mount. According to a test report³⁷:

There is no adjustment for the seat and a normal size man has insufficient headroom to sit upright. Moving to and from

...is very difficult when dressed in flying clothing. It is necessary to enter the nose compartment backwards and entails climbing over the periscope sight and straddling it. The minimum time taken to affect this gymnastic feat with

³⁵ The records are poor and so the exact number allocated, borrowed or used by 454 Squadron is unknown. Known serials include L8383, R3901 and R5800.

³⁶ Correspondence with the author.



the aeroplane on the ground was 15 seconds... On a bumpy day in the air, considerably more difficulty is likely to be experienced.

Armament was also sparse. The Mk IV had two remotely controlled, rearward firing .303 Browning machine-guns mounted in a rear facing nose blister and two gyro-stabilised Brownings in a turret set on the upper-mid fuselage. The Bisley also had four guns in the nose. Little did they know at the time, the Squadron's Blenheims would never fire a shot in anger.

Flying Training Commences

Early in November, Campbell held discussions with Headquarters and it was decided the crews needed a refresher/conversion course before they could be deemed operational, even though there was little likelihood of operations this far away from the action. Nevertheless, Campbell realised the men needed to develop their skills if they were to survive in the hostile air environment that awaited them further west. A syllabus was drawn up and authorized by Group Captain Reg Pyne³⁸ Senior Air Staff Officer at RAF HQ, so Campbell set about the task of crew conversion. The war would have to wait.

Campbell organised the Squadron into Flights – A-Flight under Flying Officer Eric 'Boots' Bamkin³⁹ and B-Flight under Flying Officer Bob Parkin⁴⁰. Refreshers started immediately and the first of six began on 21 November. Crews from other units also participated, with AHQ deeming about 30 crews were in need of the course as many hadn't flown for over a year⁴¹. The courses ran for a week and consisted of ground lectures and 10 flying hours per pilot. The intention was to get all qualified aircrew back to an operational standard. There were ground lectures on a variety of subjects; airmanship, attacks on enemy shipping and submarines, light bomber tactics as well as the usual meteorology and aircraft operations. At the same time, Campbell was obviously determined to instil some survival instincts into his team⁴² – 'Never fly just below cloud base – the AA finds it easy to range when you fly at cloud base. Watch for chances of being jumped on landing grounds within range of enemy fighters. Keep a good lookout behind – have a good system of aircraft reporting – provide a running commentary...' Little did the squadron aircrew know that his advice would soon save many lives.

³⁷ PRO AVIA 18/674 – Blenheim Aircraft: Performance and Handling Trials – 1939-42.

³⁸ GPCAPT (later AIRCDRE) Reginald Pyne, DFC, RAF, Regular Air Force Officer. d. 17 May 44.

³⁹ † FLGOFF (Later FLTLT) Eric George 'Boots' Bamkin, RAAF Pilot No 406387. b. 8 Feb 21, North Fremantle. 454 Sqn – 3 Nov 42 – 8 Jun 43. KIAA. Buried: Tobruk War Cemetery 2, A, 8 and Roll of Honour, Maylands, WA.

⁴⁰ FLGOFF (Later SQNLDR) Robert Parkin, RAAF, Pilot. No 405115. b. 14 Jan 14. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 – 12 Jan 44. The ground crew nicknamed him 'Shit-hot Parkin'.

⁴¹ Campbell Diary – entry for 7 Nov 42.



#	Pilot	Navigator/Observer	Wireless Operator/Air Gunner
1	Check Flight	-	-
2	Practice	-	-
3	Formation (sections of 3)	Wind speed and Direction Finding	Aircraft comms with section and base
4	Low Level Bombing	Low Level Bombing - 8 x 11 lbs bombs	Comms with base – HF and MF
5	Formation (sections of 3) with cross country and pattern bombing	Dead Reckoning Nav and high level bombing - 8 x 11 lbs bombs	Comms with base – QDM from Mosul D/F station
6	Shadow firing	Shadow firing	Shadow firing
7	Formation (box of 6)	Wind speed and direction finding	Shadow firing

Table 3.1 – Aircrew Refresher Syllabus – Flying Schedule

The aircraft, however, proved most difficult to maintain. Their age combined with the dust and climate did little to help. The engines were badly worn and had a high oil consumption resulting in spark plug fouling to an alarming degree which often resulted in a dangerous loss of power. The airframe fitters had a nightmare task with the compressed air systems leaking and sand caused no end of mechanical trouble. This combined with inexperienced aircrew meant it was not long before accidents began. On 25 November, Blenheim Mk IV R3901 under the command of pilot, Sergeant George McNaughton⁴³, a Kiwi, became the first such statistic. According to ‘Shelly’ Wade⁴⁴, an engine



Blenheim prangs were common - this unidentified aircraft was salvaged.
Rimmer Collection

fitter who was detailed to work on this aircraft, McNaughton ‘... took off and made a perfect landing till he reached the end of the runway and had almost stopped when all of a sudden, he was flat on his belly’. He had accidentally retracted the undercarriage instead of the flaps – an easy mistake as the two handles were similar and were located on the right side of the cockpit. But that wasn’t the end of the drama, after

extracting the pilot, ‘Shelly’ Wade later recalled⁴⁵ that ‘the fire tender later arrived and did not work very well, so a half a dozen of us gathered round and

⁴² CO’s Correspondence File, Folios 13A and 14A. Campbell Papers, courtesy Mrs Pam Campbell.

⁴³ † SGT (later FLGOFF) George Edward Scott McNaughton, RNZAF Pilot No NZ413099. b. 3 Jun 12, Christchurch, NZ. Truck driver. 454 Sqn – 15 Oct 42- 26 Nov 42. KIA with 178 Sqn – 7 Jul 44.



All that was left of R3901.

Rimmer Collection

helped but to no avail. The smoke became a fire' and the aircraft was destroyed.

Embarrassing yes, forgivable - no. He was posted out the next day. McNaughton was later killed in action in mid-1944 while flying Liberators over the Danube. In a repeat incident four days later, Mk V Bisley BA678 likewise came to grief. In the latter

prang, Sergeant Derek Rayner⁴⁶ was unable to control the aircraft and it ground looped, crashed and caught fire. Campbell later wrote⁴⁷; 'the 30 gallon extinguisher just had no effect on the fire at all. A decent crash wagon could have saved it, but we can't get them. So another aircraft gone.' While there were no serious injuries in either case, the aircraft were completely destroyed – a rather inauspicious start.

Flying during this period was not exciting - mainly aircraft delivery, together with the conversion course local flying which included the inevitable 'circuits and bumps'. No operations were undertaken and it appeared to all, including Allan Davies, that the Squadron was 'a cross between a flag flyer, a police action and an advanced OTU'.

On 30 November 1942, the Unit was formally transferred to 217 (Paiforce) Group. 217 Group had formed at Habbaniya 'to meet the situation on the "Northern Front"' – a reference to the deteriorating position the Russians found themselves in. Sister squadron 52 was also transferred, but as far as either squadron was concerned, it was to make little difference to them and



Wing Commander Campbell, the Unit's first Commanding Officer.

Campbell Collection

⁴⁴ SGT Ray 'Shelly' Williams Wade, RAAF Fitter IIe No 26926. b. 6 Feb 21, Adelaide, SA.

⁴⁵ Correspondence with George Gray, 454-459 Sqns Association – Feb 2000. With permission.

⁴⁶ SGT (later PLTOFF) Derek Arthur Ronald Rayner, RAF Pilot No1334290. 454 Sqn - 1 Oct 42 - 30 Nov 42.

⁴⁷ Campbell diary entry for 30 Nov 1942



life went on as usual. The next day, six Bisleys arrived to pick up participants on Number 1 refresher course and return them to Cairo, while Number 2 course began two days later and completed on the 12th. Campbell found out by rumour that the remaining refresher courses planned were cancelled, allowing him to begin proper squadron training in earnest.

The Squadron Badge

Once settled into a routine in Iraq, thoughts turned to producing a squadron badge. A number of designs were created until one depicting a Kookaburra holding a snake in its beak was finally, but unofficially adopted. The design while typically Australian was unfortunately not unique. 1 Squadron had used the idea of a Kookaburra and snake in an unofficial capacity before the war, however, their official badge depicted a swooping Kookaburra over a Cross of Jerusalem. 453 Squadron had also used a Kookaburra sitting on a branch with the motto 'Ready to Strike' and 467 Squadron's idea was virtually identical to 454's design. What is clear is that these all originated independently and 454's late-1942 rendition by commercial artist Sergeant Jack Bastian⁴⁸ that appeared on the walls of the Sergeants' Mess pre-dated 467s. Regardless, while the design was widely used by the Squadron throughout its war operations, unfortunately, none made the effort to register it with the Chester Herald at the College of Arms in London, and it remains unofficial to this day.



At the same time, the Squadron's unofficial motto, 'Nothing is Impossible' came into general use. Campbell had already put the squadron on notice with his 'can do attitude' and he had a sign made that was placed on the wall of his makeshift office that read-

The words can't or won't shall not be used in this squadron.

⁴⁸ FSGT (later FLGOFF) John Harcourt 'Jack' Bastian, RAAF, WOP/AG. No 406685. b. 8 May 11, Mt Magnet, WA. Commercial Artist. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 8 Dec 43.



It became an instant hit with the men. Anyone visiting the CO could not fail to see it and be impressed. It was from Campbell's sign that its rough Latin translation - *Nihil Impossibile* – was eventually used on the badge. Despite its lack of recognition by the authorities, the Squadron proudly displayed their identity everywhere and by late 1944, had very ornate reproductions painted in messes, clubs and around the squadron lines.

Behind the Scenes

Late in 1942, Leading Aircraftsman Bill Henry⁴⁹, ably supported by Leading Aircraftsman Les Russell⁵⁰, edited and produced the first of several squadron newsletters. It was called *The Kooka Bomber* after the Squadron's de facto badge mascot. Leading Aircraftsman 'Mac' McEwan⁵¹ illustrated the production and it sold for five Ackers. It was a mixture of comic articles, gossip and serious scholarship. Not surprisingly for a co-produced Brit/Aussie production, the editorial staff had to include a sports writer.

Once established at Quiyara, the men set about making the camp as comfortable as possible. Not only had they printed *the Kooka Bomber*, but they stocked a library with a selection of offerings ranging from dime thrillers to classics, held concerts with the entertainers being drawn from the members themselves and formed sporting clubs to challenge all comers.



However, one nemesis that nobody could avoid was the censor. All mail and correspondence not through official channels was examined for information that might assist the enemy. One nameless wag (an 'Erk' being the Air Force slang term for the lower ranked ground crew) in the squadron penned the following for *The Kooka Bomber* and it well illustrates the serious scholarship the magazine represented...

⁴⁹ LAC (later T/SGT) William Gladstone Henry, RAAF Fitter IIe No 15555. b. 9 Mar 1915, Warrnambool, Vic. 454Sqn – 25 Sep 42 – 14 Mar 43.

⁵⁰ LAC (later CPL) Leslie Robert Charles Russell, RAAF Fitter IIe No 10450. b. 9 Mar 1915, Pascoe Vale, Vic. 454Sqn – 15 Mar 43 – 10 Apr 43 (to 459 Sqn).

⁵¹ † LAC James 'Mac' McEwan, RAFVR ACH/GD No 972996. 454 Sqn – 2 Apr 42 – 20 Aug 43. Died of Peritonitis – 20 Aug 43. Buried at Alexandria (Hadra) War Memorial Cemetery, plot 5D5.



To Be Censored

Can't write a thing,
The Censors to blame.
Just say that I'm well,
And sign my name.
Can't tell where we sail from,
Can't mention the date,
And can't even number
The meals that I've ate.
Can't say where we're going,
Don't know where we'll land.
Couldn't inform you
If met by a band.
Can't mention the weather
Can't say if there's rain.

All official secrets
Must secrets remain.
Can't have a flashlight,
To guide me at night.
Can't smoke a fag
Except out of sight,
Can't keep a diary
For such is a sin.
Can't keep the envelopes
Your letters come in.
Can't say for sure, folks,
Just what I can write.
So I'll call this my letter
And close with "Good Night."

An Erk

Prior to their first Christmas, the squadron purchased a large number of turkeys from local traders and fattened them up to await their eventual fate. Also in December, the Australian Comforts Fund provided Christmas hampers, tobacco, papers and mail, and a 'suitable amount of liquid refreshment' was also procured. Christmas 1942 was to be a joyous affair, despite the lack of operational flying and the isolation of the place. Fortunately, although a couple of old aircraft had been wrecked, there had been no casualties and all were in good spirits.

On Boxing Day, the Unit Historian of 217 Group recorded⁵²...

The usual Christmas celebrations "in the field" have been enjoyed by all ranks of Group HQ and Unit. Fair supplies of seasonal food and liquor were available a few days before Christmas through the NAAFI. Locally purchased additions such as turkeys, nuts, etc., supplemented the Christmas puddings and other delicacies. A fair supply of Christmas mail has also assisted in spreading the festive spirit among the members of the unit.

By the end of 1942, the German move against Iraq had fizzled and the rapid onset of a severe winter slowed their advance across Russia to a crawl. Consequently, a decision was made to relocate 454 back into Egypt⁵³. On the 18 January 1943, Campbell received a farewell telegram from the HQ in Iraq:

⁵² PRO Air 25/893 – entry for 26 Dec 42.

⁵³ 454 Sqn A50. Entry for 8 Jan 43. On authority Air HQ Iraq Signal O.224 of 7 Jan 43. There is more detail in the next chapter.



454's Airmen's Mess, of typical desert construction.

Campbell Collection

...On your Squadron leaving this Command for operations, wish you all the very best of luck and would like to thank you for your excellent work whilst stationed in Iraq...

However, while Iraq had been cold and lonely, Egypt would be hot, both in climate and operations and 454 Squadron would need more than luck where they were headed.



Key personalities: Flight Lieutenant 'Boots' Bamkin (OC 'A' Flight), Squadron Leader Peter Duggan-Smith (RAF and OC Flying), Wing Commander Ian Campbell (CO) and Pilot Officer Bob Parkin (OC 'B' Flight) - December 1942.

Campbell Collection



454's Officers Group in Iraq, December 1942.

Campbell Collection



CHAPTER 4

EGYPT AND OPERATIONAL



The air situation for the Luftwaffe in 1942 had not gone well and by December, a reorganisation of its *Luftflottes* or ‘air fleets’ was required, particularly after the Allied landings in North Africa in November. The Luftwaffe was forced to strengthen its position in Sardinia to pre-stall an Allied air assault into southern France and Italy, so the boundary of *Luftflotte 2* was extended to include Sardinia, Southern Italy and the Eastern Med. The *Luftwaffe* had about 850 front-line aircraft in the Mediterranean at this time, of which about 150¹ were in the Eastern Med under *Fliegerkorps X*, and some 550 in the Western Med under *Fliegerkorps II*. The rest were in Italy and the Islands. Like the British, the Luftwaffe supply lines were stretched – a major factor in who would win the battle for air supremacy. However, it would be the German fighters of the Eastern Med that would eventually pose problems for 454.

The new year would also bring its changes, challenges and controversy to the Squadron. When Air Vice-Marshal Richard Williams² took over the RAAF Liaison position in Overseas HQ, RAAF Kingsway in London, amongst other disappointments, he was disturbed to find the Australian Article XV Squadrons were treated merely as RAF units with a mixed nationality flavour – they were not Australian at all. Not only were most not even Australian in character, he found them widely dispersed, and in the case of 454 Squadron, of unknown whereabouts. When he discovered 454 was in Iraq, this prompted some correspondence in early January 1943 between the Air Vice-Marshal and RAF Headquarters seeking notification about changes proposed for Article XV Squadrons. He received a caustic reply from Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas, rank-wise his senior, objecting to the request to be notified every time the RAF sought to alter the operations of what they saw as their own units. Williams remained nonplussed. He fired an equally poignant, but polite reply³.

You are apparently unaware that there is agreement between our
two Governments that no Australian squadron will be moved to

¹ Of these about 120 were in Greece and the Aegean, and of these only about 15 single-engine fighters. W.H. Tantom IV and E.J. Hoffschmidt, *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force (1933-1945)*, WE Inc. Greenwich, 1969, p 250.

² AM Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO, RAAF. Known as the Father of the RAAF. CAS 1921, 1925-32, 1934-39. AOC RAAF Overseas HQ 1941-42. Regular Air Force Officer of Adelaide and Melbourne. b. Moonta, SA – 3 Aug 1890. d. Kew, Vic – 7 Feb 80.

³ AA Series A2217 Item 22/37/Org. Folio 15A dated 12 Jan 43.



an area where Australian forces are not already serving without prior notification to the Commonwealth Government. Idea being to forestall possible political repercussions...

Williams made it clear that he did not want to interfere, and this note apparently ended the matter but although Williams may have felt vindicated, he never got his ardent wish. Secretly he wanted to establish an all Australian Group, much like No 6 Group which was composed entirely of Canadian squadrons. A Canadian even held the higher command appointment of Group Commander, something Australians would never see. Williams' quest, however ignored, would continue behind the scenes.

On 8 January 1943, the Squadron was directed to prepare to move again – location as yet unknown – and transfer to No 201 Group for convoy patrol and anti-submarine duties. Their new parent Wing would be 235. Would this finally bring about some action? The secret cable from Air HQ Iraq directed⁴

454 Squadron to prepare to move complete with all motor transport, tents and barrack equipment held less aircraft to location to be decided. Sqdn will be employed on anti-submarine duties under 201 Group. On arrival Sqdn to be re-armed with Blenheim Mk V...



23 year old Wing Commander Jack Coates.
Coates Collection

Despite the reference to Blenheims in the signal, for this task these aircraft would be of little use, so a new aircraft type would be needed. Three days later, their new location was known – LG227 - Landing Ground or 'LG' for short, number 227. It was at a place known as Gianaclis, but their stay there too would be short.

Formed in September 1939, 201 (Naval Cooperation) Group was by 1940, responsible for providing air support to the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, based at Alexandria. The Group then had direct control over just one squadron, 230, flying

⁴ PRO Air 27/1896 – ORB Appendices. Cable 0.224 dated 7 Jan 43.



Sunderland flying boats out of Aboukir near Cairo. When Germany invaded Crete and the Aegean at the end of April 1941, the Sunderlands could no longer operate with impunity in daylight to protect the vital convoys across the Med. The Group was faced with a need to expand. One young RAF officer who was to serve in No 201 Group and would later have a big impact on 454 Squadron was Squadron Leader Jack Coates. According to Coates⁵:

In June that year, 10 Blenheims with GR trained crews from Coastal Command were posted to 203 Squadron, which had recently come from Iraq with Blenheims to replace the Sunderlands. The base was Burg al Arab about 30 miles west of Alexandria. This became the centre of 201's coastal aircraft, flying over the sea on anti-submarine patrols and longer range reconnaissance for supply convoys and even for the Italian battlefleet, with detachments sent to refuel as far forward as the desert war would permit. The Blenheim's Mercury engines were very susceptible to the intake of sand from the desert landing grounds and their performance in the hot climate and their armament was inadequate. The Squadron was partially rearmed with Glen Martin Marylands, recently taken over from the French, which were so successful in the desert conditions that the RAF commissioned production of the Glen Martin Baltimore which was then widely used in the Middle East and Italy.

454 Squadron was to serve under 201 Group for 13 months.

While the camp was packing for its relocation, tragedy struck. On 10 January 1943 an explosion rocked the camp and while some thought they were under attack, the site of



The desert rains caused everything to turn to mud.

Basedow Collection

the noise and smoke appeared to be the Sergeants' Mess Cookhouse. Around 8 pm, two primus stoves used for cooking had apparently been vapourising in the kitchen. These stoves used aviation petrol for fuel. When a third such stove was lit by one of the men, the result was inevitable. The cookhouse was no doubt full of petrol vapour, and just went up. Leading Aircraftsman Harry

⁵ Correspondence with the author – 10 Nov 00.

⁶ † LAC Harold Hadfield, RAFVR C&B No 1010080. 454 Sqn - 2 Apr 42 – 10 Jan 43. Buried: Mosul, Iraq Col I, A, 4.



Hadfield⁶ was killed instantly and Leading Aircraftsman Jim Wilkey⁷ died some minutes later. A third man was more fortunate, just escaping the effects of the blast and was unhurt. Hadfield and Wilkey were the Squadron's first in-theatre casualties, Both men were given a full service funeral and are buried at the British War Cemetery in Mosul.

As directed by higher headquarters, the Squadron's five remaining Bisleys were flown to Shaibah, near Basra the same day as the accident and handed over to 115 Maintenance Unit. The move began in earnest on 14 January after the rain had eased, with the usual line of trucks heading out across the desert. It would take them ten days to arrive at their new destination, their route being Qaiyara – Tikrit – Habbanyia - Rutbah - H4 - Mafraq - Camp23 (Nathani) – Asluj – Ismalia - Wadi Natrun - LG227 (Gianaclis). Upon arrival at Gianaclis, the first duties were to erect tents and stake out a defensive perimeter. The base was little more than a rough dirt strip bulldozed out of the desert and as the numbers indicated, there were a great many of such strips. The only advantage was that it was relatively close to Alexandria and it was on the coast. After spending some time getting organised, some bright spark at HQ decided the camp needed to move several miles north-east, so with much cursing, the men up'd and moved. They must have had an empathy with the nomads of the desert – little did they realise their life would involve tent living and regular upheaval from now on.



Truck convoy back from Iraq to Egypt, January 1943.

Noyce Collection

A great expanse of low dunes and blowing sand spreads westwards from the green of the Nile Delta region, along a coastal strip that stretches across the entire continent of Africa. Home to nomadic Arabs and their camels and a few pockets of civilisation where water could be found, the area was to become known

as the Western Desert. It would soon be familiar terrain where the contrast of the sand, the sea and the sky could not be starker. Here, nature would become a worse enemy than the Germans and Italians. But what action would they see? At 5 o'clock in the morning of 23 January 1943, hundreds of miles to the west and just three months to the day since the 8th Army joined the battle at Alamein,

⁷ † LAC James Stephen Wilkey, RAFVR C&B No 1011628. 454 Sqn - 2 Apr 42 – 10 Jan 43. Buried: Mosul, Iraq Col I, A, 3.



the first troops entered Tripoli in Libya. At the same time, the advance parties of the Desert Air Force took over Castel Benito Airfield just outside the city – clearly 454 Squadron would now not be involved in action against Rommel. Their war would be flown over the water.

In 1943 and for the first half of 1944, the Squadron were destined to become nomads of the desert themselves, living in tents and working under the hot sun. The enemy was also the wind, which whipped up sandstorms within minutes that lasted for hours and made flying and maintenance work impossible. Tents would be ripped apart, equipment covered in mounds of sand and the men themselves would find the sand got everywhere, aggravating cuts, stinging eyes and noses and making life generally unpleasant. While working conditions were bad, marauding Arabs, scorpions, camel spiders, flies and dehydration would also have to be contended with.

The RAF had been fighting in the desert for over two years by the time 454 Squadron arrived, so it was well prepared for the rigors of desert conditions. Engineers had set up a well organised maintenance and supply depot system across Egypt and Palestine providing for all requirements. This included the most forward units in the field to manufacturing facilities well out of harm's way. Aircraft were originally supplied by sea, but when losses to enemy action rose, an air bridge was established from America across the Atlantic. For 454 Squadron, ferry pilots would deliver Baltimores via Takoradi (West Africa), Kano, El Obeid, Wadi Halfa and finally to an aircraft depot in Cairo where they would be allocated to the squadron as required. However, the risks of the long ocean crossing for ferry pilots were high with a least 17 brand new Baltimores lost in transit⁸. Meanwhile, Australian personnel numbers in the squadron had settled at 19 officers and 126 airmen⁹, and these numbers would steadily rise as time went on. At least the RAF authorities were attempting to satisfy the Australian Government's wish to populate Australian numbered squadrons with Australians.

The day after their arrival at LG227, news quickly went around the camp that the promised Bisley Mk Vs had



Baltimore MkIII, AH124:E arrived in the Middle East in April 1943
Rimmer Collection

⁸ For more detail, see Carl A. Christie, *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada, 1995.

⁹ AA2217 Item No 22/37/Org Folio 16A dated 21 Jan 43.



been cancelled and the unit would re-equip with new Baltimore Mk IIIs – a cause for much relief from air and ground crew alike. Although there had been no action and little flying activity, on the 28th the men were awoken with a start. A shot was heard across the camp at 2 o'clock in the morning and an airman was found dead. Aircraftsman Ken Shotter¹⁰, a gunner who was on guard, was found in the tented area with a severe head wound. The investigation was inconclusive, the report stating he had been accidentally shot by persons unknown. Many felt he had been the victim of a marauding Arab intent on raiding the camp. Bedouin Arabs were known to slip into the camps at night in pairs in the hope of finding something to pillage. One would pick his way through tents and property while the other stood guard with a rifle. Shotter no doubt disturbed such a raid.

Being close to Alexandria meant that most could take some leave there or in Cairo, with its lights and delights. Most welcome was a bath to remove the incessant desert dust and a chance to get clothes laundered. Restaurants and the cinema were also favourites. The men could shop and relax in one of the numerous hotels and bars – a rare luxury after long days in the desert. While these trips would be few and far between, they occasionally gave the CO worry. Being away from the fairer sex, and with a few of the men getting 'Dear John' letters from home, the temptations of the city were too numerous. Yet the squadron managed.

On 9 February, three Baltimores arrived, having been ferried from the Canal Zone by their crews, their engines no doubt stirring the dust as well as the hopes of the men. They would be the first of a steady trickle of 18 airframes to re-equip the unit over the coming days. The same day, one hundred volunteers – a full quarter of the airmen in the Squadron – took part in a raid organised by the Provost Marshal on the Bedouin camp at Hammam-el-Gedid sited nearby. The dawn raid recovered over £470 worth of stolen personal and air force property, and five perpetrators were handed over to the civil police at Amiriya - revenge for Shotter's death.

The Baltimore

Unlike its sister aircraft the Maryland which was built solely for the French, the Martin Baltimore¹¹ was originally designed to meet a joint French-British specification under the Anglo-French Purchasing Commission. Although American designed and built, the aircraft was never to serve with the US Army

¹⁰ † AC2 Kenneth Hubert Shotter, RAFVR Gnr No 1456942. 454 Sqn - 2 Apr 42 - 28 Jan 43. Buried in Alexandria (Hadra) Cemetery, Egypt. Col 4, G, 10.

¹¹ For additional information, see Breihan J., et al, *Martin Aircraft 1909-1960*, Narkiewicz/Thompson, Santa Ana, 1995, pp 124-131.



Air Forces or Navy. Martin Aircraft's Model 187, to be called the Baltimore after the city where the total of 1575 were built, used some design features of the Maryland including wings and cabin layout but had a much wider fuselage, new tail and more powerful Wright GR-2600 engines. The first production order of 400 was placed in May 1940, with the Mk I prototype first flying in June 1941. After the fall of France, the British subsumed the contract and added sand filters to the engines for desert operations, fittings for the larger British bombs and an upper turret. Despite their cost of US \$120,000 being over half as much again as the newer Martin B26, further batch orders for 575 and 600 aircraft soon followed through the new Lend-Lease arrangements and under the USAAF designation of A-30. All were destined for the Middle East and Italian Theatres.



There were the inevitable production delays at the Martin factory, so deliveries only began in October 1941 but continued to May 1944. However, not all Baltimores made it to RAF operations as two ships carrying 41 Mk III and Mk IIAs were sunk on route and other aircraft were lost during ferry flights through the Bahamas, South America and on their West African transit. A staggering 315 were to serve with 454 Squadron throughout the war and of those, 25 were lost on operations and another 16 were written-off through various accidents.

At 48 ft 6in long and with a wing span of just over 61 feet, the aircraft was in the light bomber class. Bomb load was 2000 lbs – four 500 lbs or up to six 250 pounders, the constraint being the bomb bay space and rack design. A cruising speed of



Baltimores in formation over the desert.

Campbell Collection



The result of a swing on take-off, this one a write-off.

Basedow Collection

220 mph, service ceiling of 24,000 ft and a maximum range of around 950 miles meant it would be of practical use in the desert over the Mediterranean. Crew was four a pilot, navigator or observer, a wireless operator who also manned the ventral gun and another gunner for the upper turret. Many of the 454 Squadron crews had two

WOP/AGs making the positions interchangeable, but fuselage design limitations meant it was very difficult for crews to swap positions in flight.

The RAF began receiving Baltimores ready for operations in March 1942, and had earmarked all for North Africa. Training began in April, using crews experienced with Marylands. Unfortunately, the new Baltimore aircraft soon developed an unhappy reputation. It had a couple of vices – a tendency to drop the left wing on landing and a resultant swing to the left once the wheels had touched down. If a pilot were not careful, a ground loop would occur which had the potential to collapse the undercarriage and injure the crew. As we shall see, 454 Squadron airmen recorded a number of such accidents.

Baltimore Vitals

Engines: Two 1660 hp Wright R2600-19 Cyclones Mk IV – 14 cylinders (two banks of 7)		
Revs: Taxiing – 1000 rpm, Take-off – 2400 rpm, Normal Cruise – 1850 rpm,		
Economical	Cruise – 1750 rpm	
Empty Weight – 7013 kg	Max Take-off Weight – 10251 kg	Bomb Load – 454 kg
Fuel – 400 Gals plus up to 300 Gals in Belly Tank (no bombs)		
Stall Speed – 95 mph	Approach speed – 110 mph	Cruise – 220 mph

The aircraft had a thin fuselage which prevented movement between stations. This meant that once airborne, the crew had to rely on the intercom for communication. The pilot climbed into the aircraft from the upper port side and was strapped into the single-seat cockpit. He sat on his parachute and the single man ‘K’-type dinghy – his if the aircraft ditched. The wireless operator and gunner manned stations in the back and entered through the large crew door on the port side. For these crew a bulkier ‘H’ type dinghy was fitted to the crew



entrance door, but it was harder to release and operate, especially if the crew were injured. The navigator sat in the Perspex nosecone and climbed into his seat from a ladder under the nose. He was physically separated from the pilot (who sat above him) by the aircraft bulkhead. Written messages could just be passed between the two – handy on numerous occasions when the intercom failed. The navigator also had an airspeed indicator and a stowed control column, which could be swung out and used together with a spare throttle to control the aircraft in an emergency, or give the pilot a rest on the longer flights. Squadron doctor, Flight Lieutenant Karl Basedow¹² later recalled his ‘test flight’, describing what it was like in the navigator’s compartment¹³:

It was quite an experience in itself to be sitting in that narrow space, nearly surrounded by the Perspex nose, with the engines and all the rest of the aeroplane behind me. Cut off from the rest of the crew, and with most of the noise blocked out of my helmet, I seemed to be in a world of my own – I was fascinated. Though visibility through the Perspex was surprisingly distorted, the view was enjoyable.

A series of aircraft trials by the RAF at the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment, Boscombe Down that were conducted in 1942, recommended several improvements and upgrades¹⁴. First, the Mk I and II Baltimore upper turret systems lacked punch. As a result, a Boulton Paul ‘A’ Type Mk V turret was fitted to create the Mk III Baltimore variant. The new turrets had four 0.303 in machine-guns, but these too lacked firepower. Eventually, Martin fitted the latter Mk III production run (the Mk IIIA) and the Mk IV with their own 250CE turret with twin 0.5in guns. The final model Mk V also replaced the ventral guns with twin 0.5in, making twelve guns in all (4 wing, two upper, two ventral and four fixed rear). The fixed rear-facing guns were controlled by means of a foot switch if a target was below the tail and behind.



The view out the nose - here approaching the Berka III runway.

Basedow Collection

¹² FLTLT (later SQNLDR) Karl Johannes Basedow, RAAF Doctor No 283342. b. 21 Jul 13. d. 7 Sep 04, Nuriootpa, SA. 454 Sqn - 5 Aug 43 – 14 Aug 45.

¹³ The 454 Squadron’s Medicine Man – Reminiscences 50 Years on. Via George Gray.

¹⁴ PRO AVIA 18/733 – Baltimore Performance and Handling Trials, Intensive Flying Trials, and Preliminary Notes on the Specifications, PRO AVIA 18/778 – Baltimore Gunnery Trials – Reports 1 & 2, and PRO AVIA 18/990 – Baltimore Bombing and Pyrotechnic Installation.

¹⁵ PRO AVIA 18/733 – Brief Performance and Handling Trials – p3.



The Turret guns (four 0.303in) of a Mk III Baltimore. Here, LAC Gubbins (standing) and LAC Skill give them a check before flight.

Rimmer Collection

The RAF test pilots also found other faults. Cockpit noise was assessed as ‘just tolerable’ in one report¹⁵ and the fact that the navigator had to enter and exit through a door beneath the fuselage which necessitated crawling under the tail boom clearly annoyed the test navigator. He went on to write that; ‘entering the aeroplane in this manner is difficult and is aggravated when the ground is wet’, a fact most navs would later attest in Italy. Yet despite the small annoyances, the RAF test crew found this American type to have fewer vices than other types such as the Hudson, Ventura and Marauder. In their flying trials report, they stated¹⁶:

The aeroplane is nice to handle in all conditions of flight and at all loads. Its manoeuvrability is good and evasive action is easy. The aeroplane is extremely good on one engine; maintaining height with the greatest of ease on one engine even with the propeller of the ‘dead’ engine unfeathered. Baulked landings with full flap present no difficulties. As a light bomber it should be satisfactory in operational duties provided that the aeroplane is only used for short day duties. Because of the reflection in the windscreen, the aeroplane is most trying to the pilot in night operation. The illumination for the navigator causes bad reflections.

No aircraft is perfect and other problems arise when you use them for purposes for which they were not intended. Eventually, over 100 modifications were made to the type to better its utility, safety and performance. According to Wireless Operator and Air Gunner Doug Hutchinson¹⁷, the Baltimores had another unfortunate problem when considering their use for sea surveillance...

The Baltimores were fine aeroplanes, and were fast enough to outrun a Messerschmitt 109 fighter, but there was a snag. Cruising at 180 knots they consumed 120 gallons of fuel per hour and an endurance of three and a third hours on the four hundred gallons they carried. But when opened up to full throttle, the two engines

¹⁶ PRO AVIA 18/733 – Intensive Flying Trials – p8.

¹⁷ ‡ FLTLT Douglas Frank Hutchinson, RAAF WAG No 403591. b. 10 Mar 17, Cowra, NSW. Shop Manager. 454 – 1 Jun 43 – 23 Jul 43. POW at Luft Stalag III – Sagan.



used 370 gallons per hour, giving an endurance of not much over one hour. This meant we could not open up our throttles to get away from fighters because we would run out of fuel over the Mediterranean on the way back.

Nevertheless, the Baltimore was used by the RAF extensively in Africa, the Mediterranean Theatre and Italy, operating in 11 RAF, and 3 SAAF units¹⁸. Later in the war, these workhorses also operated with the Greeks in their No 13 (Hellenic) Squadron, with ‘Picardie’ Squadron of the French Armee de l’Air and in four Squadrons of the ‘Stormo Baltimore’ of the Italian co-belligerent air forces. In late 1944, the Allies transferred 71 aircraft to the Turkish Air Force in the hope that they would join them in the final push against the Germans, but that was not to be. Four models of the Baltimore served in 454 Squadron from March 1943 to September 1945.

Model	Martin Model	Martin Serials	RAF Serials	Total Built	Notes
Mk III	187-B1	1577-1826	AG835-AG999 AH100-AH184	250	Incorporated Boulton Paul Turret with four 0.303 in guns
Mk IIIA	187-B2	3787-4067	FA100-FA380	281	Lend-lease: USAAF Serials 41-27682 to 41-27962 Incorporated Martin 250CE turret with twin 0.5in guns Up-rated engines – Wright R2600-19 Lockable tail wheel
Mk IV	187-B3	4068-4361	FA381-FA674	194	Lend-Lease: USAAF Serials 41-27963 to 41-28256 Improved turret controls Improved intercom
Mk V	187-B3	7295-7894	FW281-FW880	600	Lend-Lease: USAAF Serials 43-8438 to 43- 9037 Windscreen improved for night flying

Table 4.1 – Baltimore Deliveries to the RAF – June 1942 to May 1944¹⁹

¹⁸ RAF units were 13, 52, 55, 69, 203, 223, 454 (Australian), 459 (Australian), 500, 600 Squadrons and 1437 Strategic Reconnaissance Flight. The SAAF Squadrons were Nos 15, 21 and 60 and the Italian Squadrons were 165, 190, 253 and 281.

¹⁹ Martin Aircraft 1909-1960, p 128.



The Squadron Converts

Despite the conditions, the moves and the apparent lack of operational flying, calls for voluntary transfers were met with a nil response. After six months in the air force, these lads had learnt the golden rule – Never Volunteer! – But it was also heartening to Campbell to know



Two Mk III Baltimores prepare for a sortie.

Campbell Collection

morale was obviously high. Yet another move was directed²⁰ on 2 February, the Squadron being given the flexibility to ‘...move to LG 91 at Commanding Officer’s convenience...’. Campbell chose to move on the 16th, the Squadron arriving the same day at LG 91 – Amiriya. Again the ritual of pitching tents and setting up amenities was followed.

Meanwhile, new Baltimore Mk IIIs were continuing to arrive at a steady pace. By the end of February, the Squadron could boast 13 and 2 surplus Blenheim Vs (BA389:O & BA498:P). With new aircraft on the line, the Squadron’s immediate duty was to become operational as soon as possible, so conversion training onto the Baltimores and general reconnaissance courses were the order of the day. Aircrew numbers had been relatively high and even now that the Baltimore IIIs had begun to arrive, some aircrew number culling was required. Consequently, on 21 February, nine pilots and their observers were posted to 603 Squadron and another pair to the Air-Sea Rescue Flight. Flying could commence in earnest, now with a nice balance between airframes and crew numbers.

It was now when the Squadron needed the good flying weather the desert promised, that the elements turned against them. 24 February went down as one of the wettest days on record – most unexpected for the usually hot and dry desert conditions. The landing ground became unserviceable due mud and local flooding, and life became miserable for all. From Ken Rimmer’s diary...

Raining like hell – all camp under water. Water in the tent 6”
[deep]. Went to Alex to have teeth done – what a day!

²⁰ PRO Air 27 Item No 1896 – ORB – Entry for 2 Feb 43.



Despite the vagaries of ‘Mother Nature’, March 1943 would be a time for crew conversion and maintenance on the job training. It would also see the commencement of operations.

The First Operational Sortie

On 4 March, the Squadron’s first operational sorties were programmed; two anti-submarine hunts west and north-west of Alexandria. Flight Lieutenant ‘Boots’ Bamkin and his crew in aircraft AH183:D were the first to take-off, just after 11.30 that morning. As they landed four hours later, Pilot Officer Alan Horsley²¹ and his crew in aircraft AG978:Q repeated the mission. The flights were uneventful and no sightings were made, but 454 Squadron had finally after six months, operated in the war. The airmen had gathered to wave each aircraft off as they taxied to the holding point, but this nicety would soon fade as operations became the norm and the novelty wore off.



The CO, ‘Camel’ Coates in the ‘office’, preparing for a sortie.

Coates Collection

²¹ ‡ PLTOFF (later FLTLT) William Alroy Hugh John ‘Alan’ Horsley, RAAF Pilot No 403828. b. 30 Sep 1911, assistant agriculturalist of Willoughby, NSW. 454 Sqn – 17 Dec 42 – 3 Dec 43. POW at Stalag Luft III.

²² AA Series A11362/1 item No Z1 folio 83A dated 2 Apr 43.



Squadron aircraft line-up, 1943.

RAAF Official



CO and members of the Squadron relaxing in the Mess hut.

Coates Collection



CHAPTER 5

OFFENSIVE OPS AND COASTAL PATROLS



It was during March 1943 that the Squadron finally began to settle into a flying routine. Now under control of 201 Group, patrols, convoy escorts and open water sweeps became the norm. The 8th Army's requirement for supplies brought in across the Med meant that German *U-Boats* and *E-Boats* were a significant threat to Allied operations. 454 Squadron would be required to conduct anti-submarine and *E-boat* sweeps to keep the convoys safe.

Meanwhile, some adjustment to squadron airmen numbers was now found to be necessary as regular operations had commenced, and on the 22nd, 32 fitters and 12 flight mechanics were posted out to other units who were desperately in need of their services. Most went to Maintenance and Repair units around the theatre. It was also a time when 454 Squadron briefly had direct control over two sister RAAF units, 458 flying Wellingtons and 459 flying Hudsons. Their parent command, No 245 Wing, was relocating and could not issue tasking orders while on the move.

A Move to Gambut III

Come early April, another move was in the wind. On the 10th, orders were received from Group relocating 454 to Gambut III, a move that took three days to complete. Gambut was simply remote, desolate and a dust bowl – and the birthplace of what became known as the Desert Air Force. Squadron Doctor, Karl 'Doc' Basedow described the campsite in his diary¹:

Our camp is situated in Libya on the plain between the second and the third escarpments of the edge of the Libyan Desert. We are about 10 miles from the sea and 400ft above it and yet we can not see it... The ground here is flat with a few rises and a shallow wadi (ravine) about 2 miles away... The ground is covered sparsely with low shrubs. The grass and shrubs are all dry at present. There are no trees. There are no creeks or waterholes and yet there are frogs.

The aerodrome is very large, about 1 by 1.5 miles. 459 is on the W. side. 454 on the NW, and Wing on the N. There are other small detachments of Army and Airforce around.

¹ Basedow diary entry for 31 July (while posted at 459 Squadron).



Our camp is well deployed. There is rarely less than 30 yds between tents. Everything is tented except for a few trailers. The men's tents are 12x14 ft. RDs, Messes, cookhouses, stores etc. are in the large EPIP tents, and have cement floors... There has been no attempt at camouflage. It would be useless anyway.



*The Gambut Officers' Mess was constructed from disused German workshops found at Bardia - this, the bar corner. **Campbell Collection***

The base would be home for the next five months, although the squadron did not know this at the time, and the men set about making it as comfortable as possible. Somehow, cement and building materials 'appeared' and the camp soon took upon a lived-in look. It was also a period of fluid operations across the battlefield and consequently, the

Squadron could expect to operate across the theatre. This meant detachments would also go out and operate independently as the need for support arose. On 21 April, the first of these detachments of four Baltimore aircraft under command

of Flight Lieutenant 'Boots' Bamkin deployed to Misurata, a forward operating base approximately 100 nautical miles east of Tripoli in Libya and much closer to Monty's forward forces. The maintenance crews had set out by road three weeks prior, but when the squadron moved to Gambut, they had been recalled. Together with Bamkin were Flying Officer George Railton², Flight Sergeant Paul Bayly and Flight Sergeant 'Paddy' Archer³ and their respective crews, plus a selection of necessary maintenance staff to permit independent operations.



Looking toward the far end of the Gambut III Mess. Carpets bought in Iraq, furniture 'found' and concrete 'borrowed'.

Campbell Collection

² FLGOFF (later FLTLT) William George Railton, DFC, RAF, Pilot. No 112491. 454 Sqn – 21 Oct 42 – 21 Feb 44.

³ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Terrence Nott 'Paddy' Archer, RAAF, Pilot. No 404162. b. 31 Aug 14, Rockhampton, Qld. 454 Sqn – 15 Oct 42 – 12 Jan 44.



Three aircraft led by Flight Lieutenant Bamkin pass low over the camp departing on the Squadron's first detachment from Gambut to operate at Misurata. *Campbell Collection*

It was during this detachment that the Squadron's first Baltimore 'prang' was recorded. The conditions of Misurata and Castel Benito, a large ex-Italian air base now operated by the Allies near Tripoli, were

extremely poor. Besides ruts allegedly dug by the retreating Germans, there were innumerable large stones which couldn't be avoided. Consequently the deployment became memorable for the series of landing and take-off incidents that it recorded. On the 22nd, Railton blew a tyre on take-off and while the others got off without incident for a four-hour convoy escort, none were to escape trouble during their stay. According to Ray Lawrence, a WOP/AG who was with Eric Bamkin, on landing at Castel Benito they found:

This LG was even worse than Misurata. We refuelled and spent the next four hours escorting a convoy on its way from Tripoli to Malta. There were wrecked aircraft of all kinds around the perimeter of this drome, German, Italian and British. Our ground crew headed by 'Baldy' Jackman found a large hole in one of our tyres; we were lucky it hadn't blown on landing. On returning to Misurata at 1630 we heard that Paddy Archer had blown a tail wheel and would have to stay overnight. The next day we blew a tail wheel and George Railton took our place, we relieved George at 1130 and were there for about half-an-hour when something caught fire in the cockpit. Eric called for a fire extinguisher as a dreadful smelling smoke seemed to be coming from under his seat. I got the extinguisher to him, but Jack Brocksopp panicked and accidentally inflated his Mae West, he was in the turret and being heavily built, he was cramped for space. We returned to Castel Benito and noticed George Railton's kite was on the side of the runway with a blown starboard main wheel. His second in as many days. We had another cut in a tyre, and the electrician couldn't find the reason for the smoke and smell, so we stayed the night.



On the 24th, Flight Sergeant Paul Bayly in AG922: N, took off crosswind at Castel Benito, where the

Flight Sergeant Paul Bayly is strapped in. *Rimmer Collection*



aircraft ground looped⁴, and although the throttles were pulled back, the strain was too much for the undercarriage and it collapsed. The crew escaped without injury, but the aircraft was not so fortunate. It was damaged beyond repair and converted to components. When Eric Bamkin inspected the wreck he found someone had written the word ‘Gremlin’ on one of the blades – tempting fate as many a superstitious aircrew came to believe. It would be the first of numerous such write-offs due to accidents during the Squadron’s short, but eventful life.



The Squadron’s first serious damage occurred towards the end of April 1943 when Flying Officer Amos three pointed a Baltimore about 12 foot too high.
Campbell Collection

A few days later, Flying Officer Eric Amos⁵ was also to come to grief in a spectacular, if somewhat similar way. Flying AG925: S on completion of the detachment on the 30th, and while coming into land at Gambut in bumpy conditions, he levelled off too high, stalled and crashed, causing extensive damage. Although the aircraft hit the ground

on the port wing tip and tail simultaneously, swung left and skidded sideways for some 80 yards before coming to rest, remarkably, there were no injuries. In his report, Campbell put the cause as partly due to inexperience and partly to conditions. Amos had arrived six weeks prior from 72 Operational Training Unit and was still getting accustomed to the Baltimore’s handling qualities. In their brief detachment, the crews recorded seven main wheel and three tail wheel failures.

Despite two airframe losses in a couple of days, by early May, the unit had 16 aircraft on strength and had now settled into a regular flying routine.

Action Commences

Squadron Leader David Milligan⁶, who was the unit’s Squadron Leader Flying, an appointment that managed all flying operations on behalf of the CO, was called to 201 Group HQ on 2 May for a special assignment.

⁴ Refers to a 360 degree flick to the left or right while still on the ground. The strain often snapped undercarriages.

⁵ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Eric Albert Amos, RAAF Pilot No 402784. b. 2 Jun 14, Coraki, NSW. 454 Sqn - 14 Mar 43 - 28 Sep 43.

⁶ † SQNLDR (later WGCDR) David Neville Milligan, DFC, RAF Pilot No 40553. b. 19 Dec 16, Wellington, NZ. 454 Sqn - 3 Mar 43 - 12 May 43. SQNLDR Flying and T/CO 454 Sqn - 22 Mar - 3 Apr 43. KIAA - crashed into a hill while flying Beaufighter T4772 - 18 Jan 44 with 9 (Coastal) OTU in UK.



Milligan, a New Zealander serving in the RAF, already had extensive experience in maritime operations flying Sunderlands and was a valuable asset. He was posted to 454 to train crews in over-water operations and naval cooperation but would only remain for a short time. At Headquarters, he



Harding, Parkin, Brady and Roberts - The Crew, ready to go.

Campbell Collection

collected bundles of leaflets printed in German to be dropped by the unit over the island of Crete, now a fortified German garrison. The leaflets hailed the futility of further German resistance on the island, and in North Africa as a whole. They were intended as a prelude to a ‘big show’ planned for Crete mid-year. If 454 had wanted to be a bombing unit, they could not have been more disappointed to find out that their first raid over enemy territory would be dropping paper, not high explosive.

The leaflet raids were still a dangerous activity. Flight Sergeant Gerry Grimwade⁷ who had met Milligan earlier was now on his crew for the raids and later recalled⁸:



THREE FRONT WAR

We still congratulate the German Soldiers on the island of Crete, despite the fact that they are encircled by enemies full of hate, who are only waiting for the day of revenge. Your soldiers are still doing well but the THREE FRONT WAR will come.

In the East already, 3,000,000 German Soldiers lost their lives. Do you feel like adding yours to their number?

In the South the raging Africa Campaign represents just a preparation for the big attack. In the West, you just wait till we attack there, as Churchill promised you, then we shall

ERASE THE GERMAN CITIES WHICH WORK AGAINST US.

BOMBS ON GERMANY

In February and March alone, 18,000 tons of H.E and Incendiary bombs were dropped from British aircraft on Germany. But, just remember, the Americans have only just started to bomb Germany.

⁷ FSGT (later FLTLT) Edward Langdon ‘Gerry’ Grimwade, RAAF WOP/AG No 407864. b. 22 Aug 14, Drummoyne, NSW. 454 Sqn - 15 Oct 42 – 12 Jan 44.

⁸ Letter to author, 17 Jun 2003.



We were caught twice in searchlights; what an experience, not only for me, but for the other crew members. It was David's first time also. Though he did not admit it, one was led to believe he wished it to happen as it was a learning experience.

While the leaflet raids were being flown, Squadron reconnaissance flights also continued. Friday, 7 May 1943 was one such to be recorded as an eventful day. Flight Lieutenant Mick Moore's⁹ early evening offensive sweep off the east coast of Greece turned very exciting, very quickly. Flying AH158:O in loose formation with Flying Officer George Railton in AG932:F and Sergeant Doug Todhunter¹⁰ in AG869, Moore's crew sighted a surfaced *U-Boat* heading south-west. The boat immediately crash-dived at the aircraft's approach. Nevertheless, Moore attacked, dropping two General-Purpose 250 lb bombs over the now submerging periscope, but he estimated they had fallen 50 yards long of their intended aim point. Todhunter was only able to fire the nose guns at extreme range and Railton could not attack before the Submarine had totally disappeared. Although Moore circled for some time afterwards, no wreckage was seen and the formation was forced to return due to low fuel. The *U-Boat* was one of about 20 operating in the Mediterranean in May and was not reported missing¹¹. Had the Baltimores been loaded with depth charges, the result may have been different. Life for *U-Boats* in the Mediterranean had become increasingly dangerous since early 1943 when the allies secured a string of airfields stretching from Tunisia to Palestine. These subsequently enabled a growing number of anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort operations to be flown, making it very difficult for the *U-Boat* captains to operate unchallenged. 454 Squadron would now contribute its part to the underwater war.

Although the *U-Boat* escaped the Squadron's first attack, the island of Crete was not so fortunate. Tasked with yet another leaflet raid the same night as Moore's episode with the submarine, Flight Lieutenant Bob Parkin mounted the first of several 'bottle' raids in frustration at the lack of real bombs. Loading his Baltimore with a mixture of leaflets and empty beer bottles, Parkin dropped the lot over Retino airfield with immediate effect. Whether it was the whistling noise made by the falling bottles or the expectation of a bombing attack, the raid caused the defences to extinguish their searchlights, making the light anti-aircraft fire directed at the intruders inaccurate. The unusual raid must have caught the Nazi propaganda ministry's attention as it received a sarcastic mention on Berlin radio shortly afterwards.

⁹ SQNLDR (later WGCDR) Milton 'Mike' Jeffrey Moore, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 402804. b. 20 Nov 11, Taree, NSW. 454 Sqn - 3 Feb 43 - 26 Nov 44. Sqn CO 1 Apr - 25 Nov 44.

¹⁰ † FLGOFF Douglas Todhunter, RAAF Pilot No 403230. b. 18 Jun 16, Parramatta, NSW. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 13 Dec 43. KIA 13 Dec 43 age 29. Alamein Memorial, Egypt and Roll of Honour - Parramatta.

¹¹ For complete details of Mediterranean U-Boat operations, see Blair, Clay, Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunted 1942-1945, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1998. Chapter 3 discusses Mediterranean operations.



However, the disappointment of missing the sub was tempered by the Squadron's first ship 'kill'. On 14 May, Flight Lieutenant Bamkin and Flying Officers Railton and Amos and crews found a 80 ton caique during an offensive shipping strike sortie. These wooden boats of up to 350 tons were regular sights across the Aegean and were used by the Germans as resupply vessels. They were prime targets and consequently, fair game. The caique was sailing close to cliffs, making attack very difficult, but the three Baltimores couldn't wait for another chance. All three attacked with four 250lb bombs and then strafed the vessel. While the bombs all overshot, the caique was hit in the stern and was left sitting still in the water.

Meanwhile, life at Gambut had deteriorated with the arrival of the *Kampseen* winds whipping up the sand and making life for the maintenance crews particularly unpleasant. Not only did the sand sting and get into eyes, mouths and ears, it got into every opening in the aircraft; engines, guns, flaps and undercarriage. This contamination could cause equipment failures and damage and had to be painstakingly cleaned from filters and inlets. All credit to the hard working ground crews as the aircraft kept flying and none were lost to sand damage.

To take their minds off these conditions and the isolation of the desert camps, the men played sport and otherwise entertained themselves when not required to maintain the aircraft. Concert parties were organised and performers were generally drawn from the rank and file. In mid-May, one such troupe dubiously called 'the Muddle Easters' gave concert party performances in the open air on a makeshift stage erected for the occasion. Such evening entertainments were not uncommon and every now and then, an ENSA party would put on a show as they toured the desert bases.

Unfortunately, landing accidents also continued. After completing an inner anti-shipping patrol, on 17 May, Flight Sergeant Max McNally¹² in AG963: F overshot slightly on landing at Derna Main aerodrome. He used the brakes but the ground was slippery due to heavy rain and as the wheels locked, the aircraft skidded some distance off the landing strip and over the boundary markers. While the crew were unhurt, the port airscrew required changing, but this setback was short lived and the aircraft flew shortly after repairs. However, the landing ground was closed until the weather improved.

Meanwhile, the collapse of Axis resistance in North Africa and Rommel's string of defeats by General Bernard Montgomery and the British 8th Army also caused the *Luftwaffe* problems. May to August 1943 would be a time of rebuilding and replenishment. A further reorganisation was directed whereby *Luftflotte 2* would

¹² FSGT (later FLTLT) Max David McNally, RAAF Pilot No 404985. b. 16 Oct 10, Longreach, Qld. 454 Sqn - 22 Sep 42 - 12 Jan 44. With him were FSGT I.E.J. Evans, RAFVR Nav No 929625, FSGT R.A. Grant-Stevenson, RAAF WOP/AG No 402923 and FSGT G.A. Adams, RAFVR WOP/AG No 645064.



cover Italy and the Central Med, while a new *Luftflotte Command South-East* would cover Greece, Crete and the Balkans. Clearly General Albert Kesselring, Commander of *Luftflotte 2* was hedging his bets against a further Allied push, either in the East against Greece or the Balkans or Italy or indeed, against both. With the change, came a build up of strength in the Eastern Med with an air force strength of 305 aircraft by 3 July¹³. Of these 80 were fighters.

By the end of the month of May the Squadron could say it had been well and truly blooded. After pre-deploying to Derna, on the 21st, a six-aircraft¹⁴ high level bombing strike of shipping in Melos Harbour was conducted just before dawn, the Baltimores catching the enemy napping. Led by Flight Lieutenant Mick Moore, the aircraft each carrying six 250lb bombs, pounded the harbour, shipping and dock facilities while receiving moderate but inaccurate *flak*.

Then, on the 30th, Flying Officer Railton again featured in action – this time leading a four-ship and mixing it with two Messerschmitt 109Fs. After closing into a tight box formation, one fighter attacked the Baltimores from above and



Flying Officer Bob Parkin taken after the Melos raid. *Campbell Collection*

dropped what appeared to be small bomblets that fell harmlessly into the sea, the other making a guns pass. Both enemy aircraft were driven off with accurate tracer fire without casualty, and Campbell later wrote up the incident in his diary¹⁵:

The 109s flew along with them [the Baltimores] for about five minutes at 100 ft while the other dropped back for an attack. While the near 109 made his attack, the top one dropped two sticks of bombs on our formation. One stick

exploded harmlessly in the sea and the remaining stick about 40 yards to the port and level with our formation. The attacking 109 came in on the port quarter and changed quickly over to the starboard quarter breaking off his attack at about 80 yards.

Then one of our turret gunners saw rounds entering the belly of the attacking 109. So we have claimed him as damaged. They both followed our formation out of Kythera Channel and then flew north.

We're sure the attacking 109 didn't know his onions. Fancy coming into 70 yards on a formation of power turrets!!! That's just about survival. This boy was very lucky and incidentally, so were our people.

¹³ Tantom, W.H. and Hoffschmidt, E.J., *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force (1933-1945)*, WE Inc, Greenwich, 1969, p 257.

¹⁴ FLTLT Moore – AH158, FLGOFF Bayly – AG932, FLGOFF Parkin – AG129, FSGT Irvine – AG869, FSGT Paul – AH124 and SGT Todhunter – AG978 plus their crews.

¹⁵ Campbell Diary – entry for 30 May 43.



It was an unusual tactic employed by the fighters and one that stirred up Group Headquarters intelligence. Such a style of attack had not been seen in the Aegean for over two years and would not be seen again.

The First Fatalities

Although the squadron had been operating the Baltimores for four months, the first fatalities were not recorded until June, made worse by the fact that it was due to pure misfortune. Flight Lieutenant Eric ‘Boots’ Bamkin, who had been with the squadron since the early days in Iraq, took off first at 0415 hrs on 8 June in AH171:A on what was expected to be a four-hour mission - a shipping sweep over the Med. In reality, it was to be a very short flight. What happened next was recalled by Sergeant ‘Bull’ MacKay¹⁶, a fitter IIe who worked on Bamkin’s aircraft¹⁷...

Bamkin was a much loved and respected man. I had the privilege, with my ground crew, of looking after ‘A-Apple’, and as we both came from Maylands, a Perth suburb, we often chatted about the West. On 8 June 1943, Baltimore ‘A’ was airborne and circling, awaiting the rest of the flight to form up on the leader. Suddenly, the bomber started a screaming dive. The crash was really awesome! The two big 14 cylinder 1600 hp Wright Cyclone radial engines were torn from the aircraft and bounced two hundred yards away.

Also killed were Pilot Officer Colin Randle¹⁸, Pilot Officer Harry Broomhall¹⁹, and Flight Sergeant John ‘Tack’ Brocksopp²⁰. All were later buried at the Tobruk War Cemetery, Libya.

The official investigation found that shortly after take-off (at 04.20 hrs) while still in the circuit, the aircraft started a 20-degree nose-dive and continued until it struck the ground and caught fire. Campbell, the CO took it very badly, his diary recording the episode:

Rose at 0300 to see the boys off. Eric Bamkin took off first at 0415, circled the aerodrome and commenced a shallow dive from 1,000 ft. He went down and down only at an angle of about 20° until he hit the ground in a terrific explosion...

¹⁶ SGT Gordon Turvey ‘Bull’ MacKay, RAAF Fitter IIe No A16007. b. 6 Sep 11, Mahogany Creek, WA.

¹⁷ MacKay reminiscences, 454/459 Association Squadron records held by Mr George Gray.

¹⁸ † PILOTOFF (later FLGOFF) Colin James Randle, RAAF Nav No 407275. b. 9 Jan 19, Livingstone, North Rhodesia. 454 Sqn – 31 Jan 43 – 8 Jun 43. KIA 8 Jun 43 age 24. Buried: Tobruk War Cemetery, Libya Col 2, A, 7 and Roll of Honour, Adelaide.

¹⁹ † PILOTOFF Charles Henry ‘Harry’ Broomhall, RAAF WOP/AG No 406137. b. 3 Jan 18, Subiaco, WA. 454 Sqn – 5 Oct 42 – 8 Jun 43. KIA 8 Jun 43 age 25. Buried: Tobruk War Cemetery, Libya Col 2, A, 6 and Roll of Honour, Perth.

²⁰ † FSGT John Bentley ‘Tack’ Brocksopp, RAAF WOP/AG No 407489. b. 2 Feb 12, London, UK. 454 Sqn – 8 Oct 42 – 8 Jun 43. KIA 8 Jun 43 age 31. Buried: Tobruk War Cemetery, Libya Col 2, A, 1 and Roll of Honour, Renmark.



By this time two aircraft were airborne so after scrambling the ‘standby’, I drove over and found the wreckage strewn along about 500 yards. It was completely dark and although much of the wreckage was burning, we had difficulty in locating bodies. Broomhall and Brocksopp were quite dead and Eric’s body was lying near the cockpit ablaze. I put this fire out with an extinguisher. Col Randle was lying under the wreckage blazing fiercely.

In the end, after about four hours, we put the fire out and took the bodies to the hospital. Must confess that I went back to my tent and had a weep. Eric was such a decent officer and man. His loyalty was absolute. He would do anything for me. I felt the loss of Eric very badly.



The unfortunate crew - Bamkin with Randle, Broomhall and Brocksopp .
Campbell Collection

them back. It was most likely the cause of the accident. After this tragedy, all aircrew were required to keep a knife handy to prevent such recurrences.

There was no technical failure but investigators found that the ‘K’ type dinghy, which formed the pilot’s seat cushion, had inadvertently inflated pushing the pilot over onto the controls and thus forcing the aircraft to pitch down. Flying Officer Brian ‘Blondie’ Bayly²¹ was asked to see what happened on a static aircraft set up for the trial. In about ten seconds after the dinghy began to inflate, he was forced over the controls and could not move

Meanwhile sorties continued unabated. The occasional sighting of a small caique was met with a concerted attack, but most of the patrols were just monotonous over water patterns with no sightings ending without incident. During this period, the ground crews did exceptional work, with 12 out of 13 Baltimores the usual serviceability statistic and this, despite the dust and sand and very hot weather. By month’s end, 454 had flown nearly 1,000 hrs for the month of which 752 hrs were on 175 ops. In his six-monthly medical report to

²¹ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Brian Beverley ‘Blondie’ Bayly, RAAF Pilot No 406588. b. 17 Aug 21, Newcastle, NSW. 454 Sqn - 17 Dec 42 – 17 Oct 43.



the end of June 1943, Squadron Doc, Flight Lieutenant Jim Fleming²² summed the feeling around the camp²³:

The unit did little flying till April and the work since then has been dull and uninteresting anti-submarine patrols. At first, there was a great increase in morale and interest, but now the crews are lapsing into a state of boredom... The planes are satisfactory except the pilots complain of the discomfort of their seats at the end of the trip.

While taxiing for take-off early in the morning on 21 June with poor visibility due to dust, Flight Sergeant 'Paddy' Archer taxied AH116: R into an empty petrol drum. There was only slight aircraft damage.



Archer's accident at Gambut on 7 July 1943. AH116 was eventually repaired. **Rimmer Collection**

Two weeks later, the unfortunate crew were to again suffer a 'prang' in AH116, one that was somewhat more spectacular. After a tyre burst on take-off, and on finding himself heading for parked aircraft and tents, Archer retracted the undercarriage, hoping to prevent a catastrophe. It worked. The aircraft came to a rather abrupt halt under a cloud of dust and there were no injuries. Archer was written up for a 'green ink' entry in his log book – a pilot's good show award. As to AH116, she was repaired and flew on with the squadron till October 1944. Two days later, on 9 July, Flight Sergeant Hugh Lloyd²⁴, burst a tyre on FA231:Q during a night landing on return from 107 Maintenance Unit. While the undercarriage collapsed, there were no injuries and the aircraft was quickly repaired. Nevertheless, undercarriage collapses were becoming quite expensive.

A Close Encounter

It was inevitable that once the Squadron commenced operations near the Axis held Greek Islands that trouble would also appear. Such was the case on 10 July when Flying Officer Dave Lewis²⁵ and crew in FA390:A were attacked by a pair of Messerschmitt Me-109F fighters. The triangular dual lasted about

²² FLTLT James Wilson Fleming, RAF Med No 68672. 454 Sqn – 26 Oct 42 – 6 Aug 43.

²³ PRO Air 49/267 – No 454 Squadron RAAF – Reports. Entry for 18 Jun 43.

²⁴ FSGT (Later PLTOFF) Henry Hugh. Lloyd, DFC, RAFVR Pilot No 758163. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 11 Dec 43.

²⁵ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) David William Lewis, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 403645. b. 7 Jan 13, Ryde, NSW. 454 Sqn – 20 Dec 42 – 21 Feb 44.

²⁶ FLGOFF J. Arthur Caruthers, RCAF WOP/AG No J15413. 454 Sqn – 24 Dec 42 – 26 Nov 43.



ten minutes, during which time Dave's gunner, Flying Officer Art Caruthers²⁶ called cool and decisive evasive manoeuvres to his pilot, each designed to bring his guns to bear. The weekly summary recorded the outcome²⁷:

One of our aircraft was returning from a shipping sweep south of Crete when it was attacked by two Me-109s. [The crew were] Flying Officer David Lewis – pilot, Flying Officer Arthur Caruthers, Canadian, WOP/AG, Flight Sergeant Frank Laycock²⁸, RAF, Nav and Flight Sergeant Roy Tiller²⁹, WOP/AG. The enemy aircraft carried out eight attacks. During the seventh, Flying Officer Caruthers obtained direct hits with his gun and sent the fighter towards its base with smoke coming from the fuselage behind the pilot. The remaining 109 commenced its eighth attack, came in to 400 yards. Caruthers obtained another burst, which caused this aircraft to pull up 100 feet, gently spiral towards the sea and burst into flames at 400 feet, finally plunging into the sea. There were no survivors.

The final result was Baltimores 2: Messerschmitts 0. One Me-109 was destroyed and one returned home damaged. For this and subsequent actions, Lewis later received a DFC, an accolade the entire crew could rightly share, although Caruthers probably was more deserving - his first trip in the newer Glen Martin turrets with 0.5in guns. While British designs had favoured the 0.303in Browning machine-guns that were fitted to most war machines including the fighters, the Americans went for the harder hitting and heavier 0.5in calibre. The Germans used a combination of machine-guns and 20mm or 30mm cannon. Once the 0.5in guns were fitted, the Baltimores became much more of a threat to the marauding German and Italian fighters and would often hold their own.

By mid-July, there appeared another critical problem. It was not the *Afrika Korps* or the *Luftwaffe* that threatened to ground the Squadron, but a mechanical defect. In the words of the unit historian:³⁰

At 1800 hours, a defect was discovered on the rudder of one of the Baltimore aircraft on the unit [establishment], and an immediate inspection was carried out on all aircraft from which it was found that seven other rudders were similarly affected. 201 Group was informed by telephone and it was decided to take the affected rudders to a Base Maintenance Unit for repair or replacement by the quickest possible means. A signal was sent to all units concerned, warning them of the defect and advising inspection.

²⁷ AA series A11362/1, Item 725/P1, Folio 2A.

²⁸ FSGT (later WOFF) Frank Laycock, RAFVR Nav No 956040. 454 Sqn – 1 Dec 42 – 21 Feb 44.

²⁹ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Roy William Tiller, RAAF WOP/AG No 416009. b. 26 Jun 14, Paradise, SA. 454 Sqn - 11 Dec 42 - 9 May 45.

³⁰ A.50 entry for 14 July 43.



Although a Hudson from 459 Squadron was made available to fly the rudders to 107 Maintenance Unit, they were too large to fit through the door, so a large truck was requisitioned. Squadron Engineering Officer, Pilot Officer ‘Paddy’ Byrne³¹ and two assistants set off with due haste, arriving the next morning. Unfortunately, there were not enough rudders available immediately, so arrangements were made to scrounge several from aircraft under maintenance - enough to get 454 Squadron flying again. Byrne subsequently delivered eight serviceable rudders after driving 1,200 miles in two and a half days. A remarkable effort!

Did the rudder problems continue? On 20 July, Sergeant Alan King³² flying FA292:O inexplicably crashed into the sea off Bardia. With him were Sergeants Les Jaques³³, Jim Aitkin³⁴ and Bob Pluck³⁵. The crew was detailed to carry out convoy escort duty along the North African coast, during which the aircraft flew into the water about three miles ahead of the ships. *HMAS Geraldton*, patrolling in the area, recovered an unconscious King, but apart from small pieces of wreckage, they found nothing else. King never regained consciousness, and was buried at sea by the ship’s company. Was it a recurrence of the rudder problem? – Probably not. The investigation was inconclusive, although some believed that King had allowed both engines to cut when changing to the outer fuel tanks. Others felt he might have simply flown into the water not realising his height, the poor horizon making the flat sea and sky visually merge. Regardless of cause, there were no survivors from this all-English crew who had only been in the Squadron two weeks as replacements for Bamkin’s crew. It was to herald a terrible fortnight.

Black Friday - The Raid on Crete

In mid-1943, RAF authorities sought to both relieve German pressure from *Operation Huskey* - the Allied invasion of Sicily – and avenge the execution of 100 Cretans who had been shot after assisting a Commando raid on the island. The Sicily operation began on 10 July when the Allies’ assault forces hit the beaches to begin the long push toward Germany’s southern flank, while the Cretan Commando raid had limited success. Consequently, a retaliatory raid called *Operation Thesis* was ordered. There would be a massive combined air strike against various ports and military establishments on Crete. This would

³¹ PLTOFF (Later SQNLDR – post-war) Joseph Thomas Charles ‘Paddy’ Byrne, RAFVR Eng. No 44587. 454 Sqn - 1 Mar 43 – 21 Jan 44.

³² † SGT Alan James King, RAFVR Pilot No 1237225. 454 Sqn - 4 Jul 43 – 20 Jul 43. KIAA 20 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³³ † SGT Leslie James Stewart Jaques, RAFVR Nav. No 1534425. 454 Sqn - 4 Jul 43 – 20 Jul 43. KIAA 20 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt. While War Grave Commission records list the name as Jaques, a letter to the CO by Les’ mother Ada spells their surname as Jacques.

³⁴ † SGT James Benedict Aitkin, RAFVR WOP/AG No 656651. 454 Sqn - 4 Jul 43 – 20 Jul 43. KIAA 20 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt. While War Grave records hold the middle name as Benedict, the family record the middle name as Benedicte.

³⁵ † SGT Robert William Pluck, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1332330. 454 Sqn - 4 Jul 43 – 20 Jul 43. KIAA 20 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.



require careful planning. Three wings of Air Defence Eastern Mediterranean (ADEM) Hurricanes formed the main push, together with 227 Squadron Beaufighters and added to the formation was 454. In all, 93 Hurricanes, seven Beaufighters and eight Baltimores would take part. 80 Squadron's Spitfires would cover the withdrawal.

That 454 Squadron was to be used must have come as a surprise to all, since their training and prior tasks involved sea reconnaissance, not over land bombing. Squadron Leader Lionel Folkard³⁶, then the OC Flying, recalled in his published memoirs the jolt the unit received³⁷...

It was not until July 1943 that the even tenor of our lives was disturbed, when a senior fighter command officer arrived from England (*sic*) (where he had been leading fighter sweeps over France) to organise a special attack on Crete – by two squadrons of fighters and the Baltimores of my squadron...

That senior officer was Group Captain Max Aitken³⁸, at the time in charge of fighter tactics in the Eastern Mediterranean Headquarters in Cairo. Aitken had come to fame as an ace in the Battle of Britain and was the son of Lord Beaverbrook, the Newspaper magnate and British wartime Minister for Aircraft Production. He had been assigned the planning task for *Operation Thesis* with the objective of using the fighters to saturate enemy defences while the bombers conducted follow-on land and shipping strikes against Suda Bay, Heraklion and other targets of opportunity. The date for the raid was set at Friday, 23 July 1943.

Crete was a mountainous island that stood out clearly, even at low level. It also meant that the enemy held the advantage, the terrain masking many potential targets while allowing good cover and positioning for anti-aircraft guns, a fact already proven during the successful, but high casualty German parachute assault of 1941. For *Thesis*, the raid was planned as a coordinated strike by the fighters with the Beaufighters to sweep ahead of the bombers. The Hurricanes were intended for area defence against enemy fighters. The Baltimores were to attack factories, barracks, road traffic and other targets on the east end of the island. Altogether, 120 aircraft were involved. While simple in theory, it would require the utmost secrecy, radio silence, careful coordination and precise timing.

Eight crews were selected for the mission from those considered fully operational and it would be their first real bombing action. Excitement ran high as all prepared. 454 were to provide two box formations of four aircraft each. Each aircraft was armed with six 250 lb bombs. Folkard was subsequently detailed to lead

³⁶ ‡ SQNLDR Lionel Harvey Folkard, RAFVR Pilot No 40102. 454 Sqn - 13 Jun 43 - 23 Jul 43. POW in Stalag Luft III – Sagan. Repatriated at War's end.

³⁷ Folkard, Lionel, *The Sky and the Desert*, United Writers, Cornwall, 1985, p 49.

³⁸ GPCAPT The Honourable Sir John William Maxwell (Sir Max) Aitken, Bt, DSO, DFC, Czech War Cross, MID, RAF Pilot No 91028. b. Montreal, 15 Feb 10. Served as CO 601 and 68 Sqs, OC 219 Group, and OC Strike Wing Banff. Post-war, GM of Sunday Express and Conservative MP. d. 1 May 85.



the squadron's eight aircraft on the 230 mile flight. The result was an absolute disaster with five aircraft lost over Crete, one crash landing on return and only two landing back at base – a 75% casualty rate. Flying in Baltimore AG995 at 200 feet to avoid alerting the defences, Folkard later described the episode that ensued³⁹ ...



We crossed the south coast near the eastern end of the island

Squadron Leader Lionel Folkard (Pilot), Flying Officer Percy Willson (Nav), and Flying Officer Doug Hutchinson. Hutchinson Collection

which was less mountainous and immediately the ground defences opened up on us. We had to climb to get over the central spine of mountains and I think it was at this time that the defences scored their first hits, although there were none on my own aircraft. Once over the mountains we came down to low-level again, and then went along the coast towards Suda Bay. We were now under 100 feet and the ground fire was intense. We had flown less than half way to the target before we suffered serious damage. My aircraft was the first to be hit.

When I took stock, I found the port engine was on fire and I was wounded in the left leg, also my right arm was hanging by a shred, and I was losing a great deal of blood onto the cockpit floor.

Folkard somehow managed to crash land on a sandy beach near Heraklion after which he lost consciousness. It was amazing that anyone survived although the muster was not looking good. One of his gunners was Doug Hutchinson, an Australian who had joined the unit just three weeks prior. Doug described what happened next...

The land had been mined, but we left most of the explosions behind us as we skated over the ground, finally coming to rest. I

³⁹ The Sky and the Desert, p 50 written in cooperation with Doug Hutchinson. Others on the raid do not agree with Folkard's recollections.



had been in the turret for this trip and when it was evident we were to crash I threw the turret round to face forward and threw my arms around my face. The turret broke and I was first out. I found the fuselage had broken open beneath the turret and I dragged Keith Wedgwood⁴⁰ through this gap. I dragged him clear of the burning aircraft, but he appeared to be dead. I then turned my attention to the others and could see Jasper (Wally) Dyer⁴¹ the navigator who had taken Percy Willson's⁴² place for the trip, in the nose of the plane bleeding profusely. The nose cone was broken and I helped him out and clear. The plane by this time was well on fire and I went to help Lionel, who was in a bad way. I managed to get him out and clear just before the plane blew up. We had a full load of bombs. We then took stock of ourselves and found we were in a mess. Wally had been badly hit in the forehead, Lionel badly hit in the left leg and his right arm was nearly off.

Only then did Doug realise part of his left foot was missing and he had other shrapnel injuries. They became Prisoners of War and were destined for *Luft Stalag III* at Sagan in Silesia. Sagan was the site of what became known as the 'Great Escape', but that is another story.

Aircraft	Crew First Wave	Fate
AG995	Squadron Leader L.H. Folkard, RAFVR	POW
Lead	Flying Officer W.W. Dyer, RAFVR	POW
	Warrant Officer K.S. Wedgwood, RAAF	KIA
	Flying Officer D.F. Hutchinson, RAAF	POW
AG952	Flight Sergeant R.M. McCrabb, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant R.K. Davies, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant J.B. Ross, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant L.D. Main, RAAF	OK
FA300	Warrant Officer F.R. Morgan, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant R.N. Lawson, RNZAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant E.L. Grimwade, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant W.T. Hayes, RNZAF	OK
FA390:A	Flight Sergeant R.G. Akhurst, RAFVR	OK
	Sergeant E. Nichterlain, RAAF	WIA
	Flight Sergeant R.H. Lawrence, RAAF	OK
	Flight Sergeant J. Bastian, RAAF	OK

⁴⁰ † WOFF Keith Stewart Wedgwood, RAAF WOP/AG No 401260. b. 10 Mar 15, Melbourne, Vic. 454 Sqn – 23 Jul 43 – KIA. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery, Greece, 5, B, 4. Commonwealth War Graves spell the name Wedgewood, but NAA show Wedgwood.

⁴¹ ‡ FLGOFF Walter William 'Jasper' Dyer, RAFVR Nav No 117015. 454 – 23 Jul 43. POW at Luft Stalag III – Sagan.

⁴² † FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Percy J. Willson, RAF Nav. No 119826. 454 Sqn - 13 Jun 43 – 17 Jan 44.



Aircraft	Crew Second Wave	Fate
FA409	Flying Officer C.A. Irvine, RNZAF	POW
	Flying Officer A.F. Betteridge, RAAF	KIA
	Flight Sergeant M.F. McLurg, RAAF	POW
	Flight Sergeant D.W. Baker, RNZAF	POW
AG869	Warrant Officer F.P. Bayly, RAAF	KIA
	Warrant Officer L.W. Moon, RAAF	KIA
	Warrant Officer D.B. Giles, RAAF	KIA
	Warrant Officer J.E. Goddard, RAAF	KIA
FA247	Pilot Officer L.D. Blomley, RAFVR	KIA
	Pilot Officer J. Fletcher, RAAF	KIA
	Pilot Officer B.S. Reilly, RAAF	KIA
	Flight Sergeant E.F. Baker, RAAF	KIA
FA224	Warrant Officer G.W. Harnett, RAAF	KIA
	Flying Officer J.F. Rich, RAAF	KIA
	Flying Officer C.F. Cox, RAAF	KIA
	Warrant Officer R.O. Harris, RAAF	KIA

KIA – Killed in Action POW – Prisoner of War WIA – Wounded in Action

Table 5.1 - Crews on the 23 July 1943 Crete Raid

With regards to forced landings in enemy territory, the Operations Order Book directed that aircraft ‘not in any circumstances be destroyed even if it is certain they will fall into enemy hands’. Only the instrument panel, tyres or magnetos to be rendered inoperable if possible (to prevent flight), but it was mandatory for the Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) equipment to be smashed. This secret device could be used by the enemy to track and identify allied aircraft, so would be a very valuable tool in the cat-and-mouse game of electronic warfare that had emerged during this conflict.⁴³ The order was directed after several crew previously had been caught by the enemy after forced landings loitering at the site as they tried to destroy the aircraft equipment.

Three crews made it back – those skippered by Max McCrabb⁴⁴, Fred Morgan⁴⁵ and Ray Akhurst⁴⁶. While McCrabb and Morgan had *flak* damage, they landed safely back at Gambut III, but Akhurst didn’t quite make it.

Akhurst’s Close Shave

Flight Sergeant Ray Akhurst, a Brit, may be considered one of the fortunate ones to return, but his trip was not without its excitement. Flying FA390:A as number two to Folkard, he later described his experience⁴⁷ ...

⁴³ AWM64 Item 1/240 – Operations Order Book No 454 Squadron – 1/6/43 to 20/2/45, Order XII.

⁴⁴ † FSGT Robert Maxwell ‘Max’ McCrabb, RAAF Pilot No 403225. b. 8 Oct 18, Tungamah, Qld. 454 Sqn - 1 Oct 42 - 11 Dec 43. KIA 27 Apr 44 with 288 Sqn. Roll of Honour, Sydney, NSW.

⁴⁵ WOFF (later FLTLT) Frederick Robert ‘Smokey’ Morgan, RAAF Pilot No 401578. b. 15 Feb 19, Melbourne, Vic. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 12 Jan 44.

⁴⁶ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Raymond Gordon Akhurst, DFM, RAFVR Pilot No 149940. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 11 Dec 43.

⁴⁷ Letter Akhurst to Prof John Breihan, with permission. 3 Mar 90.



Akhurst's lucky escape. Here the salvage crew examine the wreck of FA390:A.
Campbell Collection

We must have crossed the area close to Ma-leme aerodrome, which was a large *Luftwaffe* base. The AA fire was intense and at 50 feet, I guess we were easy targets. My one

engine was taken out and the fuselage damaged but we were able to keep going on one engine. The drag caused by the damaged engine and airframe was such that we were never able to gain any height. The vibration was severe and such that it was not easy to read the instrument panel and the intercom radio plugs for each of us kept vibrating out of their sockets. Airspeed was in the region of 135 to 140 mph. For some reason we were unable to make any contact on our main radios, though by some strange quirk, my calls of *Mayday* on the pilot's command set were picked up on our radio in the Sergeants' Mess at our base. It was clear we would never gain enough height to land at our base, which was about 500 feet above sea level, so I planned to belly land on the coastal strip near to our base. The landfall, thanks to super navigation work by my observer was near perfect but we found to our dismay that the beach was littered with debris from a damaged freighter and any attempt to land in that area would spell disaster for the navigator in his glass nose area. Any idea of crossing the coastal dunes was also out, so I turned to head across the bay and as I did the other engine stopped – we had run out of fuel. I was able to tell my crew to prepare for ditching but we did not have time to do all the things we should have done, such as releasing hood covers and so on.

They hit the water into the swell and despite the heavy impact; all survived the crash, although the navigator, Sergeant Ted Nichterlein⁴⁸, suffered a badly broken leg. Amazingly, the aircraft floated ashore the next morning, the empty fuel tanks giving the wreckage buoyancy. Ray Lawrence, also a crew member, explained what happened to Folkard's aircraft and continued the story...

⁴⁸ SGT (later WOFF) Edwin Sylvius Nichterlein, RAAF Nav. No 407814. b. 21 Mar 09, Silverleigh, Qld. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 23 Jul 44.



A soap factory that was being used by the Germans as Barracks was our first target. We each dropped one 250-pound bomb; judging from the debris thrown into the air we had already hit our target. Carrying on at low-level we strafed and bombed anything defended by Germans. Our last bomb scored a direct hit on a causeway. We were still following our leader but we were off to his right when he tried to hit a bridge. The bomb dropped short and bounced off the river bank, exploding in mid air under the aircraft. I saw him crash land in a field just ahead; it seemed to be quite a good effort.

We continued along the North Coast to the valley we were briefed to go through and climbed over the mountain ridge, 5,000 feet above sea level. As we got to the foothills the A.A. got heavier and heavier. Whenever I saw a gun flash I gave the area a good burst from our turret guns. Some of the A.A. looked like a white cricket ball, coming towards us so slowly; when they missed they sped away at great speed. These were known as “Flaming Onions”. Not everything missed us. Our starboard motor was put out of action. Black smoke poured from it before Ray cut the switches. Then he found he couldn’t feather the prop, so from here on it just wind milled causing a lot of drag. At that time we still had 1,000 feet or more to climb. We circled round and round and cleared the ridge with only a few feet to spare.

Then came instructions to throw out everything I thought we could do without, as we may have to ditch. Ammunition, guns that I could remove from the mountings went. While I was throwing out whatever I could Jack and Ray were trying to contact our Nav, Ted Nichterlein, situated in the perspex nose. Ray held the kite at about 50 feet; had he ditched without “Nich” knowing it would be certain death for him. While in flight you can only contact the Navigator, through intercom; he can only reach back and touch the pilot’s foot and pass a message. The kite was shaking so much you could hardly read the instruments. Then “Nich” came on the intercom full of apologies. In the urgency of plotting a course for base he accidentally disconnected his plug. Had we been able to contact him we would most likely have ditched 40 miles from Crete. He gave “Aky” a course to fly and he was spot-on.

The crew was spotted and after contact by air, an ambulance and rescuers soon arrived. It was no doubt exciting stuff for a twenty-one year old Akhurst, who was awarded an immediate Distinguished Flying Medal for his efforts. The citation⁴⁹ read:

⁴⁹ *London Gazette*, 20 Aug 43. Award date 28 Jul 43.



This airman is a courageous and determined pilot who has undertaken many sorties. On one occasion, with a target in Crete as the objective, he pressed home a most determined attack in the face of intense fire from the ground defences, obtaining good results. During the operation, his aircraft was extensively damaged. Despite this he attempted to reach base. Whilst over the sea the aircraft could no longer be flown but Flight Sergeant Akhurst brought it skilfully down onto the water without injury to any of his crew. His skill and coolness were mainly responsible for their safety.

When this was announced, the Unit Historian proudly declared it ‘the Unit’s first gong’ and its arrival was celebrated in ‘good style’ in the Sergeants’ Mess.

Also rescued from the aircraft wreckage were two other unassuming passengers – a pair of homing pigeons – both none the worse for their ordeal. In the early 1940s, radio transmissions were not always reliable and as pigeons had been used during World War I by both the Navy and Army to return messages when communication lines were down, it was decided to use them in aircraft as emergency communications devices. So successful were these winged messengers that a separate pigeon service was established in 1918, but this was discontinued at the war’s end. At the beginning of the Second World War, the British National Pigeon Service supplied birds to the RAF until the Services re-established their own bird-breeding program. In Coastal and Bomber



A nice shot of ‘C’ for Charlie. The bar across the rudder is a lock.

Wilson Collection



Commands, two birds were carried in long oblong boxes (with drinkers and food) for use if radios failed and an urgent message needed to be sent. Messages used colour coded containers to ensure prompt delivery, but the introduction of better quality radios saw the pigeon service cease after 1943, although some members of 454 Squadron recall their use on Aegean sorties well into 1944. Gerry Grimwade whose crew logged three and three-quarter hours for the sortie, was another of the lucky returnees. ‘We were a more experienced crew and didn’t take undue chances’ he later recalled. ‘Bloody lucky really – and we watched Folkard go in, blown up by his own bombs.’ Together with the five Baltimores, thirteen of the escorting Hurricanes were also shot down. As for those who did not return, the crews of FA409, AG869 and FA224 were lost without trace and although an initial SOS was received from Doug Blomley’s⁵⁰ crew and the position fixed on the south coast of Crete west of Ierapetra, nothing further was heard.

So what went wrong? Certainly the concept of a feint across Crete was sound. Yet 23 July 1943 would go down in the Unit’s history as its darkest day. In retrospect, there were a number of factors that led to failure. First, the planners at Group HQ had forgotten that although the Allies were on double summer time, the Axis were not. The plan assumed the German defences would be at breakfast and be caught unawares, but in Crete, breakfast was over and the Germans were already attending their daily duties. Second, the 120 fighters that were sent as escort took some time to coordinate and so the Baltimores consequently arrived over the island first. This alerted the island defences, anti-aircraft guns and enemy fighters. While the Allied fighters were small and nimble and flying at much higher altitude, the bombers were not. The defences would have been fully prepared and awaiting the low-level strike with the inevitable result.

Perhaps Campbell summed up the entire Squadron’s feelings best. In his private diary entry for the 23rd, he wrote...

So today we lost 5 crews and six aircraft out of 8. I feel very bad about it. Chris Cox⁵¹ has gone, Freddie Betteridge⁵², John Rich⁵³, Hutch, Folkard, Doug Blomley, Fletcher⁵⁴ and about 13 sergeants⁵⁵. We never thought the job would cost an aircraft. Tonight, we went down to the Sergeants’ Mess and got rotten drunk. The boys are taking it well.

Never again were massed, low-level bombing runs planned over German island defences.

The next day, a large search was mounted for possible survivors, without success. The month ended with two further aircraft crashes, one resulting from the unsuccessful search. Flying Officer Bob Parkin, while landing AG952:B,



stalled in a dust storm, the undercarriage collapsed resulting in a write off. The next day was Alan Horsley's turn in AG974:A. Tasked to pick up replacement aircraft from 75 OTU for those lost over Crete, Horsley's prang resulted from the usual burst tyre – undercarriage collapse scenario as had become the norm. AG974 was eventually returned to flying condition and again, there were no injuries. It was testament to the sturdiness of the Baltimore, that there had been no injuries recorded from any of these crashes. However, Campbell had lost a third of his crews and half his aircraft in just four days.

The end of a rotten month heralded a move back to LG 91 – Amiriya, the advance party to move out on 2 August followed by the rest four days later. The move would also mark a change from offensive ops to anti-submarine patrols and hail a new era for 454. It would be a welcome change and a way of putting the loss of six crews and 11 aircraft for July well behind them.

⁵⁰ † PLTOFF Lionel Douglas 'Doug' Blomley, RAFVR No 141732, 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. KIA 23 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵¹ † FLGOFF Christopher Frederick Cox, RAAF WOP/AG No 407493. b. 7 Mar 15, Gawler, SA. 454 Sqn - 31 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵² † FLGOFF Arthur Frederick 'Freddy' Betteridge RAAF Nav No 400772. b. 25 Jul 15, Smithton, Tas. 454 Sqn 9 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 27. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery, 5, E, 1, Greece.

⁵³ † FLGOFF John Frederick 'Jack' Rich, RAAF Nav No 400998. b. 23 Jan 16, Rushworth, Vic. 454 Sqn – 1 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 27. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵⁴ † PLTOFF John Fletcher RAAF Nav No 401188. b. 27 Jan 21, Hamilton, Vic. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt. DVA and AWM databases have the incorrect date of 23 Jan 43.

⁵⁵ Also killed were:

† FSGT Edgar Francis Baker RAAF WOP/AG No 403249. b. 14 May 17 Dubbo, NSW. 454 Sqn – 28 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

† WOFF Donald Bruce Giles, RAAF WOP/AG No 407498 b. 6 Jan 17, Minlaton, SA. 454 Sqn – 15 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 26. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery, 5, D, 18, Greece.

† WOFF John Endacott Goddard RAAF WOP/AG No 406692. b. 23 Oct 14, Wickepin, WA. 454 Sqn – 15 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 28. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery, 5, D, 17, Greece.

† WOFF Geoffrey William Harnett RAAF Pilot No 400987. b. 14 Apr 17, Harrow, UK. 454 Sqn – 15 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 26. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

† WOFF Ronald Oswald Harris RAAF WOP/AG No 401624. b. 19 Nov 14, Eaglehawk, Vic. 454 Sqn – 15 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 28. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

† WOFF Louis Willis Moon RAAF Nav No 401011. b. 29 Mar 18, Camberwell, Vic. 454 Sqn – 15 Nov 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 25. Buried: Suda Bay War Cemetery, 5, D, 20, Greece.

† PLTOFF Beresford Stanley Reilly RAAF WOP/AG No 401583. b. 17 Sep 14, Sth Melbourne, Vic. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 23 Jul 43. d. KIA 23 Jul 43 age 28. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

POWs were:

‡ FSGT (later WOFF) Darcy Walker Baker, RNZAF WOP/AG NZ No 404044. b. 28 Aug 22, Masterton, NZ 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 23 Jul 43. d. 26 May 46, Auckland, NZ. POW Stalag IVB.

‡ SGT (later FLTLT) Charles Alexander 'Alec' Irvine, RNZAF Pilot NZ No 411409. b. 12 Jul 20, Dargaville, NZ 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 23 Jul 43. POW Stalag VIIA, IVB and Luft III.

‡ FSGT Mervyn Francis McLurg, RAAF WOP/AG No 404378. b. 15 Aug 19, Brisbane, Qld. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 - 23 Jul 43. POW Stalag VIIA and IVB.



CHAPTER 6

STOOGING OVER THE MED



The Squadron's move went well and the members quickly settled back into life at LG91, a familiar base. Anti-Submarine or AS patrols, as they would become known, commenced from the first of August. For this work, the aircraft would be fitted with what the Unit Historian could only call a 'Special Installation' and they would also eventually get a fresh coat of white paint for the under-surfaces and lower fuselage. The 'Special Installation' was a new piece of equipment called Air-Surface Vessel (ASV) – a radar system designed to detect small surface vessels and submarine periscopes – and crude by today's standards. The ASV required trained operators to continually monitor a scope fitted to the Wireless Operator's panel for that all elusive 'blip'. Crews tended not to use the device as you had to be very close to the target for the chance of detection, and it acted as a beacon to the German defence once they worked out the operating frequency.

This new role would be under the command of 201 Group, 238 Wing, Middle East Air Force and crews waited anxiously for their chance to recommence flying operations. Coincident with the move was the arrival of six fresh Baltimore crews¹ from 75 Operational Training Unit in Kenya, which boosted the membership of the respective messes.

St Jean and Lakatamia Detachments

No sooner had the Squadron arrived at its new base than they discovered they would again be spread across the Mediterranean. Two smaller detachments were deployed to help manage the immense task of over-water protection for convoys and allied forces.



The Convoy prepares to set off for St Jean.

Basedow Collection

¹ Those were led by FLGOFF Ray Crouch, PLTOFF 'Jock' Clarkson, FSGT Dave McMurray, and SGTs Mal Stevenson, Peter Kennedy and Brian 'Kid' Rawlings.



The first was despatched to St Jean in Palestine in early August to replace sister Squadron, 15 SAAF. The base was just four miles north of Acre and situated in a wide, flat valley. The camp site was on the western slope of the valley amongst a plantation of eucalyptus trees which was a distinct boost to morale. Not only because of the arboreal reminders of home, but the climate and scenery were a welcome change to the flatness, heat and sand of the desert. Sergeant ‘Pete’ Stacey led the 20 ground crew and truck maintenance detachment. The men slept in tents as the few buildings were used for administration and messing.

Under the command of Flying Officer Alan Horsley, the first detachment would allow greater coverage of the Eastern Mediterranean against the marauding *U-boats* threatening vital allied convoys and supplies heading for Egypt and Palestine. The Squadron’s operational reach now extended from Mersah Matruh in Egypt to Beirut in Lebanon, a distance of almost 500 miles.

Flying from St Jean commenced on 5 August with four uneventful sorties logged. Back at Amiriya, the deployment had depleted the Squadron’s strength, particularly since many of the unit’s ground staff were still in transit from Gambut. The ability to generate sorties from home base was thus somewhat reduced until the remainder of the Squadron had arrived and the replacement crews came on line. In addition, Group had ordered the fitting of long-range fuel tanks. Clearly, ops were about to change.

On 10 August, the ground party for the second detachment left for what the Unit Historian said was ‘a mysterious destination.... The whole matter is extremely hush-hush and even the CO pretends he doesn’t know what’s in the wind.’ In fact they moved out to Lakatamia in Cyprus to prepare to receive more aircraft. However, they would wait for quite a while. Operations from Cyprus would also extend the area of Mediterranean which the Squadron could cover.

All were greeted with sad news a week later. On 18 August, Leading Aircraftsman Jim McEwan who had been admitted to hospital with acute peritonitis, died. His loss was felt by all, more so as he had an artistic flair and had illustrated the Squadron’s newsletter, particularly with his humorous cartoons. He was well known amongst the Squadron and would be sadly missed. Camp security also had to be kept tight, especially at night. As well as the possibility of Axis attack, the locals had to be contended with. On numerous occasions equipment was found missing. On 20 August was one such night, the Unit Historian eloquently recording that:

Our friendly Allies, the Egyptians, last night raided the MT Section and ‘won’ a number of tyres. The Section are using the undisputed



Leading Aircraftman McEwan's Funeral with full military honours. He lies in the Alexandria (Hadra) War Cemetery, Egypt. **Campbell Collection**

command of invective to describe the fate of any future wog caught monkeying around with their unprintable vehicles.

This semi-private war between the light-fingered locals and the Unit MT fitters came to a head later in mid-September when Corporal Charlie Griffiths, sleeping in the doorway of the Section Office, awoke to find a group of the natives bent on removing tyres from a three-ton truck. Griffiths' guttural invitation to unarmed combat was answered unsportingly, by a shot fired from under the truck, the bullet lodging in a four-gallon drum in line with Charlie's head. In the face of the evidence, the section returned fire into the desert darkness in the direction to which the invaders had fled, more out of support for Griffiths rather than any hope of hitting a moving target. The next day, a pair of Browning machine-guns were erected at well-chosen positions and a revisit by the perpetrators was eagerly awaited by the whole unit.

Meanwhile, submarine hunting continued as the *U-boats* were out there. On the 23rd, Flight Sergeant Max McCrabb flying FA444 out of St Jean - one of four searchers that morning - found the remains of a ship floating over a wide area. He could also make out six survivors clinging to the wreckage and another holding onto what looked like a hatch. All he could do was get a position fix and report the location to Air-Sea Rescue.



The Squadron was also not without its accidents, both major and minor. All were a cause of frustration to CO, aircrew and ground staff alike. Regardless of risks of personal injury, they all caused some loss – aircraft maintenance, flying time or simply cost to the Air Force. On 22 August, an Air-Sea Rescue Wellington taxied into Baltimore AH 159 at St Jean and damaged the Perspex nose. Despite the lack of casualties, the damage took several days to repair – awaiting parts, fitting and eventually testing the repair. A week later on the 31st, a more serious mishap occurred. While unloading FA618 after a sortie, an armourer accidentally fired a flare left loaded in the flare gun by the wireless operator from the previous flight. The white-hot flare burnt the fuselage skin and radio set, but the result could have been far worse. Also risky to aircrew health were the shots fired at them by nervous skippers aboard friendly shipping in convoys they were supposed to be protecting! Fortunately for the Squadron, most aircraft captains took appropriate avoiding action.

A Change of Command

By the end of the month, a change of command was in the wind. On 29 August, a tall, lanky, rather young looking RAF Squadron Leader stepped out of a Miles Magister aircraft. He would have a great impact on the Squadron in the coming months, as his predecessor Ian Campbell had. Squadron Leader Jack ‘Camel’ Coates had arrived from HQ 201 Group and at just 23 years old when promoted, was one of the RAF’s youngest Wing Commanders. Campbell’s tours with both 454 and 459 Squadron on the other hand were completed and he was on his way back to Australia. He later had a long and distinguished career with the RAAF, retiring in 1965.

Campbell handed over a keen and dedicated crew, none more so than the maintenance airmen. In recognising their achievements many year’s later, Jack Coates recalled²:

Under Ian Campbell, the Squadron had developed a system of planned maintenance which enabled us to sustain a very high level of aircraft availability, even through that wet and uncomfortable winter of 43/44: for example, 90.5% serviceability in December against a group average of 73% One of the characteristics of our Squadron which made a deep impression on me was the commitment of the ground crew in all trades to keeping those kites in the air. As I said in a letter to my parents: “As fitters, riggers, drivers, and in technical trades the Aussies are without equal. On the other hand

² Speech at 454-459 Squadron’s Association dinner – April 1992.



they are not very happy as storekeepers, postmen, orderly room clerks or in the cookhouse, but in all these jobs we have RAF chaps who excel. In short I would say that the combination is ideal; it certainly works well.” Perhaps a bit patronising, but I was very young and very proud.

Life for ground staff was not, of course, all sweetness and light, particularly because physical conditions were rough, female company remote and leave irregular. Most had been too long separated from wives and families. Moreover our base at that time was a long way from the shooting war, which led to boredom as well as discomfort; but my word, how morale picked up when an aircraft returned from a trip with some bullet holes.

‘The Terrible Three’

Along with a new CO, the men of the Squadron were also introduced to another Australian who would become very influential in their lives, especially when they later moved to Italy. He was Padre Bob Davies³, a RAAF Anglican Chaplain. Bob had sailed with the Yellow Draft on the *Queen Elizabeth* in July 1941. He and fellow padres, John McNamara⁴ (Catholic) and Fred McKay⁵ (Presbyterian), were to travel the length and breadth of the Middle East, visiting Australians wherever they served and ministering to them. Whether it was Communion or just a ‘cuppa’, the padres were there. Called the ‘Terrible Three’ by the men, these three became very important in maintaining morale, particularly amongst the Australians as they instituted a number of activities including the occasional run into town to pick up beer for the canteen. Sadly, they also administered last rites and presided over many funerals.



Padre Bob Davies

Basedow Collection

What made these padres so special? As fellow Australians and servicemen, they understood how the men were feeling so far from home, seemingly abandoned with no knowledge as to when they would return. It was not just the Aussies they ministered to - Brits, Canadians, Kiwis and South Africans also. They worked with the Comforts funds and Red Cross to ensure each man was not forgotten. To do so meant becoming mobile, so each requisitioned a truck and driver,

³ FLTLT (later SQNLDR) The Rev. Robert Edward Davies CBE. RAAF Chaplain. b. 30 Jul 13. d. 17 Feb 2002, Hobart, Tas. Later The Right Reverend Bishop Davies, CBE, Bishop of Tasmania. Davies was attached to 454 Squadron. Departed for Australia, April 1945.

⁴ FLTLT (later SQNLDR) The Rev. John Patrick McNamara RAAF Chaplain. b. 1910. d. 1986.

⁵ FLTLT (later SQNLDR) James Frederick ‘Fred’ McKay AC, CMG, OBE. RAAF Chaplain. b. 15 Apr 07, Walkerston, Qld.. d. 13 Mar 00, Richmond, NSW. Later the Very Reverend Fred McKay, Superintendent of the Inland Mission, Moderator of the Australian Presbyterian Church. He also developed the Royal Flying Doctor Service after Flynn’s death. McKay was attached to 3 Squadron, RAAF. Obit, Air Force News, Jun 00, p 25.



rations and cooking equipment, and off they went. It was truly an ecumenical pastorship. Davies later recalled the arrangements⁶:

I was the first to start on my own and I was to pioneer the sort of work for the boys. We were right on the front line. Freddy (McKay) and Johnny (McNamara) joined me after the fall of Tunis and they agreed this was the way to go. We decided that one would be at one unit and the others would be at others. More often enough we only looked after the RAAF. We each had a truck and a driver which was good, so we could organise our own time... It wasn't always easy to get a compassionate posting. One of the complaints of the chaps over in the ME was they seemed to have been forgotten when it came to going home.

The month ended quietly, although the Squadron remained busy with convoy and anti-sub patrols. Much to everyone's amusement was the well reported outgoing CO's brush with the law. Campbell had succeeded in breaking the speed limit in his staff car under the astonished gaze of the Alexandria MPs, who quickly took to the chase. This incident seemed sufficient enough to haul the offender in, but was made all the more difficult by the gentleman under suspicion not having his ID card on him. After some time at the police station, he was released, but not before the whole camp had heard the news.

In closing out August 1943, the Unit Historian simply stated the total flying for the month was 1136 hours and that 'the hush-hush detachment has been forgotten by the crews concerned, although the ground party have not returned. We have learned that they are in Cyprus and have apparently been thoroughly enjoying themselves'. Their 26-day 'holiday' would soon come to an abrupt end, as the new CO ordered their return in early September and they were picked up shortly afterwards.

While 'nothing sighted' was the now regular post flight debrief for most missions, crews kept their spirits up and few sought transfers out. Coates later recalled the conditions⁷:

In some ways, life was easier for the aircrew. They could look forward to a change when they completed their tours and they did have the satisfaction of seeing the enemy from time to time. The flying over the Aegean was usually a bit tense and always lonely, but our crews established a reputation for determination and courage which was carried forward to the land battle in Italy. I shall never forget the time when we lost three aircraft in ten days, nor [my] agony in writing to the next of kin.

⁶ Personal interview, RAAF Richmond, 16 Jul 00.

⁷ Speech at 454-459 Squadron's Association dinner – April 1992.



The rather monotonous routine was occasionally punctuated by some action and sometimes, support for fellow airman. Such was the case on 5 September, when Coates and his new crew set out in search of a 7 Squadron, SAAF Spitfire reported missing. They located an aircraft crashed on a sandbank with a Walrus Air-Sea Rescue aircraft stranded nearby. Coates reported the sighting to ‘Hunchback Control’, the Squadron’s radio station, and it transpired that the Walrus seaplane had ‘pranged’ on landing to rescue the fighter pilot, who incidentally was not the airman the search was originally mounted for! This missing aircraft was not located. Similarly, on 27 September, Flight Sergeant Doug Todhunter and crew found a small lifeboat with two survivors floating 85 miles South of Cyprus during an anti-submarine patrol. They called in a Walrus rescue seaplane, which was unable to land due to heavy seas, however, the survivors were collected the next morning.

Long-Range Tanks Fitted - Italy Captulates

By early September, Wing HQ had decided to institute a daily reconnaissance of a nominated Greek Island to observe for enemy shipping and possible troop movements. This prompted some wag in the Mess to retort; ‘This war’s getting too bloody dangerous’. At least this broke the tedium of the standard over-water flights. The Baltimores were fitted with an internal 300-gallon fuel tank to stretch the endurance to over six hours, but the disadvantage was that it took up the bomb bay meaning no weapons could be carried. However, the decision soon paid dividends. On 13 September, Flight Lieutenant Bill Shankland⁸ found forty to fifty caiques sitting in Symi Harbour with shipbuilding also in evidence. For nearly ten minutes, while people on wharves waved, the Baltimore circled taking overlapping and oblique photographs of the entire waterfront. Elsewhere a Turkish steamer of between 500 and 1,000 tons was encountered, plus several smaller vessels.



Squadron Leader Bill Shankland.

Shankland Collection

The 300 gallon tanks also held a surprise of its own, as Jim Baber⁹ found out on a particular Aegean recce¹⁰:

It was usual to reduce height when about 50 miles away – to keep out of enemy radar – throttle back and glide down. I don’t know

⁸ FLTLT (later SQNLDR) William Stobo McCrick Shankland, MID, RCAF Pilot No J4434. 454 Sqn - 6 Jun 43 – 20 Jan 44.

⁹ SGT (later FLGOFF) James Raymond Baber, RAFVR Pilot No 173938. 454 Sqn – 3 Oct 43 – 30 Jul 44.

¹⁰ Letter Jim Baber to Prof John Breihan. With permission.



what made me look at the instrument panel, but both fuel warning lights were on! On opening up the throttles, the lights stayed on – we were levelling out by now and very close to the sea. Normal starting drill was to select inboard petrol tanks, switch on booster pumps and hope! This was done at considerable speed. It was a thrill to hear both those wonderful Wright Cyclone engines roar into life – just in time.

In discussion afterwards, the following conclusion was reached: The 300 gal auxiliary petrol tank in the bomb bay was OK in level flight and climbing, but should not be used at other times. It was reckoned that about half the contents had been used, so that in a dive (even a shallow one) the remaining petrol would surge forward, leaving the end of the fuel pipe sucking in air.

This design fault may have led to the loss of several aircraft as we shall see.

The Squadron could now boast 18 aircraft and 24 complete crews, six of which were attached to St Jean. This commitment meant that aircraft had to be rotated every 40 hours flying to allow necessary maintenance to be carried out. Consequently, most crews spent a while in Palestine – a change of scenery if not operational flying. It also meant better living conditions than the desert, a better climate and fresh food, so naturally air and ground staff alike eagerly sought their turn.

Italy has capitulated! This exciting news greeted the men on 8 September following Italy's unconditional surrender. Men crowded around any tent with a radio to hear the news. Expectations now rose amongst the Aussies of a quick return to Australia following the Axis power's collapse. Few foresaw the German's dogged determination to continue the fight for another year and a half. Nevertheless, any excuse for a party and the Squadron celebrated well into the night until the supply of beer ran out.



A convoy escort - this one taken on 16 March 1943. Wilson Collection

Two days later, 15 Squadron, SAAF delivered an ASV fitted Baltimore – FA417:N because, they said: ‘we heard you wanted one’! These aircraft were adapted to night patrols having the added advantage of the new invention of airborne radar, but



the disadvantage of a maximum endurance of four-and-a-half hours, down by half-an-hour on the regular machines. ‘What ever gave them that idea’ asked the recording officer? 454 were already flying more hours than 15 SAAF or 203 Squadron, RAF, the other two Baltimore Squadrons then in theatre. The limited number of crews and ground staff made it virtually impossible to fly any more.

By mid-month, the operational sphere was widening, with the first sorties into the Aegean scheduled on the 15th. Warrant Officer ‘Smokey’ Morgan and Flying Officer ‘Blondie’ Bayly were tasked to fly them. Morgan took off from Limasol, photographed the island of Rhodes and went on to Tilos and Nisyros. Bayly aborted. The next day, during the morning reconnaissance, Flying Officer Dave Lewis and crew saw an impressive sight below them. Steaming into Alexandria harbour was the surrendered Italian Battle Fleet¹¹ being escorted by *HMS King George V* and *HMS Howe*. They were the first Middle East personnel to see the biggest prize of the Italian capitulation.

Newer model Baltimores were also arriving in theatre and several were used for long endurance missions. Flying Officer Ray Crouch¹² flew one such aircraft on 16 Sep, logging an amazing 6 hours and 40 minutes for the otherwise uneventful trip – he held the endurance record to date.

Bayly’s luck improved on 20 September, when he discovered a 500-ton merchantman and a pair of *E-boats* in Vronti Bay off Scarpanto. While Beaufighters later took care of the vessels, Bayly and crew had a moment of excitement on their return. They were spotted by a German Arado 196 seaplane fighter which investigated, then turned away. ‘Must have been me in the turret’ claimed Pilot Officer Dave Ovenstone¹³, shooting a line in the Mess later that evening. However, the Arados’ presence was a portent of things to come.

The next day, the Squadron’s luck didn’t hold. Sergeant Peter Kennedy¹⁴ and crew flying long-range Baltimore FA574:S on an Aegean reconnaissance, failed to return. Conjecture in the Squadron was he had too little practice low flying and had hit the sea. Others felt he had engine trouble and diverted to Turkey or even Crete. The following night, after a light was reported flashing from the sea south of Scarpanto Island, an extensive search for them was carried out by the Air-Sea Rescue flight, but with no success. In fact Kennedy and crew had been hit by anti-aircraft fire, causing the port engine to cut. The aircraft hit the sea, bounced, turned sideways and came to a halt. It then rapidly sank. Ex-POW Peter Kennedy was later to recall¹⁵...

¹¹ The Battle Fleet consisted of the 35,000-ton Littorio class battleships Vittorio Veneto and Imperio, 4 cruisers and 5 destroyers.

¹² FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Raymond Crouch, DFC, RAF Pilot No 136516. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 4 Apr 44.

¹³ PLTOFF (later FLGOFF) David Ovenstone, RAFVR WOP/AG No 133089. 454 Sqn – 14 Mar 43 – 28 Dec 43.

¹⁴ † SGT (later WOFF) Peter Sutherland Kennedy, RAAF Pilot No 413609. b. 13 Jan 23, Mosman, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 21 Sep 43. POW.

¹⁵ 454 & 459 Squadrons Association Records – Kennedy Memoirs – Nov 1991.



...we were flying below 100 ft when gunfire led to a ditching as an engine lost power. Our crew consisted of myself as pilot, Flight Sergeant Noel Fisher¹⁶ as WOP and turret gunner who was killed; Sergeant Jack Ganly¹⁷, WOP/AG and Navigator/Bomb aimer Sergeant Alvin Liebich¹⁸. We climbed into the aircraft's inflatable dinghy, which floated up from the sunken aircraft and subsequently were taken ashore by Greek villagers in a small boat.

When Jack and I pulled Alvin into the dinghy, we found that he had suffered deep scalp wounds about 8 inches long and also a badly lacerated and crushed chest (I think broken ribs). He was in such pain that I injected him with two of the morphine ampoules from the dinghy's medical kit.

After reaching shore at the village of Diafani [on Karpathos Island, also called Scarpanto], our wounds were treated by a Greek doctor who placed 32 stitches in Alvin's head wounds and bandaged his chest. There was no hospital available.

We were arrested and imprisoned by the Germans in a small concrete floored hall in Pigadia. Alvin became so weak from his wounds and particularly from his chest, he could not reach his toes. [We] were obliged to tie shoelaces around his socks to prevent the cockroaches getting to his feet during the night.



Airmen celebrate their first anniversary.

Campbell Collection

Subsequently they were flown to Piraeus Harbour then transported by train to Salonika and eventually to *Dulag Luft*, near Frankfurt Germany. Alvin had only minor medical attention during the trip, but eventually recovered after suffering chest problems for the next

two years. *Dulag Luft* was the German POW holding camp where initial interrogations were held. Here they found their final destination was to be *Stalag IVB* at Muhlberg, where they spent the rest of the war.

¹⁶ † SGT (later FSGT) Noel Fisher, RAAF WOP/AG No 409679. b. 6 Feb 12, Fitzroy, Vic. 454 Sqn - 5 Aug 43- 21 Sep 43. KIA. Buried: Rhodes War Cemetery, 4, A, 9, Greece.

¹⁷ ‡ SGT (later WOFF) John Archibald 'Jack' Ganly, RAAF WOP/AG No 414481. b. 17 May 17, Croydon, Qld. 454 Sqn - 5 Aug 43 - 21 Sep 43. POW Stalag Luft IVB. d. 5 Dec 84.

¹⁸ ‡ SGT (later WOFF) Alvin Frederick Liebich, RAAF Nav No 416220. b. 23 Apr 19, Woodville, SA. 454 Sqn - 5 Aug 43 - 21 Sep 43. POW Stalag Luft III, IVB. d. 26 Aug 91.



Friday, 24 September was, however, a day to celebrate. It was the occasion of the Squadron's first anniversary. A dinner for all ranks was held with six large tents joined for the occasion. Tables ran the full length of the marquee, covered with bowls of fruit and nuts, cigarettes and beer were also in abundance. Volunteer waiters from all ranks served a sumptuous repast of soup, fish, chicken, and sweets of ice cream and jelly. Wing Commander Ian Campbell used the occasion for his formal farewell speech. He made specific mention of the good work the Squadron was doing – now flying almost double the hours of similar units with twice the number of aircraft and crews

and presented a cup he had made to the sports committee. The party ended in the small hours of the morning, so it was with some relief that no flying was planned the next day until 1400 hours, when only a single flight was made. The same day, six police dogs arrived from Cairo to bolster the defences of the now fortress like MT Section. The Unit Historian recording ...they have a lean and hungry look, and "erks" approaching them have done so with a spurious nonchalance, whistling loudly. Rumours that they are fed on blood should be discounted'.

In true RAAF style, the Officers held another farewell thrash for the CO on the 28th at the Hotel Cecil in Alexandria. Although listed as 'cocktails', the party went on well into the night with a lavish dinner and included guests from the Air Officer Commanding¹⁹ down.

However, change was already in the wind. The Squadron had a new CO and started flying missions into the Aegean – 10 for the month which heralded the Squadron's first incursions into German occupied territory. This move had seen the loss of one crew and increasing contact with enemy shipping and fighters. With this change to ops, more trouble was soon to follow.



'Girls' on stage. On the 1st Anniversary, the men made up their own show, complete with stage from a converted trailer.

Campbell Collection

¹⁹ Air Vice-Marshal Thomas Audley Langford-Sainsbury, CB OBE, DFC, AFC. Others present were the COs of 459 Sqn, 127 Sqn and 55 RSU.

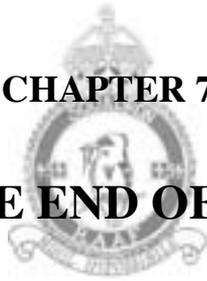


Map 2: Aegean Islands — Samos, Leros and Cos.



CHAPTER 7

THE END OF '43



Wing Commander Jack Coates officially took over the squadron from 4 October 1943 and saw to it that he pulled his weight as far as flying operations were concerned. He would later be joined by Pilot Officers John Howard¹ and Gordon Hissey², both Australian WOP/AGs, who arrived from No 75 OTU and joined the CO's crew. In time they together with Flying Officer Don Surtees³ would become a formidable team and an example to all. In describing Coates, the Unit Historian later stated:

In appearance he is very tall, dark and rather thin, and still in his early twenties. He invariably uses his hands to express himself. He won his DFC on Blenheims operating in the Med, so he is fully conversant with conditions under which we are working. He has made no attempt to stand on his dignity – which would have been unfortunate in an Australian Squadron – and his keenness is unquestioned. There is a feeling that he will not ask anyone to attempt anything he is not prepared to do himself.

Surtees also later recalled the arrival of Coates:

I wondered how this tall, gangling, very English, Englishman was going to cope with some very rugged Australian air and ground crew. That he was 23 at the time did not seem to auger too well for his new command. In short order he was to show me. There were two Baltimores to be air tested and the outgoing CO suggested that he and the new CO should do the testing. Wing Commander Coates said “come along Number Two” (we were always to be numbers one to four). This was obviously going to be a ‘beat-up’ of the squadron, hail and farewell so to speak. Twenty minutes later I was in the nose of the Baltimore going very fast and looking straight ahead at the door of the marquee which was the mess. I had a vivid glimpse of

¹ PLTOFF (later FLTLT) John Howard, RAAF WOP/AG No 402034. b. 22 Oct 18, Bega, NSW. 454 Sqn – 11 Oct 43 – 18 Oct 44.

² PLTOFF (later FLGOFF) Gordon Sumner Hissey, RAAF WOP/AG No 402087. b. 30 Jul 17, Marrackville, NSW. 454 Sqn - 11 Oct 43 – 18 Oct 44.

³ FLGOFF Donald Maurice Surtees, RAFVR Nav No 141805. 454 Sqn – 2 Sep 43 – 10 Nov 44. d. 12 Oct 00, Malaga, Spain.



three very frightened drinkers at the bar. Everything the departing CO did, our number one did two feet lower. I don't think there was much doubt that the aircrew of the squadron were thereafter in his pocket. In the mess afterwards someone said to me "let me buy you a beer now. If you are flying with him, there may not be many more opportunities!"

While the Allied advance through Sicily under *Operation Huskey* had gone well and they had a toe-hold in Italy, by early September 1943, they suffered a reverse of fortune in the Eastern Med. Buoyed by the success of the African and Sicilian campaign, and the fact that Italy had capitulated on 8 September, Churchill now sought to force a thrust towards the Balkans and Greece. In fact, as early as November 1942, plans to this effect had been put in place on the direction of the PM and the Chiefs of Staff in London. The first objective of the Greek and Balkan campaign became the capture of the Dodecanese Islands as launch pads for a new front. It was to be called *Operation Accolade*. Although the prospect of obtaining troops from North Africa was always uncertain (and became more so with the Sicily invasion), a detailed plan for a full scale attack on Rhodes and Scarpanto (Karpathos), and the subsequent occupation of other islands was produced by 2 May⁴.

The main weak point of the plan was the landing of forces 250 miles from the nearest Allied air bases in Cyprus and still further from those in Palestine or across the African coast. The success of the entire operation thus hinged on the Mediterranean Air Force's ability to provide adequate air cover and transport support for the landing parties. However, the Allied landings in Sicily, Eisenhower's rejection of what he felt was the siphoning of supporting forces, and the pending invasion of Italy forced a change to the *Accolade* approach. A much smaller attack would be made into the islands as a distraction, hopefully to draw some of German General Albert Kesselring's much needed troops and air power away from the main action. The revised plan, now called *Operation Microbe*, would bypass the heavily defended island of Rhodes. On 13 September, British forces landed on Cos (Kos), Leros and Samos, with little opposition from the Italian garrisons⁵.

Bypassing Rhodes in hindsight was a mistake. The *Whermacht* quickly secured Rhodes from the Italians on 11 September and it provided the Germans with a fine airfield for basing fighters and dive bombers with which to reassert their control over the minor islands. The Germans quickly mounted an air raid against Cos almost to prove they were still not done with the island. Using bombers from Greece escorted by Messerschmitt 109s from IV/JG 27 they attacked the

⁴ PRO Air 41/61 – RAF Operations in the Dodecanese Islands Sept-Nov 1943, Ch 1, p 4.

⁵ Cos had the only suitable airfield beyond Rhodes, Leros, an excellent harbour and Samos as an advanced outpost. See RAF Mediterranean Review, No 5, September-December 1943, p 75.



island for several days. In short time, the Germans also reinforced their air assets in the Aegean, bringing the strength up to 350 bomber and fighter aircraft. Although seen by some in Whitehall as a side-show, the war in the Aegean would take on added importance for the German Higher Command. The back door to Germany, through Greece and the Balkans had to be kept shut.

For Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces since February, the primary objective was to provide air support and fighter cover for the outposts. Tedder needed to prevent a German re-attack and also be able to project friendly air power over Greece, the Balkans and Italy. To achieve this, 7 Squadron, SAAF and 74 Squadron, RAF both flying Spitfires together with RAF Regiment support, landed at Antimachia on Cos, but Kesselring had other ideas. He attacked the British positions from airfields in Crete, Rhodes and Athens. Clearly, Germany was not done with the islands yet. Greece, Turkey and Romania had to be protected as they supplied the German War Machine with oil and vital minerals such as chromium, copper and bauxite ore. Such was the German determination that on 3 October, a German combined air-sea assault quickly recaptured Cos. Leros received the same treatment nine days later and Samos soon afterwards. Churchill's campaign in the East had been a failure and the main focus again turned to Italy, the so called 'soft underbelly of Europe', and condemned both protagonists to a protracted side-show in the Eastern Med that dragged on into late 1944.

In recapturing the Islands, the Germans created themselves a resupply problem which the Allies chose to exploit. If they couldn't be fought out, they would be starved out. Consequently, 454 Squadron's Aegean reconnaissances now extended well into the Greek Islands – the Dodecanese, Rhodes, Cos, Leros and Naxos. Shipping and port traffic was all reported and photographed. Once an enemy ship had been discovered, rocket firing Beaufighters would shortly afterwards deal with the enemy, thus denying the German garrisons much needed supplies. Friendly convoy escort also remained steady business, although 'nothing to report' was the regular post-flight debrief. Despite the relative calm, and the thousands of hours of endless over water patrols, the Squadron could boast that they never lost a ship to *U-boat* or enemy action while they were on patrol.



Depth charges being loaded into A for 'Apple'.

Campbell Collection



Flying Officer Ray Heathwood⁶, A WOP/AG on Squadron Leader Don Beaton's⁷ crew kept an extensive diary and in it he described the action the Squadron faced over Cos (Kos)⁸:

November 1943

Woken while it's still dark by the man with the torch - I sign acknowledgment, climb out in the cold - over at the Mess it's again cold bully and chi a most unappetising breakfast. Airborne in the Aegean - sky is clear - visibility good - no cloud cover. Approaching Kos we see an Arado fighter float plane getting airborne to attack us. The Arado has very lethal cannon equipment and close to our speed. We continue on and get our photos despite pursuit by the Arado. The pity is our orders are to avoid combat if possible and get back with the all important photos. Since there is only one fighter chasing us we would not mind engaging him in combat despite his better armament. Our speed and manoeuvring denies the Arado a favourable firing angle and eventually he breaks off pursuit - we continue our reconnaissance. Over Kos harbour a lot of flak was thrown at us - luckily we are not hit. The Kos airfield is badly pitted with bomb bursts. We sight an enemy Destroyer with three 109's orbiting as protective cover. We get in and get our photos and the expected attack from the 109's did not eventuate - maybe they didn't see us. We crossed out through Kasos Strait at wave top height, set course of 209° for Gambut - we have insufficient fuel to make Benghazi. At Gambut (our airfield from a previous tour) I meet many old acquaintances. After a meal and refuelling we fly across a familiar desert route to Benghazi. Debriefing and our photos of the progress of the German invasion of Kos and Leros show things are not going well for our troops there.

Despite the occasional tussle with German fighters, there had also been a good deal of unexciting flying to date under the control of 201 Group. Nevertheless, crews remained both alert and motivated. Every small ship or caique sunk weakened the German position. The Eastern Med air war had become one of attrition. The detachment out of Cyprus was flying 'offensive anti-submarine' patrols, but as one wag put it 'there was nothing to get offensive about', while those at LG 91 concentrated on convoy escort and long-range patrols. However, things quickly change during wartime, and on 3 October, five crews and their aircraft deployed to Gambut to be briefed on a special night raid planned for that evening. They took off at 1900 hrs with a load of three 250 lb bombs each fitted with rods – a mechanism that allowed the bombs to explode on or above

⁶ FLGOFF (Later FLTLT) Rayphael William Heathwood, RAAF WOP/AG No 404780. b. 18 Feb 13, Goomeri, Qld. d. 17 Dec 00, Qld. 454 Sqn – 26 Oct 43 – 9 Nov 44.

⁷ SQNLDR Donald Charles Beaton DFC, RAAF Pilot No 406370. b. 3 Jul 10, Geraldton, WA. 454 Sqn - 26 Oct 43 – 14 Nov 44.

⁸ Heathwood Diary. With permission.



the ground, thus maximizing their blast effect. Their target was Heraklion Aerodrome on Crete – the first time the Squadron had returned since the disaster of late July. Arriving over the target around 2050 hours, Pilot Officer Max McNally found the aerodrome lit up like a circus – clearly they had been caught by surprise – and he proceeded to bomb the dispersal area. Flight Sergeant Max McCrabb was next in, and as if to prove you should never be second, copped the *flak* and bombed in the dark. Sergeant Cliff Frost⁹ now finding cloud obscuring the target and still under fire from light *flak* bombed what he thought was the field. Finally Flying Officer George Railton bombed on dead reckoning after obtaining a good fix off Candia. Flying Officer Bob Parkin could not find the aerodrome at all, so bombed Suda Bay instead. All returned safely to Gambut just after 2200 hours.

However, the 13th lived up to its reputation when Sergeant Reg Curry¹⁰ taking off in FA417:N hit a bump before attaining flying speed, became airborne too soon, and dipped a wing causing the aircraft to slew. The Baltimore skidded to rest through 180 degrees and was a write off. The crew emerged shaken but unhurt although the Unit Historian recorded the navigator, Flying Officer Max Bryant,¹¹ reporting to the doc twenty minutes later for a check up was found to have ‘a pencil and rubber clutched tightly in his hand, a circumstance of which he was totally unaware.’ Later that evening, while Sergeant Mal Stevenson¹² was doing night circuits in FA609:E, he overshot the runway quite badly. Then aircraft set out on a cross-country run, wheels on the ground. Having crossed a road, FA609 sheered its way through a barbed-wire fence and weaved through sundry stacks of 44-gallon oil drums, took a concrete ditch in its stride, before bumping into the air for 20 feet and eventually coming to rest 300 yards past the end of the runway, somewhere out in the desert. Damage: Bomb bay doors and a bent propeller – relatively minor repairs – amazing!

On 14 October, the Squadron learnt that another move was looming. They would relocate to St Jean, the airfield just north of Haifa in Palestine, to cover the Allied invasion of Cos and Leros, with a detachment at LG 91 rather than the other way round as had been. Those at LG91 began to strike tents the next day, with many looking forward to a spell in Palestine – cooler weather, green grass, fresh food and more pleasant surrounds. Few would pine for the sands and dust of the desert and after a year out in the heat, the change was welcomed. The camp was packed by the 18th and for the majority who were unable to fly, another truck convoy was the go. The Unit Historian amply recorded the scene:

⁹ † SGT (later FSGT) Clifford Frost, RAFVR Pilot No 1433361. 454 Sqn - 7 Sep 43 – 19 Nov 43. KIA 19 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁰ SGT (later FLGOFF) Reginald Maurice John Curry, RAAF Pilot No 411997. b. 1 Oct 17, Ashfield, NSW. 454 Sqn - 26 May 43 – 5 May 44.

¹¹ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Maxwell Richard Bryant, RAAF Nav. No 410131. b. 22 Sep 19, Artarmon, NSW. 454 Sqn – 31 Aug 43 – 10 May 44.

¹² SGT (later FLGOFF) Malcolm Essington Stevenson, RAAF WOP/AG No 413039. b. 29 Mar 21, Bathurst, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 23 Mar 44.



The camp is beginning to lose its identity and fortunately, our operational commitments have been light... The tents are down, the mess is reduced to a single EPI [tent] and people are sleeping in the open. Half loaded trucks stand about in the desolation which was once our camp. The desert is pitted with holes where tents have stood, and littered with empty petrol tins and those scraps of personnel kit too old to be worth packing – a battered topee, a torn shirt. But we are a mobile squadron and must not overburden ourselves with possessions. We must be prepared to move, also without breaking the continuity of our operational flying.

The line of trucks moved out early on the 18th, staging the first night through Cairo. Thence off to Ismalia, Asluj, Gaza and finally St Jean. After the desert trek and their time in the sand, it was no doubt harder to find a greater contrast between camp sites. While the desert was hot, open and flat, St Jean was surrounded by mountains and the selected campsite, a wooded knoll of eucalypt trees. It wasn't long before the Australian members of the squadron were smelling the leaves with 'faraway looks in their eyes' – so close to home, and yet...

It was during this period that George Barnard, Warrant Officer 'Polly' Pollard and the admin team, rallied the troops to overcome the discomforts and problems in the ground move of over 1500 miles. As the move progressed, the aircraft were kept flying at a critical time during the German reoccupation of Cos and Leros. While the camp was being relocated, convoy patrols continued, including a memorable sortie on the 15th by Flying Officer Dave Lewis, which was nearly the end of him and his crew. Flying Baltimore FA590 off Castelrosso, Dave came across an Allied convoy. Following proper procedure, he fired off the colours of the day - flares to alert the shipping to the presence of a friendly aircraft, but soon found he was being chased by a Beaufighter. So much for friendly encounters – the Beaufighter opened fire, hitting the Baltimore in the port engine, mainplane and tail. Lewis managed to limp back to St Jean and landed successfully, although all were somewhat shaken by the experience.

With the change in location came a change in aircraft, or rather a much more modern variant. On 24 October, the Unit Historian recorded...

We received our first Mk V Baltimore. The differences appear to be mainly superficial, but the 'drivers office' now looks more like a Wurlitzer organ keyboard than ever. 52 switches somebody said!

Settling into their new operating airfield went smoothly, the Squadron now used to packing up and setting down, but again, this stay would be short. Almost as soon as the unit had arrived and reconsolidated, the CO announced



As well as move and work the Squadron members made their own fun. Here some 'aboriginals' barrack a squadron soccer match.

Coates Collection

the news that another move was on. Consequently, the mood swung again to one of anticipation with a general unwillingness to get too comfortable. While awaiting news of their next destination, aircraft continued to be delivered and as there were no disposal instructions for the older Baltimores, the aerodrome began to fill up with aircraft. By November 454 could boast 38 Baltimores, enough to equip three normal sized units.

The wait for news about the next move did not take too long. At 2100 hours on 2 November 1943, a telephone call from Wing followed by a cipher telegram¹³ directed five aircraft to fly to Berka III, a desert airstrip near Benghazi in Cyrenaica (now Libya). They were to depart the next morning and the unit would follow. The formation duly took off at 1000 hrs the next day after the pack and load was complete. Heading for El Adem to refuel, the formation found it had to coast-crawl owing to severe thunderstorms enroute. El Adem was an absolute quagmire and with just a single petrol bowser, only three aircraft could be refuelled in time to get off and land at Berka before dark. The other pair followed the next day. After a refuel and obligatory nature-break, the three departed and arrived at dusk only to go straight into a two-hour No 247 (Fighter) Wing briefing. The Baltimores were needed to do five separate Aegean reconnaissances the next day. The CO, Flying Officer's Bayly and Crouch and Warrant Officer Todhunter, together with a crew from 203 Squadron completed the task with their newer long-range Balts – again fitted with an internal 300 gallon belly tank which meant no bombs could be carried. Their job according to

¹³ AA 11362 Series Z1 folio 105A.



the recording officer was to ‘see, photograph and get the hell out of it’. The long-range aircraft could stay aloft for up to seven hours, a most fatiguing challenge for pilots who could not change seats in flight, nor was there an autopilot fitted. To add to the strain, often aircraft had to fly as low as 50 ft above the water in order to fly under the German radar and to improve the chance of sighting the convoys they were sent to locate in the Mediterranean haze.

According to Keith Howard and Sam Birtles, the tactics were well developed:

Accurate navigation flying was also required to fly straight into harbours and other likely hiding places for shipping. The idea was usually to climb up to about 7,000 ft on the approach to the harbour, fly over with plenty of evasive movements to beat the anti-aircraft fire, look for shipping, note details and take photographs, the dive out to sea with a few changes of course to endeavour to mislead the German defences as to our next move. At the same time as all this, it was very essential to keep a sharp lookout for the German fighter aircraft who took their toll from time to time. After this quick ‘shufti’ (Arabic for “look” and probably the most commonly used word by Air Force people in the Middle East area) we would dive off seaward and head for the next ‘recce’ point at low level, hoping that the German fighter defences did not pick us up.

Berka might have been better suited to ops, but it was a miserable place as far as the men were concerned. While LG91 was in the desert too, it had frequent entertainments, a ready supply of beer and was close to Alexandria where the men could spend a pleasant 48 hours on leave. Berka on the other hand according to the Squadron newsletter *Topics*¹⁴ was a place where:



Chow line at the Airmen's Mess, Berka III.

Basedow Collection

...such consolations are inadequate or non-existent. Life is monotonous and consequently boring. There is very little to look forward to. Yet at a time when leave would serve as a badly needed tonic there are almost insuperable difficulties in the way.

¹⁴ *Topics*, No 2 February 14th, 1944. A roneoed newsletter of a few pages. It was classified Confidential and not allowed off the Unit. Also, it was not official comment.



It would be another eight and a half months before relief in the form of another move would arrive. The road trip to Berka also had its moments when a truck filled with kit bags caught fire. Max Bryant recalled losing most of his clothing as did many others¹⁵:

Many of the aircrew (of whom I was one) made the journey (from 7th to 23rd November) in Squadron trucks. All kinds of gear (kit bags, trunks etc) caught fire. We had to assume that one of the chaps, driver or passenger, flicked a cigarette butt out of the window, which lodged on the rear of the open truck. The speed of the vehicle encouraged the butt to glow which resulted in a smouldering fire which grew and grew with disastrous results.



Portalago Bay, Leros and the main supply depot for the Island. This shot taken on 25 February 1944 during a recce.

Coates Collection

At Berka, the squadron absorbed a number of ex-203 Squadron Baltimores and crews, but they were not the only unit there. Located on the same aerodrome was 16 Sqn, SAAF (Beaufighters), 38 Sqn, RAF (Wellingtons) and 603 Sqn, RAF (Beaufighters). The sandy conditions here took some getting used to. The campsite was situated on a stony ridge on the western side of the Benghazi – Agedabia Road, about ten miles from Benghazi town.

The site was clean, relatively free from dust and reasonably dry in wet weather although after heavy downpours, the surface turned to a sticky mud. The men were again living in tents, but ten Nissan huts were soon erected and used for messes and airmen's canteen. The site would also prove cold in winter.

The German Counter-Attack

Between the Italian Capitulation on 8 September and 3 October, German reinforcements amounting to 110 aircraft were moved to the Eastern Med, making a total of 345 front-line aircraft facing the Allies. 454 Squadron soon realised this as reports of sightings and attacks by German fighters soon

¹⁵ Letter to George Gray dated 21 Jan 99., 454-459 Sqns Association archive.



increased. By early November, the Germans were intent on recapturing their lost island garrisons, so 454 Squadron crews reported much activity over Cos, Leros and Samos. Ju-88s were seen bombing the island outposts and smoke from the action could be seen many miles away. On 6 November, Flying Officer Ray Crouch bounced FW297 and collapsed the undercarriage on landing in the gusty weather and damaged the airframe beyond repair. Luckily the crew were unhurt. Two days later there was worse news. Pilot Officer William ‘Jock’ Clarkson¹⁶ and the all RAF crew went missing in FA523:W. They reported sighting enemy forces during a morning patrol and were later spotted by another Baltimore, but that was the last sighting. Lost too were Flying Officer Doug Mansell¹⁷, Sergeant Tom Gibson¹⁸ and Sergeant Charles Lane¹⁹. What happened to the aircraft is anybody’s guess – lost without trace.

On 10 November, another loss, but this time the cause was more certain. After carrying out a photo recce of the Stampalia and Cos area, the crew of FA669:O reported sighting an invasion fleet of 14 landing craft escorted by seven aircraft. Lost to subsequent enemy action were Flight Sergeant John Joiner²⁰, Flight Sergeant Joseph Gilvarry²¹, Flight Sergeant John May²², and Flight Sergeant Dennis Nest²³.



A nice shot of the CO’s aircraft B for ‘Barbara’ - named after his girlfriend at the time.

Coates Collection

Among new arrivals at Berka was a ‘tall, quite pleasant’ Yugoslav – Captain Milko Vracaric²⁴ with ‘a moustache unrivalled in the Middle East’, and his crew²⁵ from the same

country. This unusual crew would remain with 454 until the new year when they transferred to sister Squadron, No. 55. By all reports, they fitted in very well.

¹⁶ † FLGOFF William M ‘Jock’ Clarkson, RAFVR Pilot No 133764. 454 Sqn - Aug 43- 8 Nov 43. KIA 8 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁷ † FLGOFF Douglas Victor Mansell, RAFVR Nav. No 135913. 5 454 Sqn - Aug 43- 8 Nov 43. KIA 8 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁸ † SGT Thomas Norman Gibson, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1385020. 454 Sqn - Aug 43- 8 Nov 43. KIA 8 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁹ † SGT Charles Edward Roy Lane, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1314918. 454 Sqn - Aug 43- 8 Nov 43. KIA 8 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁰ † FSGT John Henry Joiner, RAAF Pilot No 409204. 454 Sqn - Sep 43 - 10 Nov 43. KIA 10 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²¹ † FSGT Joseph Gilvarry, RAAF Nav No 414222. 454 Sqn - Sep 43 - 10 Nov 43. KIA 10 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²² † FSGT John Alexander Henry May, RAAF WOP/AG No 420230. 454 Sqn - Sep 43 - 10 Nov 43. KIA 10 Nov 43. Buried; Rhodes War Cemetery, 1, B, 5, Greece.

²³ † FSGT Dennis Sidney Nest, RAAF WOP/AG No 420248. 454 Sqn - Sep 43 - 10 Nov 43. KIA 10 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁴ CAPT Milko Vracaric, DFC Pilot No Y.52. 454 Sqn 5 Nov 43 – 4 Jan 44.

²⁵ Including Lt M. Karic No Y.500 (Nav), 2/LT B. Vasiljevic No Y.152 (WOP/AG) and FSGT Y. Selmic No Y.215 (WOP/AG). All served with 454 Sqn - 5 Nov 43 – 4 Jan 44.



Meanwhile, ship sightings and reports continued. *E-Boats* and *F-Boats*, merchant vessels of varying sizes and the occasional convoy were all photographed and reported to Wing, but despite regular reports of their presence, no submarines were sighted. *E-Boats* were fast motor torpedo boats used to make hit-and-run raids on Allied shipping and resupply boats. *F-Boats* were primarily tank-landing craft²⁶, although they were capable of carrying troops, motor vehicles and general cargo. They also had formidable protection. One 75mm and two 20mm cannons provided cover, but these vessels were still vulnerable from the air. Most were built in Greece shortly after Axis occupation and were used throughout the Aegean.

Numerous reports of German Ju-52 transport aircraft being escorted by Me-109s were also common. Fortunately, few too were engagements with these enemy fighters. On 12 November, the Germans attacked the Island of Leros to lodge against Allied forces and counter resistance. This activity created a flurry of shipping and air movements which meant that the patrolling aircraft were bound to see something to report. The Island surrendered five days later.

The Losses Mount

Patrols continued but so did crew and aircraft losses. Two more aircraft and crews would be gone by the month's end. The first, on the 19th, was piloted by Flight Sergeant Cliff Frost in FA672. While on a patrol, the crew had reported a sighting and shortly afterwards had engine trouble. Three minutes later, an SOS was received from a position fixed at 20 miles south of Crete. Unfortunately none survived the impact with the water. Also lost were Sergeant Frank Cheetham²⁷, Sergeant Desmond Bumfrey²⁸ and Sergeant Harry Peel²⁹. This crew had been in the squadron less than a month.

On 23 November, the remainder of the Squadron finally arrived by truck convoy from St Jean after being stranded at LG 91 for ten days when the vehicles they had borrowed were withdrawn. Coates was no doubt very glad to see them, as the high ops tempo meant double shifts for the few fitters who had originally deployed to Berka. They unloaded quickly and struck camp. The location was on a slight rise which would give some runoff and was well away from the Bedouin camps.

Sergeant Jim Baber's sortie flown in FA602 on the 25th was also exciting. They saw a Ju-52 transport plane³⁰ in the distance, got a small piece of shrapnel through the turret at Melos, fortunately without injury to the gunner, Sergeant

²⁶ Length 156 ft, beam, 21 ft and displacement of around 320 tons. Driven by three Diesel engines developing 130 Hp each, speed about 8 knots. RAF Middle East Review, May – Dec 42, p 52 via RAAF Museum Library.

²⁷ † SGT Frank Alan Cheetham RAFVR Nav No 1437917. 454 Sqn - 7 Sep 43 – 19 Nov 43. KIA 19 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁸ † SGT Desmond Bumfrey, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1128115. 454 Sqn - 7 Sep 43 – 19 Nov 43. KIA 19 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁹ † SGT Harry Rawlinson Peel, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1129991. 454 Sqn - 7 Sep 43 – 19 Nov 43. KIA 19 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁰ It was unusual to see German transports unescorted.



Jim Hendy³¹, and were chased for ten minutes by three Me-109s and an Arado Ar-196 seaplane. With observer Sergeant ‘Robbie’ Robinson³² and WOP/AG Sergeant Les Weale³³, on their first foray into the Aegean, they must have got a rather coloured view of these operations.

The next day, Squadron Leader Mick Moore burst a tyre on taking-off on an air test. The aircraft swung badly, ground looped and came to rest against a parked 38 Squadron Wellington (colloquially called a Wimpy), clipping its tail with the Baltimore’s wingtip. FA398:D was a write-off. However, sitting in the nose was Flying Officer Bruce Bowden³⁴ who not only had a spectacular view but probably thought it was curtains for him. Both members were unhurt, but it didn’t stop Bruce celebrating his good fortune later in the bar. After quite a few beers, the story had reached mammoth proportions with Bruce shooting a line:

Round and round we went. Then the @#\$\$ Wimpy got bigger and bigger @#\$\$ quick. But that didn’t worry me. I said to myself ‘We’re going through that bugger – that’s only fabric’. Then I saw the second and third behind it.

The final loss for the month was Flying Officer Ken Adamson³⁵ and crew of FA602, on their first operational sortie. Briefed to carry out a photo recce of shipping routes along the eastern coast of Greece and the islands of the western Aegean, the crew made a sighting report after which nothing further was heard. While Squadron members could only speculate on cause and wait for notification from the Red Cross, the aircraft was in fact shot down by a Me-109F³⁶ west of the island of Cos. With Adamson were Flying Officer Art Milligan³⁷, Flight Sergeant Gordon Marland³⁸ and Flight Sergeant Fred Pritchard³⁹.

November was to be put down as a ‘hard month’, with the loss of four valuable crews, all killed in action. The Allies too had suffered a reverse of fortune with the German recapture of Cos, Leros and Samos and with their loss went Churchill’s grand plan to force a push into Greece and the Balkans. The month was spent almost entirely on Aegean reconnaissance, while December would see the year out with further recces and anti-submarine work and unfortunately, four more losses, The first two went within a week and would greatly shock the squadron.

³¹ SGT James H. Hendy, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1316155. 454 Sqn - 3 Oct 43 – Aug 44.

³² SGT Rex A. ‘Robbie’ Robinson, RAFVR Obs No 1320131. 454 Sqn - 3 Oct 43 – Aug 44.

³³ SGT Leslie Alexander Weale, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1386797. 454 Sqn - 29 Sep 43 – 7 Aug 44.

³⁴ FLGOFF Bruce Manton Bowden, RAAF Nav No 296237. 454 Sqn - 3 Aug 43 – 25 Mar 44.

³⁵ † FLGOFF Kenneth Ebenezer Adamson, RAAF Pilot No 409785. 454 Sqn – 3 Nov 43 – 29 Nov 43. KIA 29 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁶ Shot down and claimed at 0945 by Feldwebel (SGT) Hannes Löffler of 9/JG 27.

³⁷ † FLGOFF Arthur Peter Spencer Milligan, RAFVR Nav No 141561. 454 Sqn – 3 Nov 43 – 29 Nov 43. KIA 29 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁸ † FSGT Gordon Edward Marland, RAAF WOP/AG No 415544. 454 Sqn – 3 Nov 43 – 29 Nov 43. KIA 29 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁹ † FSGT Fred Leonard William Pritchard, WOP/AG RAAF No 416995. 454 Sqn – 3 Nov 43 – 29 Nov 43. KIA 29 Nov 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.



Once established at Berka III, the opportunity to demonstrate the Unit's sporting prowess became available in the form of competition between the musterings and between units, as sister squadron and rivals, 459 were not far away. Corporal Vic Klix⁴⁰ became acting NCO of Sports and soon Aussie Rules and Rugby teams sprang up. Regular games were played and the usual after game refreshments ensured a large crowds of supporters.

December started badly. Baltimore FW282:P was briefed to carry out an Aegean recce and as had frequently occurred before, after a sighting report, nothing further was heard. While Flight Lieutenant Alan Horsley was captured and became a POW, the remaining crew of Flight Lieutenant Les Row⁴¹, Warrant Officer 'Shorty' Gartside⁴², and Pilot Officer Col Walker⁴³ unfortunately perished. Upon release from POW camp, Horsley was finally able to recount what happened⁴⁴:

Whilst photographing part of the coast of Greece, two Me-109s located our aircraft and approached but we avoided action and later secured photographs. After despatching reports by radio we lost altitude and flew low level near the sea and altered course near Seriphos to avoid giving our location.

When in sight of Kythera two more Me-109s with long-range tanks approached from the direction of Crete. We prepared for action. The Me-109s delivered seven attacks, during which the aircraft was set on fire in the port wing, the intercommunications systems destroyed, and Pilot Officer Walker and Warrant Officer Gartside wounded – extent unknown.

Avoiding action had taken us nearer Antikythera; two avenues lay open:

- 1) to crash land on Antikythera, and
- 2) to ditch nearby.

I decided on the latter and indicated to my crew who answered with visual signals (thumbs up). I then jettisoned the top hatch, and F/Lt Row opened his hatch immediately in front of me. I then throttled back for precautionary landing and selected a spot on the northern shore of the island which appeared broken, and afforded a possible spot to land.

When the aircraft landed on the sea, I hit my head on the front part of the open hatch, having raised my seat for landing. When I regained consciousness the aircraft was submerged at the nose, and

⁴⁰ CPL Victor Paul Klix RAAF No 11542. b. 19 Jun 09, Melb, Vic.

⁴¹ † FLTLT Leslie Norman Row, RAFVR Nav No 117013. 454 Sqn – 17 Dec 42 - 3 Dec 43. KIA 3 Dec 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴² † WOFF John 'Shorty' Gartside, RNZAF WOP/AG No NZ404599. 454 Sqn – 30 Nov 42 – 3 Dec 43. KIA 3 Dec 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴³ † PLTOFF Colin William Walker, RAAF WOP/AG No 403291. 454 Sqn – 24 Nov 42 – 3 Dec 43. KIA 3 Dec 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴⁴ HQ RNZAF London, Report No 1301/3508/P3 dated 12 Jul 45.



sea water was up to my neck. I released my safety harness, stood up and the aircraft submerged under me.

I swam over the spot where the aircraft submerged, but no-one else left the aircraft, which sank in deep water about 300 yards from the northern shore of Antikythera. I then swam to shore in full sight of the spot until picked up by some fishermen from Antikythera.

That the enemy fighters were using long-range tanks was also only known by a few. Wing Commander Coates later recalled⁴⁵ how Group found out from...

... the Enigma intelligence, which was not known at the time to myself or anyone who might become POW, and indeed to few others. In fact most of our reconnaissances were planned on known information about the enemy intentions. There were what were known as Special Liaison Units at 201 Group, where we called them 'the girls on the roof', and at 247 Wing, Berka. The latter told me in very strict confidence about the Me-109s with long-range tanks, so that we were able to vary our routes into the Aegean – fortunately they were also spotted by one of our crews which helped to hide the source of this information.

The next day, Flight Sergeant Dave Paul's⁴⁶ crew were lost in FA548:R, shot down by another Me-109F fighter⁴⁷. With Paul were Warrant Officer George Agg⁴⁸, Warrant Officer Jim Rennie⁴⁹, and Warrant Officer Ralph Simpson⁵⁰. It was to have been Paul's final trip on completion of his tour and Rennie was already extended. They were on a recce near Laurion harbour when attacked by two Me-109s. They ditched and were subsequently picked up by a pair of German Arado Ar-196 seaplanes. The Me-109s gun fire hit the starboard wing and the port fuel tank, which subsequently caught alight. Turret gunner Simpson had baled out, but was lost. After rescue and initial interrogation, the three were taken to Athens, then Salonika and finally into a Stalag in Germany.

While 4 December was a tragedy for some, it was cause for excitement for others. Warrant Officer Hugh Lloyd completed his tour – the first Squadron member to do so. Together, the losses of Horsley and Paul, and the posting of Lloyd would have a profound effect. It was not so much that Horsley and Paul had gone on successive days, but they were both squadron originals and very experienced crews. When Joiner and Clarkson were lost previously, older members of the squadron reassured themselves by reflection that both were comparatively inexperienced. Now that Horsley and Paul had failed to return, that comfort was denied them.

⁴⁵ Correspondence with the author – 11 Nov 2000.

⁴⁶ ‡ WOFF (later SQNLDR) David Valentine Paul, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 403215. 454 Sqn - 1 Oct 42 - 4 Dec 43. POW 4 Dec 43.

⁴⁷ Shot down and claimed at 0833 by Oberfeldwebel (FSGT) Fritz Gromotka of 9/JG 27.

⁴⁸ ‡ WOFF George Townson Agg, RAAF Nav No 400954. 454 Sqn - 17 Dec 42 – 4 Dec 43. POW 4 Dec 43.

⁴⁹ ‡ WOFF James Rennie, RAF, WOP/AG No 645357. 454 Sqn - 17 Dec 42 – 4 Dec 43. POW 4 Dec 43.

⁵⁰ † WOFF Ralph Mervyn Simpson, RAAF WOP/AG No 406684. 454 Sqn - 17 Dec 42 – 4 Dec 43. KIA 4 Dec 43.

Alamein Memorial, Egypt.



Operations had now turned serious. Ray Heathwood's diary again recorded the cat-and-mouse game being played out:

Sunday 12 December 1943

Woken by the man with the torch, a quick breakfast, we load our gear and lift off the deck while it is still dark. Daylight sees our Baltimore coast crawling the east coast of Greece off Monemvasia. A tri-motor Ju-52 pops over the mountains on a course for Crete - we climb steeply to lessen the range which was extreme - a long burst from the twin 0.5's scored incendiary sparkles on his fuselage, the enemy pilot swung sharply towards us obviously taken by surprise - a second long burst scored more hits, the pilot swung the Ju-52 over on it's back and spiralled vertically towards the sea, meanwhile we orbited to watch him splash in - but no when the aircraft reached sea level it flattened out on a reverse course - clever piloting! Should we go down and finish him off? The Pilot and I were all for this course of action - the navigator argues against it saying we cannot afford to expend fuel this way and complete our reconnaissance. So we continued our patrol. That decision saved our lives as we were to learn on being debriefed. Wing had adopted a plan of sending off two Baltimores one, a half-hour after the first. At this particular location the second Baltimore crew sighted 5 Me-109's cross ahead, ignore them and proceed towards the position of our attack - we would not have survived against five enemy fighters.

Later we sighted a 100 ton vessel with sails heading towards Crete - Pilot Don Beaton dived steeply and raked it with the Baltimore's front guns then circled steeply while I spattered the deck with the 0.5's - some of the crew were seen to dive overboard - doubtless the ship would later turn about and pick them up. Over Siros plenty of flak was thrown at us. Realising enemy fighters would be searching



The Baltimores had very effective camouflage when over the desert landscape.

Gray Collection



for us we did several changes of course when flying low to the sea and eventually completed our flight programme without meeting enemy interception.

Warrant Officer Dave McMurray⁵¹, one of the squadron Kiwis, burst a tyre on landing on the 10th after touching down on one wheel due to the cross-wind. FA580 was heavily laden and there was not sufficient runway length available. The aircraft ground-looped, the tip of a wing hit the ground and it came to an abrupt halt in a cloud of dust. No one was hurt, and yet another aircraft went off to maintenance unit for major repairs.

On the 13th of December, the Squadron lost yet another veteran crew - Flying Officer Doug Todhunter with navigator, Pilot Officer Keith Anderson⁵² and Wireless Op/Air Gunner Warrant Officers Roy Donaldson⁵³ and Bill Ward⁵⁴. Flying aircraft FW315:F, they set off on a Western Aegean recce and nothing further was heard. Subsequent study into the German records now confirm the crew were shot down by Major Ernst Düllberg, an *experten* (ace) and commander of *Stab III/JG 27*, the



Sergeant Doug Todhunter - lost on
13 December. *Campbell Collection*

Me-109 fighter squadron based in the Aegean at the time⁵⁵. Todhunter's crew loss was the cause of much debate within the Squadron. It was the fifth loss within a month. It was decided that the white aircraft colour scheme while good for anti-submarine work made the aircraft show up too clearly against a background of blue sky or sea and Aegean islands. Enemy fighters and *flak* could easily pick out the Baltimore's guppy shape and accordingly, two were flown to 135 Maintenance Unit to be camouflaged grey. Others would soon follow.

The sturdiness of the Baltimore design continued to be tested. On the 21st, Sergeant Vic Mitchell⁵⁶ in FA535 found on return from a sortie that the starboard undercarriage would not lock down, so he carried out a perfect belly landing without injury. Again, the aircraft went off for maintenance. Christmas Eve also brought its excitement and no doubt a smile to Squadron member's faces

⁵¹ WOFF David Haddon McMurray, RNZAF Pilot No NZ411990. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 3 May 44.

⁵² † PLTOFF Royston Charles Keith Anderson, RAAF Nav No 400956. b. 24 Jun 20, Carlton, Vic. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 – 13 Dec 43. KIA 13 Dec 43. Age 23. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵³ † WOFF Robert Roy Donaldson, RAAF WOP/AG No 407146. b. 23 Mar 13, Waikerie, SA. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 – 13 Dec 43. KIA 13 Dec 43. Age 30. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵⁴ † WOFF William Garth Ward, RAAF WOP/AG No 407979. b. 5 Oct 20, Wallaroo, SA. 454 Sqn - 9 Oct 42 – 13 Dec 43. KIA 13 Dec 43. Age 23. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵⁵ Research by Roy Donaldson's nephew, Nigel Donaldson – letter to the author, 17 Mar 03 and German claims archive – see bibliography. This was Düllberg's 25th claim.

⁵⁶ SGT (later PLTOFF) Victor Cooke 'The Champ' Mitchell, RAAF Pilot No 412604. b. 20 Oct 20, Ballina, NSW. 454 Sqn – 26 Nov 43 – 22 Oct 44.



when the tale was re-told. Ray Heathwood recorded in his diary this interesting episode, culminating in the destruction of an enemy convoy:

Friday 24 December 1943

Woken early for another Aegean recce, airborne while it was still dark, but were well across the Mediterranean when the sun rose. At Crete the mountains were now covered with snow, and inside the Aegean a cloudless sky and excellent visibility. At Milos the Ack-Ack gunners greeted our approach with heavy flak. After crossing over Sifnos - Paros - Naxos we descended to sea level and circled the small island Dhenousa to take a close look at a cluster of fishing boats - we smiled at the way people waved their arms, coats, anything as our Baltimore rocked from wing to wing returning their salute.

Soon afterwards flying at a low altitude we saw to our starboard a long low narrow cloud, perhaps five miles in length paralleling our general course. Pilot Don swings towards it, climbed steeply and soon we were enveloped in it's misty whiteness and back on course. Knowing we would quickly run out of it again into a cloudless clear sky I was thinking the manoeuvre is hardly worth the effort.

Suddenly as we burst out of the white enveloping fog into clear air, our eyes nearly jumped out of their sockets - we are a formation of four aircraft! Our Baltimore and three enemy Messerschmitt 109 fighters positioned only 30 feet below us - too close to bring our guns to bear.

To say we were almost immobilised with fright is an understatement moreover we instantly noted our speed was faster than theirs, the possibility of our aircraft appearing right out in front of their cannons was a first visual impression - what to do? Pilot Don pulled back both throttles, with reduced power our overtaking speed lessened and we began to see the enemy formation slide ahead. However in the interim I could look down onto the heads of the enemy pilots, see their hands — even note they carried maps in the leg pockets of their flying suits.

Despite our acute fear concerning the outcome of this encounter it was obvious the enemy pilots were suffering an attack of the jitters also - they were weaving their heads from side to side anxiously scanning for sight of us below



Engine overhaul time. Everyone pitched in to ensure the aircraft were ready for the next mission. **Basedow Collection**



as they too leapt out of this same cloud. No doubt their controller is telling them our Baltimore should appear below their altitude his radar must have missed our steep climb and now our radar blip would be merged with that of his searching fighters.

As the three Me-109's drew ahead a fleeting opportunity was presented to gun them down, but reacting to standing orders (which were to avoid combat and bring back our photos) we regrettably let the opportunity pass in favour of seeing how this intercept would develop. Also at the back of our minds was the knowledge the enemy would make a determined effort to shoot us down with another fighter force were we successful.

So intent were the enemy pilots on searching for sight of us below them, they neglected to look ahead and up, surely they would have sighted our aircraft flying so closely behind their heads.

From a position dead astern we closely watched, when the three 109's went into a wide port turn we veered starboard and fled presenting our slimmest silhouette, then putting into practice those changes of courses and altitudes which had paid dividends time and again in the past we continued our patrol unmolested.

Later flying at 8,000 feet we approached the island of Thira (also called Santorini) the southern most of the Cyclades group of islands, to photo-cover its deep circular bay - itself the resultant aftermath of Planet Earth's greatest known, cataclysmic volcanic eruption - which in 400 B.C. destroyed the ancient Minoan civilization on Crete - an eruption estimated eight times greater than that of Krakatoa in 1883 A.D. Now this deep bay is being utilised as a hiding place for enemy shipping.

Pilot Don Beaton says "Look at those two parallel streaks on the water up ahead, are they speed boats?" No, as we watch the two creamy streaks on the bay terminate. We see out in front of us two Arado float lane fighters climbing steeply to attack us. We proceed keeping a wary eye on these Arados - they are equipped with vicious cannon and have close to our speed, when we pass above them the range is too great for them and us. Whilst we orbit around getting our photos we also have to keep a lookout for those 3 Me-109's which are probably still searching for us. The two Arados are now situated some distance behind us and have achieved a height advantage, they dive toward us to close the range, we pull up into a steepish climb, the Arados pull out of their slanting dive and climb again for more altitude. We level out and step up our speed, the Arados try another dive towards us and we climb again, so do the Arados. This cat and mouse game takes us up to 15,000 feet. Don pushes the Baltimore into steep full powered dive, we exceed 400



mph, the Arados fall further and further astern, we see them break off the chase and turn back towards Thira.

Continuing our reconnaissance we sight an enemy convoy at sea equipped with escort *flak* ships and three orbiting Me-109 fighters, We climb to a position a mile or so astern of the Me-109's and join in the orbit around their convoy. We transmit a sighting report to our Command at Alexandria giving details of the convoy's composition, course, speed, escort and geographical location - a message with a very high priority rating. Before Alexandria answers us Malta silences other of our aircraft radios transmitting and takes over control of our report. In rapid succession we hear Malta pass our report to Alexandria and to Gibraltar. We can hear Gibraltar pass the report to U.K. but do not hear U.K. responding. In a time span of mere minutes Admiralty Headquarters in England have this enemy convoy on their charts marked for action.

We also know a striking force of Rocket Beaufighters, airborne for sometime now, is winging its way towards the Aegean from North Africa. Our sighting report is being rebroadcast every few minutes for the benefit of the Rocket Beaufighters and any of our submarines that may be in the locality. The purpose behind our dangerous daylight reconnaissance in the enemy Aegean backyard is about to pay a dividend.

Warily we watch the three Me-109's flying ahead of us, they continue their monotonous orbit and we follow. Amazingly the *flak* ships below have not opened fire at us, we can plainly see enemy sailors moving around the decks, apparently our aircraft is accepted as one of theirs - we fully appreciate this absence of hostility. Their radio operators could not fail to hear our transmitter working - nor would our code baffle them, we are in clear view appreciatively savouring this unpremeditated deception. Much as we desire to be sitting in this unique box seat when the Beaufighter attack comes in, our fuel situation is such we cannot hang around too long, finally we break out of orbit, noting there has been no alteration to the convoy's course.

At low altitude we exit the Aegean around the eastern end of Crete through Kasos Strait. Crossing the Mediterranean our engines are dragging us along at greatly reduced power and speed, we are endeavouring to wheedle the maximum distance from our remaining fuel, obviously our airfield at Benghazi is too far away and we set course for El Adem. Anxious eyes study the empty horizon and receding fuel gauges - at long last we sight land ahead, fly across Tobruk and touch down at El Adem for fuel and a much needed meal.



Arriving back at Benghazi later in the afternoon we learn at our debriefing that of the three merchant vessels attacked by our Beaufighters, two were sunk and a third left in flames.

As if that was not enough action for the Yuletide. Any thoughts of a quiet Christmas Day were dashed late on the 24th when a signal from HQ was received calling for a full flying program and ending with a message from the Air Officer Commanding wishing everyone a Merry Christmas! It was Christmas, but as the Unit Historian recorded, it didn't feel like Christmas. A few sprigs of gum leaves decorated the Nissan huts, but many air and ground crew alike were up before dawn to go to work. And a busy day it was too – three reces and six anti-submarine patrols – nine sorties in all. There was not much to report except from Warrant Officer Dave McMurray who was bounced by a pair of Me-109s south of Melos. The enemy aircraft made seven attacks, but only hit the Baltimore once in the elevator. His WOG/AG Sergeant Bill Stamp⁵⁷ later recalled the Christmas Day action⁵⁸:

...we were on standby that day for two Baltimores that took off at first light to recce the Aegean. I thought if these aircraft take off we'll be home for Christmas [home being the Sergeants' Mess]. They took off. I was delighted, but an hour later we were called out, as one was returning with an unserviceable turret. As we approached the Aegean between the east coast of Greece and the west coast of Crete ['one-o-nine corner'] two Me-109s were waiting for us and both attacked. I signalled back to Base O-A [am being attacked by enemy aircraft] then got down on the floor in the fuselage as our pilot McMurray turned in to each attack – I fired those guns and I had a glimpse of blue Mediterranean one minute and the sky the next. The attacks lasted for about 20 minutes; we shot one down and damaged the other. Did I get drunk that day!!



Everyone ready for Christmas dinner - the cooks did a remarkable job given the sparse conditions.

Coates Collection

After all the day's action, Christmas dinner was served by the Officers to the ground crew and NCO aircrew in the traditional way, but owing to

⁵⁷ SGT William Stamp, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1384398. 454 Sqn - 5 May 43 - 14 May 44.

⁵⁸ 454//459 Squadron's Association Bulletin, 2002-2003.



the large numbers to be fed, the Squadron ran out of dinner plates. The Officers, who had been flying that day had to wait until after 10 pm to get what little remained, and by then, most were too tired to enjoy it.

Baltimore FA559 was airborne at 1230 hrs on the 30th for the now standard Aegean recce. Nothing further was heard from the aircraft after take-off, and although the crew were new, they had conducted three similar sorties previously and knew the risk. Lost were Flight Sergeant Gus Paterson⁵⁹ with Flying Officer Derek Armitage⁶⁰, and Flight Sergeants Laurie Nichol⁶¹ and Claude McEvoy⁶².

The last day of the year almost brought about the loss of another veteran crew. Flight Lieutenant George Railton flying FA450 called for the ambulance when he landed just after 1400 hrs after a rather exciting sortie. The aircraft was badly holed with cannon and machine-gun strikes and Wireless Operator Pilot Officer Tony White⁶³ was wounded in the leg. They had been jumped by a pair of Me-109s just south of Polygandros⁶⁴ and the turret guns had jammed after firing only a dozen rounds. They eventually escaped into cloud, but the ordeal had not ended. About 50 minutes later, after leaving Kythera Channel, they were again intercepted and again, the guns jammed. Only excellent flying by Railton prevented the Baltimore from suffering greater damage or even its loss. After landing it was discovered that one aileron was shot away and the other – although he didn't know it - reduced to a single strand of the control cable. For this and previous action, George Railton was awarded a DFC.

In summing up the year, the RAF Mediterranean Review (a Secret document produced by the HQ) stated⁶⁵:

How did the Aegean balance sheet stand at the end of 1943? On the debt side, we had lost our foothold behind the enemy's defence ring and were back where we had started in the previous September... On the credit side, our operations had certainly succeeded in their object of creating a diversion at the time of the invasion of Italy and had compelled the Germans to divert both troops and aircraft from other theatres.. Nevertheless, in spite of all the disadvantages and handicaps, the squadrons involved in the Aegean – bomber, fighter, reconnaissance and transport – unquestionably added their full share to the combined operations.

⁵⁹ † FSGT Angus Paterson, RAAF Pilot No 411180.b. 20 Jun 16, Gourrock, Scotland. 454 Sqn - 3 Nov 43 – 30 Dec 43. KIA 30 Dec 43. Age 27. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁶⁰ † FLGOFF Derek Norman Armitage, RAFVR Nav No 142427. 454 Sqn - 3 Nov 43 – 30 Dec 43. KIA 30 Dec 43. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁶¹ † FSGT Laurence Keith Nicholl, RAAF WOP/AG No 415383. b. 29 Oct 14, Perth, WA. 454 Sqn - 3 Nov 43 – 30 Dec 43. KIA 30 Dec 43. Age 29. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁶² † FSGT Claude Edward McEvoy, RAAF WOP/AG No 415540. b. 3 Nov 14, Jarrahdale, WA. 454 Sqn - 3 Nov 43 – 30 Dec 43. KIA 30 Dec 43. Age 29. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁶³ PLTOFF Anthony Hopper White, RAAF WOP/AG No 400608. b. 29 Oct 14, Parkes, NSW. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 42 – 2 Jan 44. WIA.

⁶⁴ It is likely they were the aircraft claimed by Feldwebel Rudolf Moycis of 7/ JG 27 north of Crete at 11.03.

⁶⁵ *RAF Mediterranean Review*, No 5, p 91.



So another year came to an end, and the expected withdrawal of the Germans from the Med and Italy had not occurred. The Squadron had lost 15 aircraft and crews in action, one to an accident and had written-off ten more in prangs. Many others had been repaired. Gone too were the boring patrols across the Med. Now the very real prospect of enemy fighter interception and well aimed *flak* had come into play. The Squadron too had taken the war to the enemy. After the disaster of the mid-year Crete raid, crews now regularly bombed and strafed shipping and shore installations and the odd Me-109 had come off worse for the encounter. The Squadron could well and truly say it had been in action.

Month	Sorties	Hours	Month	Sorties	Hours
January	-	-	July	235	1221
February	-	-	August	236	1136
March	46	406	September	317	1502
April	74	503	October	228	1242
May	158	922	November	149	1052
June	175	963	December	162	1074
			Total	1776	10220

Table 7.1 – Operational Flying Summary for 1943⁶⁶



Aircraft FA617:U goes out on patrol.

Coates Collection

⁶⁶ AA Series A11362/1 – File 12/1/Air – 454 Squadron Statistical Analysis of Operations.



CHAPTER 8

A TYPICAL RECCE MISSION



In late 1943, the Germans were well established in Greece and the Aegean Islands, and their presence still remained a significant threat to the Allied plans for Italy. Their troop garrisons relied on mostly sea transport for their resupply, reinforced to a much lesser scale by air. By early 1944, anti-submarine and anti-surface shipping patrols were the norm for 454 Squadron. These flights often lasted over five hours, and while boring to some, required the utmost in concentration. A small caique or submarine snorkel were very difficult to see from the air and could easily be missed.

Flight Lieutenant Peter Lawton¹, a navigator/bomb aimer with Flying Officer Jack Ennis²'s crew, describes a typical Aegean reconnaissance sortie³...

Crew:

Flying Officer Jack Ennis, Pilot
Flight Lieutenant Peter Lawton, Nav(B)
Flight Sergeant Bill Burke⁴, WOP/AG
Flight Sergeant Ted Denton⁵, WOP/AG



The Crew - Jack Ennis, Bill Burke, Peter Lawton and Ted Denton.
Ennis Collection

Our squadron's job was to maintain a ceaseless reconnaissance of the main Greek and Aegean harbours, and, incidentally, to provide anti-submarine cover for Allied convoys which were passing through the eastern Mediterranean. But the vital job was this unending search for

¹ FLTLT Peter Lawton, RAAF Nav No 423318. b. Southport, Qld. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 26 Nov 44.

² FLTLT John Robert 'Jack' Ennis, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 420339. b. 22 Aug 14, Drummoyne, NSW. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 26 Nov 44.

³ Courtesy 454/459 Squadrons Association – used with permission.

⁴ FSGT William Burke, RAAF WOP/AG No 421241. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 6 Dec 44.

⁵ FSGT Edward James Denton, RAAF WOP/AG No 415770. 454 Sqn - 9 Feb 44 – 6 Dec 44.



enemy ships, no matter how small. Anything larger than a rowing boat, which we found and reported in these waters, ran the risk of being sunk by air attack from other Middle East aircraft. All operations were controlled from Alexandria, and R.A.F. and Naval Headquarters there boasted that they knew the name and tonnage of every major German-controlled ship in the Aegean Sea. If we could supply them with the position of these ships, our job was well done.

This reconnaissance work was done by a lone aircraft from our squadron, and it was rather an exacting task, always done from a low altitude. There were enemy fighter aerodromes at various strategic points scattered among the maze of islands which dot the Aegean Sea, and most of the harbours were protected by anti-aircraft guns.



Off on another recce.

Gray Collection

Generally we were briefed for a trip soon after dinner in the evening. We bump along the dusty road to Wing Headquarters in the back of a three-ton “gharry”, and silently hope that the job on the

tomorrow will not take us into any of the known “hot” spots. The briefing officer details our time of take-off, which harbours we are to visit, which waters we are to patrol, our call-sign on the radio. In front of the intelligence officer are the latest reports concerning enemy activity, and he tells us which aerodromes German fighters have been sighted on recently. He informs us of the latest position of Allied convoys which we may see during our crossing and re-crossing of the Mediterranean, and also the positions of our submarines. Each one of us is issued with an “escape pouch” in case we are forced down. It contains enough American dollars and Greek money to reward any friendly Greeks who may help us to get out of the country.

Back to our tent for an early night in bed, Jack and I discuss tactics. We finally agree on the best way to approach each harbour, and by



this time we have been in bed for an hour. Sleep during the night is fitful, and one tends to have vivid dreams.

It's odds on that you are already awake at 4.30 a.m. when the guard comes to waken you. The reward for setting up so early is an extra egg for breakfast, but you always feel that you do not appreciate it as much as you should. The ride in the truck to the aerodrome in the early-morning desert air is most invigorating, but somehow you are not inclined to notice that either.

At the Operations Room I ring through to H.Q. and get the latest weather report which I write in my log. We collect binoculars and a camera, and then drive out to our waiting Baltimore. Heavy dew covers her windscreens, and one of the 'erks' is busy trying to remove it with a cloth. In the darkness we get everything aboard, and find somewhere to stow the equipment in the kite's cramped interior. I grin when I hear little Billy, the gunner, cursing quietly to himself as he tries to get the crate containing the homing pigeons through the hatch. He always does that. But one day those pigeons may save our lives.

We climb into our seats about ten minutes before take-off time, then check the various instruments. Jack starts the motors. We begin to taxi out to the runway. It's a difficult aeroplane to taxi in the dark, so I poke the Aldis lamp out of the window and light up the edge of the strip to help Jack a bit.

After the motors have been run up, we begin to gather speed down the lighted flare path. Gradually the speed builds up, but the kite takes a long run to get airborne because she is overloaded with a full petrol tank instead of bombs in the bomb-bay. This extra fuel almost doubles our range.

We circle the flare path once, I give Jack the first heading, and we set course. There are nearly 400 miles of open sea ahead before we next sight land. The few scattered lights which denote Benghazi, slide away behind us, and we slide on into the darkness with the Mediterranean a thousand feet below.

As soon as it is light enough to see the waves I check the drift. An alteration of course of a couple of degrees usually follows this.



The loneliness of an Aegean recce. Aircraft 'U' on patrol.
Coates Collection



Soon the sun begins to peep over the eastern horizon, the Med begins to take on its exclusive shade of blue, and it makes you almost feel good. Every ten minutes I check the drift and keep a good watch on the windlanes on the sea for any sign of a change in wind direction. As we pass the half-way point to Crete I inform Jack and we begin to lose height slowly, edging down until we are just above the tops of the waves at about thirty feet.

The *Jerries* find it difficult to pick up a low flying aircraft on their Radar.

Billy now tests his guns by firing a couple of bursts. We check our petrol consumption and find everything OK. Five minutes before my calculated estimated time of arrival, we see, like a faint blue smudge on the horizon, the outline of Anti-Kythera Island, dead ahead. It seems like a sleeping sentry ready to be awakened at the slightest sound. As we approach Kythera Strait four pairs of eyes search every inch of the early-morning sky. “No welcoming party, anyway,” Jack remarks. Soon we are skimming the waves through the Strait; subconsciously I hear the note of the motors go into a higher tone as Jack opens the throttles a little to bring our speed up to 190 m.p.h.



How low can you go? This lighthouse photographed on one such recce.

Wilson Collection

Always, as we fly through this narrow strait between the mainland of Greece and the Island of Crete, I get the same feeling inside of me. It is one of uncertainty as to the future - almost like walking through prison gates, hearing the clang as they shut, and feeling that there is no certainty as to when they will ever open again.

Inside, we turn east, and fly along the coast of forbidding-looking Crete. I check drift, write

it in my log, scan the water with binoculars. Nobody says a word. We reach our turning point, and I give Jack the course north to Melos Island. Still nobody speaks. A microphone switched on at



this stage means something; you begin to dread hearing the click and the whirring noise which indicates that one of the crew is about to report something. Then, suddenly, - “Three aircraft dead ahead,” from Jack, and immediately we go into a steep turn to starboard, the motors scream as the pitch goes into fine and the throttles are opened. Quickly I note the time and our position then take a look through the binoculars. I tell Jack that I think they are Arados. Billy now takes over directing the pilot, reports their relative position every ten seconds, but in three or four minutes time the enemy has given up the chase. Our speed is always our main defence.

I give Jack a new course back to the spot where we first sighted the Arados, for they may have been protecting some ships, and ships are our business. We search the area but sight nothing. We conclude that the enemy aircraft were merely enroute for Crete, so we continue on our way north to Melos.

As the island looms up ahead we start to climb, and edge round to its western side, for that is where we have decided to [make our] approach. We dive across the harbour, and Billy reports a red Very light being shot up, so that means the *flak* batteries are ready for us. As we scream down at over 300 m.p.h. I open my window, have a look at the quayside through the binoculars, mentally note the five ships, pick up the camera, and take three photos. Through my earphones I hear Billy in the background quietly reporting the *flak* bursts. We’ve got all the information we want, so I say to Jack, “OK, mate,” and he immediately throws the aircraft into a steep turn to port and we head for the sea again. I pick up my log and make the appropriate entries, conferring all the while with Jack and Billy and Ted about the size of the ships and the amount of flak.



These recce flights were often flown very low as seen here. In the background a small fishing village and olive groves.

Campbell Collection

I set the new course for Monemvasia and work



out the time of arrival. As we fly west towards Greece, I make out the first sighting report of the ships in Melos and pass the message over the intercom to Ted, the wireless operator. Then while he is transmitting that we make up the weather report and the amplifying report. They go to Ted when he is ready, and he wireesses them back to base.

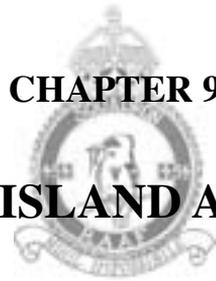
The strange rock formation, which juts out into the sea at Monemvasia, is visible when we are still twenty miles away. We climb to a thousand feet, dive across the harbour, the flak comes up, the photographs are taken, and we set course for Cape Maleas. Then there are more sighting reports to compile. By now, we have been inside the Aegean for an hour and a half; this is the last little stretch, and we're all anxious to be on the way home. Fifteen minutes after passing Maleas, we're again passing through Kythera Strait. Now we can relax for the long drag home across the Med.

I give Jack the course, take a drift, give Ted our time of arrival at base, bring my log up to date, I dig the thermos and sandwiches out of the bag and find them most welcome. When I have eaten mine, I take the controls to give Jack a spell from flying the kite. We talk a bit more than usual now, nattering about the trip, the ships we saw, the *flak*, the fighters, anything at all. I don't fly very well, but having only the compass, altimeter and airspeed instruments makes it a bit difficult.

We find at about a thousand feet, that 24 inches of boost, 1650 rpm will give us 165 miles an hour Indicated Air Speed, and a consumption of 84 gallons an hour. This is our most economical cruising, and makes a safety range of three-and-three-quarter hours, calculating safety range to be eighty-two percent of the absolute maximum.

The North African coast looms up, and that parched desert looks good. The coast of Australia is the only sight, which would be better at this moment. I hand over to Jack, we fly down the coast over battered Benghazi, circle our field, and touch down five hours and twenty minutes after we took off.

No detail is too small for the Intelligence Officer when he is debriefing us. He writes the whole story down. The whole procedure takes half an hour, and it is quite annoying to four very tired men. We're very glad to get back to the old tent where some food and a sleep await us. We all have that satisfied feeling of a job well done.



CHAPTER 9

GREEK ISLAND ATTACKS

By the end of the Northern Hemisphere Autumn, attention had turned towards the Greek Islands and the German Garrisons stationed throughout. With the German defeat in North Africa and the war now moving on to Italy, Allied convoy protection and anti-submarine work across the Med while still important, had become less vital. German forces had retaken Cos, Leros and other Greek Island outposts and *E-Boats* were now based in Crete. While the Germans had won back their outposts, it was to be a pyrrhic victory. They would now have to support those garrisons, and that would require convoys to run the air gauntlet. The *Luftwaffe* was now becoming stretched and could muster only around 120 aircraft of which some 30-40 were reconnaissance types, 40-50 coastal types

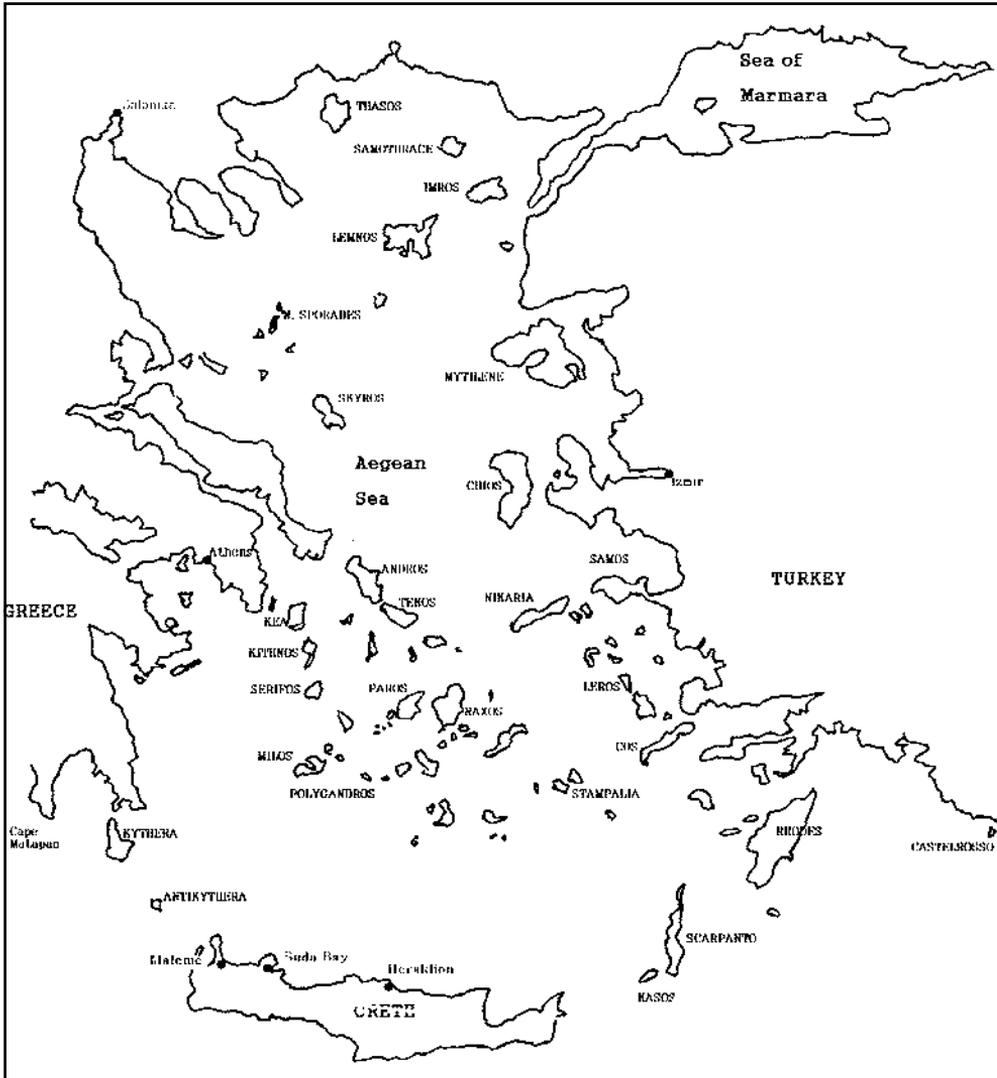
and 40-50 fighters – but was by no means a spent force. This situation required 454 and sister Aussie Squadron 459 to be on constant patrol. The work was thankless, with many hours spent over the Aegean scanning for signs of shipping, troop movement, in fact anything that may disclose the German position.



A typical Greek Island attack - 20 March 1944. Authors Collection

New Year's Day 1944 found 454 still amongst the sand dunes of Berka.

January and February 1944 passed quickly, with Aegean reces the norm. Although action was slow, the vital reports allowed Allied intelligence to build a picture of German movements and on many occasions, lead to later strikes by



Map3: Greek Islands

rocket-firing Beaufighters. The winter weather had also set in, making life in the desert cold and flying conditions deplorable. Early in January, Wing Commander Jack Coates discovered a new Radio Direction Finding (RDF) station being constructed on Erakhia Island. It was the latest in a chain of sites that had been under development. These RDF stations were the German early warning radars and would mean that clandestine operations would become much more difficult. Recce crews could all expect an unfriendly reception from now on.

Crews also began flying longer missions, some deploying to El Adem before launching on their task. It meant nine-hour days for some. A detachment to Gambut was also mounted from 4 to 11 January.



While January was free of enemy action, an unfortunate accident deprived the Squadron of two valuable crew members. After conducting the morning reces from the Gambut Detachment, the three crews involved were recalled to Berka that afternoon leaving an aircraft in place. Accordingly, Flight Sergeant Vic Mitchell and his navigator Flying Officer John Clough¹, returned with Squadron Leader Don Beaton. The two WOP/AGs, Flying Officer Tony Lindley² and Flight Sergeant Les Holley³ jumped into Flying Officer Roger Wilson's⁴ aircraft. However, Wilson's aircraft FA379:Q stalled on take off, hit the ground, cartwheeled and landed on its back. The crash was such that the aircraft was completely destroyed. Fortunately, both engines fell out on impact so there was no fire. Flying Officer John Maitland⁵, the navigator was severely injured and both Wilson and Lindley admitted to hospital with fractures. The remainder escaped with bruises and a shaking. It transpired that Maitland had suffered a fractured skull, spinal injuries and a shattered leg and was admitted to Cairo hospital where he was not expected to live. He later recovered, but would not return to flying duties. He eventually walked again and lived a long and rewarding life, finally passing away at 80 years of age.

On 1 February 1944, 201 Group and AHQ Air Defence, Eastern Mediterranean ceased to exist as separate functional commands and were amalgamated to form Air HQ Eastern Mediterranean. The effect on 454 Squadron would be minimal, but tasking now came through from No 212 Group.

Newcomer to the Unit, Lieutenant Alex Dryden⁶, a pilot from the South African Air Force, made a momentous start to his 454 Squadron service. On 4 February, he crashed on landing while attempting a go-round and the crew walked away. Then, two days later, he struck particularly bad weather and luck. Flying FA534: W and tasked with a convoy escort, he did not locate his target and with a bad radio compounding his problems, he exceeded the endurance of the aircraft and was forced to belly land at Magrum, approximately 50 miles from base. After spending a very uncomfortable night, the crew⁷ were located by the CO the next morning and a ground party were directed to the site. While the crew were uninjured, the aircraft was a write-off.

¹ FLGOFF John Alexander Clough, RAAF Nav No 412395. b. 4 May 16, Ivanhoe, Vic. 454 Sqn - 26 Nov 43 – 5 Sep 45.

² FLGOFF Anthony Frederick Horace Lindley, RAAF WOP/AG No 414578. b. 13 Dec 22, Gympie, Qld. 454 Sqn – 26 Nov 43 – 22 Oct 44.

³ FSGT Leslie Alfred 'Babe' Holley, RAAF WOP/AG No 420000. b. 24 Jan 23, Carlton, NSW. 454 Sqn - 26 Nov 43 – 2 Oct 44.

⁴ FLGOFF Roger Ruddle Wilson, RAAF Pilot No 420710. b. 9 Jan 21, Randwick, NSW. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 43 – 26 Nov 44.

⁵ FLGOFF John Richard Maitland, RAAF Nav No 420972. b. 30 Nov 19, Newcastle, NSW. 454 – 18 Dec 43 – 10 Jan 44. WIAA – 10 Jan 44.

⁶ CAPT Alexander Thomas Dryden, DFC, SAAF Pilot No SA102099V. 454 Sqn – 21 Jan 44 – 9 Dec 44.



These flights were not always ‘milk runs’. Engagements with enemy fighters became more regular, often with fatal results⁸. Turret gunner Gordon Hissey remembered his 6 February 1944 flight with pilot Dave Lewis particularly well...



Lieutenant Dryden's crash of FA534:W on 4 February 1944 - near Agedabiah. Basedow Collection

For more than an hour, all went well. We were flying high with some cloud cover. Passing Melos Island, I reported that two planes seemed to be taking off. Intelligence had warned us that an airstrip had recently been constructed there. I was searching astern, above and below on the port side when Dave calmly announced; “We have company out to the starboard”.

I turned the turret and also took a good look astern thinking; “Where is the other one?” The Me-109s usually flew in pairs. There was a 109 sitting approximately 600 yards away. Though it was a long shot, I opened fire. The right hand gun misfired, the first time I had any trouble with a turret gun. The Nav(B) took a photo with his big hand held F14 camera. We brought back photographic evidence of that engagement. Our Wireless Operator, Warrant Officer Tom Strickland⁹, tapped out a signal we were under attack and then went to the lower rear gun position. Meantime, I had cleared the right hand gun and was regularly giving Dave the fighter’s position. The 109 was slightly above our height and coming from astern on the port quarter. If he attacked, I wanted Dave to corkscrew down to port.

It seemed odd though that the 109 sat between 6-700 yards astern of us and was not closing at all. Then the unexpected happened. Cannon shells exploded from behind the tail, under the port wing and past the nose. Another fighter? Dave instinctively lifted the nose and the plane went into a high speed stall, then into a vicious spin.

Dave soon had control after the spin and was heading for cloud and home, but we still had the 109 chasing us. He came fast from astern; my left gun was blocked out by the tailplane and fin, but

⁷ With Dryden were FLGOFF Jim Scott, Nav, SGT E. Lomas, WOP/AG and SGT J. Griffiths, WOP/AG.

⁸ A total of 21 squadron aircraft together with their crews (84 airmen) were lost over the Aegean during these missions.

⁹ WOFF (later PILOTOFF) Tom Leslie Strickland, RAAF WOP/AG No 406334. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 42 – 21 Feb 44.



the other gun didn't malfunction this time and to me, he presented a good target. So I was able to get some bursts off. We came out of the cloud, but the 109 did not reappear!

They did not wait to see what happened. Dave Lewis was subsequently awarded a DFC for his overall airmanship and for successfully returning his damaged Baltimore after this and a previous attack by fighters. It must have been with a sense of *déjà vu* that Lewis recounted the action to the intelligence officer with a flash back to an almost identical incident on 10 July 1943. Dave subsequently was asked by 201 Group to lecture new crews on his unorthodox escape manoeuvre.

April Fool's Day was to be lucky for Flight Sergeant Jim Baber and his crew. They attacked a 150 ton motor launch and experienced *flak* along the way. One cylinder was holed by a 20 mm cannon shell. It was remarkable that the engine kept going as the damage might have easily caused the engine to quit altogether. They reached base without further trouble, testament to the solid construction of the Balt. As time went on, there would be further examples of its sturdiness. According to Jim¹⁰:

...the engine continued to function perfectly “after noticing a pronounced loss of synchronisation corrected by advancing one throttle”. After de-briefing, we were met by the Flight Sergeant with a chewed-up but still recognisable 20 mm shell – he said “we work all day keeping the engines fit, now we have to work all bloody night doing a bloody engine change!”

The Big Week

Towards the end of February, things began to heat up. On the 21st, Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore¹¹ and crew sighted what he estimated to be a 4,000 ton merchant vessel with an escort in Melos Harbour. It was their first recce after arriving at the Unit, and as the newcomers, was a spot of good fortune. The large ship was believed by Allied intelligence to be the 5,300 ton *Livenza*, one of the enemy's prized transports in the Aegean. Such a target would be too good to miss, but it was unlikely to remain in Melos as a sitting duck. An immediate attack was 'on'.

The next day, according to the Unit Historian, was 'one of the liveliest days in which this squadron has had a hand'. Flying Officer Pat Humphreys¹² was

¹⁰ Correspondence with George Gray. Dec 00.

¹¹ SQNLDR Victor Cashmore, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 407165. b. 3 Sep 19 Adelaide SA. 454 Sqn – 11 Feb 44 – 22 Dec 44.



sent off to Melos to check for the *Livenza's* presence while Warrant Officer Dave McMurray went to search the nearby islands. Humphreys confirmed the vessel had sailed and set off to search the nearby sea lanes to the south. The scent was becoming fresh when a pair of enemy fighters were spotted orbiting south of Melos. Meanwhile, McMurray making his way northwards sighted the enemy convoy comprising a merchantman and two escort vessels. About ten minutes later, the convoy was also sighted by Humphreys who relayed the position to base and handed over to Flight Sergeant Bill Milne¹³. Humphreys later recalled:



Flight Lieutenant Pat Humphreys (Pilot), Flight Sergeant George Joyce (WAG) and Flying Officer 'Jock' Logan (Nav/B). Turret gunner, Flight Sergeant Charles Lancaster was absent in hospital at the time of the photo.

Humphreys Collection

Most of the time, a reconnaissance patrol was unlikely to locate anything more exciting than a Greek caique or two – but on 22 April, flying Baltimore “R” – FA468, we were fortunate enough to scoop a major prize. At 06:55 on a beautiful sunny morning, we spotted the 5300-ton motor vessel *Livenza*. My Navigator got a couple of excellent pictures before we were intercepted by a couple of Me-109s, which, much to our relief, seemed to be keener to chase us off than to tangle with us.

By now, the convoy was known to be heading for Candia Harbour on Crete and had eight escorting fighters. The Baltimores played a shadowing game with Flying Officer Harry ‘Kipper’ Carew¹⁴ replacing Milne and finally Flight Sergeant Brian ‘Kid’ Rawlings¹⁵ likewise replacing Carew. Unfortunately, Rawlings and crew were lost while on this dangerous activity. Flying Baltimore FW329, they got too close and fell fowl of the convoy’s escorting Me-109s and were shot down¹⁶. Lost on Rawlings crew were Warrant Officer Harry Padman¹⁷,

¹² FLGOFF Herbert M ‘Pat’ Humphreys, RAFVR Pilot No 48634. 454 Sqn – 21 Jan 44 – 25 Jan 45.

¹³ FSGT William D. Milne, RAFVR Pilot No 1250497. 454 Sqn – 29 Dec 43 – 1 Oct 44.

¹⁴ FLGOFF Henry William ‘Kipper’ Carew, RAAF Pilot No 409509. b. 11 Aug 22, Marrickville, NSW. 454 Sqn - 3 Oct 43 – 5 May 44.

¹⁵ † FSGT Brian Edwin ‘Kid’ Rawlings, RAAF Pilot No 413504. b. 10 Nov 22, Bexley, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 22 Feb 44. KIA 22 Feb 44, age 21. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁶ Claimed by Lt. Hans-Gunnar Culemann of 7/JG 27 NNW of Heraklion, Crete.



Flight Sergeant Tom King¹⁸, and Warrant Officer Gordon Barker¹⁹.

Despite the loss, the day's activities culminated in the sinking of the vessel off the north coast of Crete by a combined force of 24 Beaufighters and four US B-25 Mitchells. In addition, two enemy fighters were shot down for the loss of three Beaus. Humphreys concluded:



Beaufighters attack the German vessel 'Livenza', 22 February 1944. *Coates Collection*

Later in the day, *Livenza* was sunk by rocket-firing Beaufighters of 227 Squadron, RAF. Operations of this kind were rarely reported in the public press, but this one was documented in detail in an English-language periodical in Cairo under the title "The Last Cruise of the *Livenza*."

McMurray was also given official credit for the intercept. The RNZAF Official History of the action quotes:²⁰

Warrant Officer McMurray, who flew with an Australian Baltimore squadron, was an outstanding reconnaissance pilot. Towards the end of February 1944, he sighted the enemy's largest available dry-supply ship in the Aegean - the 5000-ton *Livenza*. As a result of his report twenty-four British Beaufighters and four American Mitchells caught up with the *Livenza*; she was set on fire and left sinking.

As a result of the day's work, Wing Commander Coates received a congratulatory message from the Air Officer Commanding in Chief expressing his appreciation for the good work of all concerned and regrets at the loss of Rawlings and crew. On the 26th, a message was also received from the Prime Minister commending the work in the Aegean.

¹⁷ † WOFF Douglas Henry Padman, RAAF Nav No 415218. b. 20 Oct 20, Donnybrook, WA. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 22 Feb 44. KIA 22 Feb 44, age 23. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁸ † FSGT Thomas King, RAAF WOP/AG No 420798. b. 18 Jul 13, Tyalgum, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 22 Feb 44. KIA 22 Feb 44, age 30. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

¹⁹ † WOFF Gordon Ross Barker, RAAF WOP/AG No 413941. b. 20 Jun 22, Arncliffe, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 22 Feb 44. KIA 22 Feb 44, age 21. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁰ Thompson, WGCdr H.L., *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force*, Vol III, p225.



Five days after the *Livenza* attack, the Squadron suffered another loss. Flying Officer Arnold Dawe²¹ and crew flying FA499:U took off at 0730 hours to carry out a shipping recce along the coast of western Greece. No sightings were made, but at 1043 hours, a distorted message was received which seemed to suggest they were in distress. At 1206 hours, a strong bearing was plotted which indicated the aircraft was on course for base. From this time on, the aircraft received frequent bearings, but just after 1300 hours, an SOS was received giving the position about 100 miles from Benghazi. Shortly afterwards, all communication was lost and despite an extensive search, there was no sign of survivors. A fuel tank and small pieces of wreckage were later found, and it was assumed the aircraft broke up on impact with the heavy seas present at the time. Officially, the aircraft was believed to have ditched about 150nm SW of Cape Matapan. Also killed were Warrant Officer John Rowe²², Flight Sergeant John Siebert²³ and Flight Sergeant Bob Williams²⁴.

On the same day, the squadron had to write off another aircraft, FA468:R, but in this case, the crew escaped unhurt. Flying Officer Ray Crouch was intercepted by two Me-109s at Anti-Kythera on his exit run from an Aegean recce. The enemy fighters followed the Baltimore for 13 minutes and spent the next 17 minutes trying to shoot it down. Ray Crouch later recalled the excitement²⁵:



Aircraft 'N' goes out on sortie. This is a Mk IV and has the heavier turret with 0.5in guns.

Coates Collection

We were briefed for a photo-reconnaissance of Melos, Paros and Naxos. We were to go in formation with 'B' Baker crewed by the CO. The CO was to photograph a new RDF station on the south coast of Melos. We in 'R' were to act as a diversion, take vertical photos of the harbour and proceed to recce Paros and Naxos and

²¹ † FLGOFF Arnold William Dawe, RAAF Pilot No 416940. b. 25 Mar 13, Parkside, SA. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 43 – 27 Feb 44. KIA 27 Feb 44 age 30. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²² † WOFF John Rowe, RAAF Nav No 415359. b. 8 Oct 21. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 43 – 27 Feb 44. KIA – 27 Feb 44 age 22. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²³ † FSGT (later WOFF) John Augustine Siebert, RAAF WOP/AG No 416897. b. 21 Jul 22, Adelaide, SA. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 43 – 27 Feb 44. KIA – 27 Feb 44 age 21. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁴ † FSGT (later WOFF) Robert Devon Williams, RAAF WOP/AG No 415370. b. 19 Jan 23, Collie, WA. 454 Sqn – 18 Dec 43 – 27 Feb 44. KIA – 27 Feb 44 age 21. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

²⁵ The Rev Ray Crouch – 454 Sqn Association correspondence, 5 Mar 1992.



return to Berka via Anti-Kythera straits. Flight Lieutenant Philips²⁶ navigated for both aircraft outbound.



Crouch's crew - Flight Lieutenant 'Curley' Philips, Flight Sergeant John McHugh, Flying Officer Ray Crouch and Flight Sergeant 'Bob' Manning - Berka III - February 1944.

Basedow Collection

Both aircraft flew very low through Anti-Kythera on a diversionary track for Falkonera (a tiny Island west of Melos). As arranged, 'B' broke to port, staying on the deck while we in 'R' climbed steeply to 8,000 ft. on a south-easterly heading to Melos. Philips reported seeing 'B' running in low beneath us. Manning, in the turret, reported heavy flack as we turned over the harbour, photographing. I felt a 'kick' on the rudder and shortly after that an engine cut as we dived away. The starboard engine cut at about 1,000 ft. After an engine cut for the third time, despite attempts to change to 'third outer' tank, I decided we had serious fuel selector-box trouble, so decided to return

to base abandoning the rest of the sortie. I told the crew that we would hopefully make base if I didn't fiddle with the fuel cocks again. Philips told the WOP/AG to send the signal 'WJR - returning to base, engine trouble'. This was no doubt helpful to the Germans in notifying our intention, and position!

Approaching Anti-Kythera at about 50 ft I saw two aircraft ahead circling the lighthouse, known by 454 Sqn as the 'Duty Pilots', who booked us in and out of the Aegean. The navigator optimistically said 'they are probably Beaus' who were expected to follow us for a strike at Melos. However, on closer view they proved to be Me-109s.

Keeping as close to the water as possible, we went flat out at about 280 knots on a heading of roughly 200 deg, holding them for about ten minutes. The Me-109s were also flat out, pouring black smoke, each alternately climbing to 100 ft and diving presumably trying to get their sights on us. I was very grateful for our low-flying training over water.

Being anxious to throttle back (from full boost) to conserve fuel, I decided to make for what appeared to be stratus cloud at about 1,000 ft, and climbed into it. Unfortunately it was thinner than expected, and the Me-109s closed in, attacking from each quarter: Manning, in the turret, took command and expertly called for evasive turns

²⁶ FLTLT Mark Wishart 'Curly' Philips, RAFVR Nav No 117006. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 - 9 Apr 44.



for 5 minutes or so as the attacks intensified. The right gun jammed and the left was firing intermittently, but he got it going again and managed to hold them out. McHugh²⁷ was at the back hatch with his gun. We were being hit, and the undercarriage came down and one engine was misfiring.

In a clear patch one Me-109 attacked from 5 o'clock, then 7, and again from 5 o'clock but then surprisingly 'formed' on our right beam at what seemed to be a range of about 200 yards, but below our upper guns' sighting line. As we turned in towards him, the gunner got a good burst across the Me-109s cockpit. I saw him peel off steeply downwards followed by his partner.

After throttling back and into 'coarse pitch', we took stock and the navigator put us on a heading for Derna. We asked for QDMs, but received no reply, so sent SOS and O-A out continuously, with emergency IFF, hoping we'd be tracked. Fuel states being an unknown quantity, I told the crew to prepare for ditching, but this proved to be unnecessary.

As we approached the Cyrenaican coast, we flew nervously over a RN convoy, hoping our IFF and radio had been working. A Hurricane investigated us, and a naval escort signalled "All well by you?" by lamp.

Reaching Derna, we fired a red Very flare, having no R/T. There was difficulty lining up as the speed dropped on finals due to flap and aileron trouble. On touch-down a tyre burst and we swung off the strip towards a deep ditch. For the sake of the navigator, I deliberately raised the undercarriage, and the aircraft, luckily settled right way up. We all scrambled out unhurt.

Bob Manning²⁸ in the upper turret had a better view of the attack and recalled:

I pick them up as they pass on starboard beam and they come round to port and starboard quarters. We keep on deck all out at about 280 kts and hold them... First attack comes from starboard quarter and I see tracer shoot past tail as we turn into attack, I discover we have only one gun as right-hand one has jammed. Second attack hits the tail fin and I see a flash of cannon from nose of attacker. We climb for some cloud cover at about 1000 ft. and for next 10 minutes or so play hide-and-seek through wispy cloud and they keep hitting us. Left gun is firing intermittently but eventually manage to

²⁷ FSGT (later FLGOFF) John Patrick McHugh, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1354886. 454 Sqn - 5 Aug 43 - 9 Apr 44.

²⁸ WOFF Cyril Horace 'Bob' Manning MID, RAFVR WOP/AG No 157578. d. 14 Aug 99. 454 Sqn 5 Aug 43 - 9 Apr 44. Bob Manning recollections, 454 Sqn Association files. With permission.



A low level attack on Sami Harbour shipping. *Gray Collection*

get it going OK and begin to hold them out. Soon one makes an attack from 5 '0' clock and I get tracer in front of him, he breaks off and repeats his attack from port quarter and again I see tracer in front of him. He comes in for a third attack from 5 'o' clock - same effect, and this time he gets fed up with the tracer so he calls it a day and goes and parks himself on the starboard beam at about 600 yards,

giving me a chance for a beam shot. May have managed to hit him as I see tracer pass his nose and he dives to sea level and pulls out. Both 109s then broke off the engagement.

Damage noted by the salvage crew and advised to Ray some days later was extensive. There had been about 26 cannon strikes, including hits on the wings, engines and fuselage. Amazingly, the aircraft returned and the crew got out without a scratch. It was some time later that Ray was awarded a DFC for his airmanship. 'Curley' Philips²⁹ was so taken by the event, he composed a ditty (with help from Ray):

The Last Time I Saw Paros³⁰

The Last Time I Saw Paros
The *flak* was flying high,
And lots of little 109s
Were nipping round the sky.

The Last Time I Saw Paros
We flew round Nassau Bay;
But Gerry took a meagre view
And chased us far away.

So! We beat it for the water
With engines going full blast

²⁹ FLTLT Mark Wishart 'Curley' Philips RAFVR Nav No 117006. 454 Sqn – 5 Aug 43 – 9 Apr 44.

³⁰ From the 454 Squadron records and Ray Crouch correspondence to George Gray.



And we make our way through Anti-K
With a Messerschmitt up our

March 1944 would see the usual sorties and yet more losses. On 3 March, the Unit Historian solemnly reported the loss of two more crews:

We have recognised for some time that losses are inevitable, in conjunction with our work in the Aegean, but we were not prepared for the severe shock we suffered today, when neither of our recce crews returned. Flying Officer Scott³¹ flew to Suda Bay, and no signal of any kind has been received from him. An O-A – enemy fighter signal – was received from Flight Sergeant Kempnich³², after which nothing was heard. It seems fairly obvious that he was shot down. In Flying Officer Scott's case the probability is that he was attacked so suddenly that he had no chance to send out a message. It was his third trip into the Aegean, but Flight Sergeant Kempnich's was an experienced crew.

With Frank Scott in Baltimore FA601 were Flying Officer Arthur Lewis³³, Flying Officer Ed Magee³⁴ and Sergeant Walt Cullen³⁵. All were killed.

As to Kempnich and crew flying FW300, they were to fare slightly better. While Allan Kempnich and WOP/AG Warrant Officer John Stapleton³⁶ were killed, Flight Sergeant Frank Brown³⁷ and Warrant Officer Jack Seymour³⁸ survived and became POWs. The pair of Baltimores had both been shot down³⁹. After release from POW camp, Frank Brown later recalled what happened⁴⁰:

We were attacked by two Me-109s. After the first attack, the intercom was shot up and owing to the structure of the aircraft, we could not communicate. After two more attacks, the starboard engine ceased and the port engine caught fire. We ditched. Three

³¹ † FLGOFF Frank Neville Scott, RAFVR Pilot No 143288. 454 Sqn - 21 Jan 44 – 3 Mar 44. KIA – 3 Mar 44. Age 25. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³² † FSGT Allan Wilfred Joseph Kempnich, MID, RAAF Pilot No 413608. b. 11 Jun 18, Sydney, NSW. 454 Sqn - 18 Dec 43 – 3 Mar 44. KIA – 3 Mar 44. Age 25. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³³ † FLGOFF Arthur Lewis, RAFVR Nav 144611. 454 Sqn - 21 Jan 44 – 3 Mar 44. KIA – 3 Mar 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁴ † FLGOFF Edward Vincent Magee, RAFVR WOP/AG No 16162. 454 Sqn - 21 Jan 44 – 3 Mar 44. KIA – 3 Mar 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁵ † Sergeant Walter Percy Cullen, RAF WOP/AG No 657499. 454 Sqn - 30 Dec 43 - 23 Aug 44. KIA 3 Mar 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁶ † WOFF John Edward Stapleton, RAAF WOP/AG No 416898. b. 29 Jun 19, Lithgow, NSW. 454 Sqn - 18 Dec 43 – 3 Mar 43. KIA – 3 Mar 43. Age 24. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

³⁷ † FSGT Francis James Brown, RAAF Nav No 421787. b. 23 Feb 24, Brisbane, Qld. 454 Sqn - 18 Dec 43 – 3 Mar 43. POW - 3 Mar 44.

³⁸ † WOFF Jack Dudley Seymour, RAAF WOP/AG No 409187. b. 31 Aug 21, Maryborough, Qld. 454 Sqn - 18 Dec 43 – 3 Mar 43. POW - 3 Mar 44.

³⁹ Two Baltimores were claimed by Uffz. Hans Giese and Lt. Hans-Gunnar Culemann of 7/JG 27. Giese's claim was at 09.07 near Cape Sparta, while Culemann's was at 09.35 50nm from Melos.

⁴⁰ Statement of Repatriated POW – Brown Personal file. RHS.



members of the crew got out. FSGT Stapleton sank with the aircraft. After five days in a dinghy, FSGT Kempnich attempted to swim to a small island but I do not think he reached it. The aircraft ditched approximately 10 miles south of Melos Island.

As well as aircrew, casualties among the ground crew were also recorded. On the same day as Scott, Kempnich and their crews were lost, so too was Leading Aircraftsman Mal McKenzie⁴¹. He was shot by marauding Arabs in the early hours of the morning and died shortly afterwards.

By the spring of 1944, strange, new aerials were being fitted to some of the long-range Baltimores. They were part of the earliest of maritime patrol radars called Air-to-Surface Vessel (ASV) and as the name suggests, were used to detect surface targets. Such devices were becoming more sophisticated, and were well suited to the Mediterranean theatre. Soon the wireless operators were getting expert in its use. The equipment consisted of a number of aerials fixed to the aircraft wing (looking much like a modern TV antenna) and a number of 'black boxes' fitted inside the cabin. It was top secret and no photos of it were permitted. The wireless operator would use a cathode ray scope to interpret the returns and provide the pilot with range and position left or right of track. As well as the ASV equipment, the first Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) was also fitted to each aircraft. This would send a signal to the Allied ground stations to show that the aircraft was friendly. With such equipment came the need for maintenance and so radar mechanics fresh from training in Canada and the US began to arrive. Leading Aircraftsman Wilf Darby⁴² was one of six Canadians and a single RAF airman who made up the radar section. He later recalled his duties:

We had been warned by other Canadian radar mechanics to bring our own screwdrivers of various sizes, wire cutters, pliers etc. [It was] The best advice we received from a practical viewpoint since said tools in the radar section were either non existent or so badly worn as to be almost useless.

... There were no hangars, so repairs had to be done in the open. Aircraft were inspected after every flight and after 50 hours they would be given a more thorough check by the maintenance section. For the radar group, we did daily flight inspections and maintenance inspections. After 500 hours the aircraft would go to a maintenance unit which was based somewhere else.

One example of the ASV radar's sensitivity was reported on 16 March when a *U-boat* hunt was on after several radar reports from a Wellington. Four crews

⁴¹ † LAC Malcolm McKenzie, RAFVR Elect II No 992779. Shot by Arabs – 3 Mar 44. Age 24. Buried: Alexandria (Hadra) War Cemetery, 6, A, 14, Egypt.

⁴² LAC Wilfred Arthur Darby, RCAF Radar Mech No R186385. 454 Sqn – early 44 - 28 Jul 44.



were dispatched to the area and although a patch of oil was sighted by one crew, it was discounted as coming from the boat. Flying Officer Jack Ennis and crew reported a very large log of wood in the water. This was quite capable of giving the tell-tale ‘blip’ on the radar scope and it was determined that the log was the source of the *U-boat* reports, and so the search was abandoned. In Jack Ennis’ own words...

Interesting experience today. Went out on a sub hunt about 80 miles out. When almost there we saw a disturbance in the water and on going down to have a shufti [*slang*: a look] found a long log or box. Pete [Lawton, the navigator] got a wizzo snap and when we returned, Wing reckoned that would have been what gave the Wimps the ASV contact.

Despite a miss this time around, by the end of March, the combined Allied air and naval effort in the Aegean had sunk 58 ships, badly damaged eight and a further 134 were damaged to some extent. Some successes were put down to the ASV.

Nevertheless, while the Allies had successes, so they had losses. On 2 April another crew disappeared. Flying Officer Harold Jarvis⁴³, Flying Officer Bob Browning⁴⁴, and Warrant Officers Andy Hamilton⁴⁵ and Bernie Stokes⁴⁶ failed to return. Flying FW404, and setting off on a recce of Leros at 5 am, nothing was ever heard of the crew and it was believed they few into the water before first light.

Around mid-1943, the Squadron acquired a mascot – Butch – a well bred Boxer dog. Ray Heathwood remembered the story:

The first evening I saw Butch collared in a flying football tackle and the rolling vigorous scramble and ferocious growling which ensued, I really believed Butch’s huge jaws clamped around an assailant’s arm or leg would really cause some injury. Not Butch, this was a conflict where he could utilise his great strength – his bite was gentle and his ferocious growling only added to the enjoyment of a mock battle.

He is the friend of everyone and the servant of no-one – loves going for a swim. When 30 or more lads clamber onto the back of a

⁴³ † FLGOFF Harold Edward Jarvis, RAAF Pilot No 417083. b. 16 May 13, Quorn, SA. 454 Sqn – 30 Dec 43 – 2 Apr 44. KIA – 2 Apr 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴⁴ † FLGOFF Robert John Browning, RAAF Nav No 420533. b. 26 Jun 20, Woonona, NSW. 454 Sqn – 30 Dec 43 – 2 Apr 44. KIA – 2 Apr 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴⁵ † WOFF Andrew Hamilton, RAAF WOP/AG No 412433. b. 24 Sep 22, Tamworth, NSW. 454 Sqn – 30 Dec 43 – 2 Apr 44. KIA – 2 Apr 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁴⁶ † WOFF Bernard George Stokes, RAAF WOP/AG No 413447. b. 19 Jun 20, Narrabri, NSW. 454 Sqn – 30 Dec 43 – 2 Apr 44. KIA – 2 Apr 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.



'Butch' scores a goal. As can be seen, he had his own 'Squadron Colours' and held honorary rank of Sergeant (some members also called him 'Sergeant').

Coates Collection

5 ton 'swim' truck there is standing room only, from somewhere around the camp comes Butch at full gallop, one almighty leap and he hurtles into our midst with a weighty wallop – in the water he would swim for hours often getting

ducked, but not afraid to climb on a swimmers back and do a bit of ducking himself.

There was a brief moment of excitement of another form reported on the morning of 6 April when Flying Officer Lem Gray⁴⁷ flew directly over a submarine. After crossing the coast near Tocra in Baltimore FW367, he sighted an empty dinghy and shortly afterwards, noticed a wake as the gunner reported a dark object just under the surface. After sending a message, he lost contact and resumed his patrol until ordered back by HQ. But he was too late and the sub had slipped away. German and Italian submarines had a harder time remaining concealed in the Mediterranean. The waters were clear and less turbid, so it was possible to see submarines under the surface below 50 feet in depth, whereas in the Atlantic, crews were lucky to see anything below 30 feet down.



New CO, Wing Commander 'Mick' Moore, outgoing CO, Wing Commander 'Jack' Coates and Flight Commander, Squadron Leader Don Beaton. *Coates Collection*

⁴⁷ † FLGOFF Lemuel William Gray, RCAF Pilot No J21425. 454 Sqn - 30 Dec 43 - 23 Aug 44. KIA 23 Aug 44. Florence War Cemetery, Col VIII, G, 16, Italy.



By early May, the Squadron was informed that it would soon be spending more time on bombing missions, so operational flying was reduced while bombing and formation flying was practiced. On the 14th, the first promised attack occurred – the first bombing mission for about nine months. Four Baltimores led by the new CO, Wing Commander Mick Moore in FA486, bombed Kalamata Harbour in Western Greece. Moore had returned to the Squadron on promotion as its commander after a two-month spell with 201 Group HQ. Also on the raid were Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore in FW366:G, Flying Officer Lem Gray in FW589 and Pilot Officer Dave Johnston⁴⁸ in FW405 and their respective crews. Each aircraft carried three 250lb bombs, but unfortunately most bombs fell long, as the approach had to be made from the land side.

A second attempt on the 18th went a little better. On this occasion, Squadron Leader Don Beaton, Flying Officer Ken ‘Fiji’ Thompson⁴⁹ and Lieutenant Alex Dryden, one of several South Africans with the squadron, attacked from seaward. Hits on a 200-ton caique and harbour facilities were observed. Inaccurate light *flak* failed to score in return. Kalamata was visited for a third time on the 21st. Led this time by Squadron Leader Cashmore, Flying Officer Gray and Pilot Officer Johnston did more damage to the town than port.

The Aegean was infamous for its haze and often an island would loom out of the mist and catch crews unexpectedly. Such happened to Pat Humphreys on 20 May while flying FA635: K. At 6.10 in the morning during



Greek Islands often loomed out of the mist.

Campbell Collection

a recce patrol, Pat and his crew found themselves completely disoriented. He decided to head towards home when suddenly Kythera appeared out of the fog.

⁴⁸ PLTOFF (later FLTLT) David Beatty Johnston RAAF Pilot No 413774. b. 9 May 23, Chatswood, NSW. 454 – 25 Jan 44 – 1 Dec 44.

⁴⁹ † FLGOFF Kenneth Robert ‘Fiji’ Thompson, RAFVR Pilot No 137416. 454 Sqn – 1 Feb 44 – 22 Nov 44. KIA 22 Nov 44. Padua War Cemetery, Col III, F, 15, Italy.



*Electrical Section, Berka III - March 1944. Rear: Ron A. Herbee (RAF), Bob Harrison (RAF), Max Truscott (RAAF), Smith (RAF), Van Haim (RAF), Middle: Hank Hayes (RAF), Geo Mann (RAF), Jack Unsworth (RAAF), Brian Ball (RAAF), Ken Rimmer (RAF), Front: 'Barney' Brooker (RAAF), Chas Barnes (RAF), Joe Hunter (RAF), Bobby Lamonby (RAF).
Rimmer Collection*

Never one to miss an opportunity, Pat decided to 'shoot-up' a radar station at Kapsali, which was right in his sights, but as Pat later recalled⁵⁰, the enemy were expecting him:

...because they opened up with everything they could throw at us. We were hit head on, the starboard engine was knocked out, and although explosive cannon shells went in through the leading edge of both wings, rupturing both fuel tanks and shattering both main spars, the aircraft kept flying.



*Kalamata harbour got some attention between May and July 1944. Here the results of one raid.
Authors Collection*

Apart from the navigator, who was hit by a small shell splinter, the crew was unharmed.

The same could not be said for the unfortunate Baltimore she never flew again and was struck off charge four days later.

⁵⁰ Letter to author, 19 Apr 01.



The Luftwaffe's Arado 196 Seaplane — useful for reconnaissance and attack. These aircraft were often encountered by 454 Squadron crews, but the Baltimore could usually escape being almost 100mph faster. Their armament was formidable — two 20mm cannons and one 7.9mm machine gun forward and one 7.9mm machine gun on a flexible mount facing aft.

Author's Collection



More formidable and responsible for a number of 454 losses was the Me-109F's of JG 27. The fighters were a proven design and deadly with one 20mm cannon and two 7.9mm machine guns in the nose.

Author's Collection



CHAPTER 10

THE BIG STRIKE



By the end of April 1944, the Germans were faced with a growing problem – how to resupply their garrisons on Crete and the outer islands. The German forces had been spread thinly across Greece, the Ionian Islands and the islands of the Aegean, although their numbers were 175,000 – insurance against an Allied push in the ‘back door’ to Europe. The *Luftwaffe* too was stretched countering the Allied push into Italy and despite a strong presence in the Eastern Med, the combined Mediterranean Air Forces had were gaining air superiority making unescorted air transport all nigh impossible.

At the beginning of the year, the Germans had a fleet of 12 merchant ships of over 1,000 tons as well as some 50 smaller craft totalling over 64,000 tons and 700 caiques ranging from 350 tons. To defend this fleet, were five destroyers and 20 or so lesser escort vessels¹.

Towards the end of May, a significant shipping convoy had to be mounted or the garrisons would wither and starve. By 20 May 1944, it was apparent from



Armourers load a Baltimore.

Gray Collection

¹ RAF Mediterranean Review No 8, HQ MEAAF July – September 1944, pp138-9.



photographic coverage of the Salamis-Piraeus area by 680 Squadron Photo Reconnaissance Spitfires that the Germans were preparing the long predicted convoy. Allied intelligence was now very conscious of the German plight, and so a week of constant surveillance by 454 Squadron during daylight supported by 38 Squadron Wellingtons at night was tasked to report on any shipping movement out of Greece. From 22 May, the reconnaissances began.

However, Allied command was faced with a problem for both its sea and air forces – operating range. In preparation for this sailing, the Allies had gathered a naval striking force at Alexandria, but distance across the Med and timing would be critical if they were to play any significant role. The RN destroyers could not loiter in wait as fuel and marauding *U-boats* would take their toll. The naval task force would take 11 hours to cross the Med to intercept the convoy, meaning it would have to sail before the Germans, or rely on excellent reconnaissance – position, course, and speed – if it was to have any hope of a successful intercept. Air on the other hand was better for timing but limited by range of the escort Spitfires, meaning the convoy could only be attacked once it was south of the 36th parallel, and consequently, very close to its intended destination. It meant very careful coordination was required indeed.

Meanwhile, on 31 May, two Beaufighters of 603 Squadron sighted eight enemy aircraft orbiting north of Melos and this was interpreted by intelligence as indicating the long-anticipated departure was imminent. In harbour at Piraeus were four large merchantmen – *Sabine* (2300 tons – ex-*Salvatore*), *Gertrude* (2,000 tons – ex-*Gerda Toft*), *Tanais* (1,500 tons) and *Anita* (1,200 tons) and a significant number of escorts.

Then, after some weeks of searching and waiting, it was on. Vigilance was rewarded when the convoy moved out of the harbour in the early morning hours of 31 May-1 June 1944. The convoy now comprised of only the *Sabine*, the *Gertrude*, and *Tanais* plus ten supporting vessels². Flying Officer Jack Ennis, who was tasked with shadowing duties that day, recorded in his diary: ‘Well it happened. The convoy left Piraeus and was picked up by a Wimp at 2 am. [It was] coast-crawling south-east. He shadowed for two hours. Then we were called on. Dryden and Humphreys airborne at 0600 and after being rudely awakened at 5.30, I got away at 0700.’

The Crete bound convoy slipped out of the harbour and headed into the Salamis Straits – destined for beleaguered Crete. The ‘Wimp’ mentioned in Ennis’

² In all, the convoy was comprised 13 vessels. The three merchantmen plus four destroyers (two Curtatone Class, one Solfarino class and one Turbine Class), four corvettes and two E-boats. All available Me-109s and Ar-196s were also assigned aerial protection and duties. The *Gertrud* was ex-*Gerda Toft*, *Sabine* was ex-*Salvatore*.

³ FLGOFF Louis Morgan Gossen, MID, RCAF Pilot No J22390. No 38 Sqn, RAF.



diary was air force slang for a Wellington aircraft; in this case 'C' for Charlie flown by Flying Officer Lou Gossen³. The crew reported the initial sailing through the Mandri Channel and shadowed the ships throughout the hours of darkness until its fuel state was low and after bombing the target (unsuccessfully), handed the shadowing task over to the Australian squadron.



Everything had to be checked.

Coates Collection

454 Crews then took turns in watching the ships in daylight, a dangerous activity given the German fighter escort and the certain determination of the ship's *flak* gunners to force them away.

Sinking the convoy became the Air Officer Commanding, Air Marshal Keith Park's highest priority. In a Top Secret cablegram to the Station Commander at Gambut, he stated:

As the Navy have no ships available it remains to the Air Force to put this convoy down. The German military garrison in Crete is badly in need of supplies and the destruction of one or more ships of this convoy will be an important victory. There is bound to be flak and there may be fighter opposition and the AOC-in-C wishes you good luck and good hunting in your important mission.

At daylight on 1 June, 454 Squadron swung into action. Two recces were launched, FW477:B under command of Flight Lieutenant 'Pat' Humphreys went westbound and FW499:Q under Lieutenant Alex Dryden headed east. Dryden's crew relocated the convoy at 0900 and it was subsequently shadowed by a succession of eight squadron aircraft throughout the day. Dryden approached the convoy at sea level and was closing to identify the vessels when four Me-109s, which were providing the convoy air cover at 1,000 ft, turned and rolled in on him. As he was avoiding the enemy, at 0915, Dryden reported three merchant vessels under 2000 tons, two over 2000 tons, a destroyer and four auxiliary vessels, an assessment reasonably close to the mark. Air cover at the time was four enemy fighters and barrage balloons.



Armourers load up for a strike.

Author's Collection

This report indicated the convoy was heading for either Candia Harbour or Suda Bay and would be in range of the now gathering bombing force around 1900 hours that evening. Shadowing crews were then briefed to cover the Piraeus channel, and the convoy was soon relocated south of Pholegandros Island. Most of the shadowing Baltimores were jumped by fighters or harassed by *flak*, with Jack Ennis' aircraft being attacked on at least five occasions. His careful evasion while maintaining contact and reporting very accurate convoy updates resulted in his later award of a DFC.

It was during this shadowing phase that the Unit lost another crew attesting to both German desperation and the danger of such activities. Lost were Warrant Officer George Liels⁴ and his crew in FW399:T. They had joined the squadron in early February and were considered old hands. Those killed included this navigator, Flying Officer Ed Quinlan⁵, and Wireless Operator/Air Gunners Warrant Officer Max Schultz⁶ and Flying Officer Max Short⁷. Believed shot down by escorting Me-109s, the aircraft was lost without trace⁸.

The shadowing continued throughout the day, with Flying Officer Ken Ilott⁹ and crew providing information that confirmed the convoy was heading for Candia (Heraklion Harbour), the last report at 17.25 placing it just 40 miles out.

⁴ † WOFF George William Liels, RAAF Pilot No 420215. b. Leichhardt, NSW 13 May 20. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 1 Jun 44. KIA – 1 Jun 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁵ † FLGOFF Edward Ernest Quinlan, RAAF Nav No 425216. b. Brisbane, Qld 15 Apr 15. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 1 Jun 44. KIA – 1 Jun 44. Of note, the AWM Roll of Honour database has him listed as PLTOFF. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁶ † WOFF Maxwell John George Schultz, RAAF WOP/AG No 410818. b. 9 Sep 21. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 1 Jun 44. KIA – 1 Jun 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁷ † FLGOFF Max Cameron Short, RAAF WOP/AG No 417242. b. Adelaide, SA – 29 Sep 22. 454 Sqn – 9 Feb 44 – 1 Jun 44. KIA – 1 Jun 44. Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

⁸ There is no German aircraft claim for this on record, so it seems likely they were either shot down by *flak* (ship or shore based) or flew into the sea.

⁹ FLGOFF Kenneth Reginald Ilott, MID, RAFVR Pilot No 137398. 454 Sqn - 21 Jan 44- 22 Oct 44.



Take off time	Aircraft	Crew	Remarks
0625	FW477:B	FLTLT H.M. Humphreys FLGOFF W.D. Logan FSGT G. Joyce FSGT C. Lancaster	Convoy search – not sighted due thick fog
0625	FW499:Q	LT A.T. Dryden FLGOFF J.B. Scott FSGT E. Lomas FSGT J. Griffiths	Convoy located at 3704N 02455E @ 0857C Course 175 degrees, 8 knots Shadowed
0705	FW466:P	FLGOFF J. Ennis FLGOFF P. Lawton FLGOFF E. Denton WOFF W. Burke	Convoy relocated at 3649N 02502E @ 0950C Course 185 degrees, 6 knots Shadowed
1044	FW399:T	WOFF G.W. Liels FLGOFF E.E. Quinlan FLGOFF M.C. Short FLGOFF M.J.G. Schultz	Convoy relocated at 3630N 02450E @ 1303C Aircraft shot down
1106	FW402	FSGT I.R. Pederson FSGT G.B. Gray FSGT B.T. Watts FSGT R.T. Bright	Convoy relocated – position not recorded Shadowed
1300	FW507:E	FLGOFF K.R. Ilott FLGOFF N. Jarvis FSGT P.S. Johnson FSGT R.F. Pickavance	Convoy relocated at 3620N 02503E @1526C Course 180 degrees, 8 knots Shadowed
1310	FW375:P	LT W.B. Tite FLGOFF M.F.B. Couzens FSGT J. Miller FSGT W.S. Morrison	Convoy relocated at 3610N 02515E @1530C Course 150 degrees, 8 knots Shadowed
1455	FW422:D	WOFF D.H.C. Dunn FLGOFF E.F. Mumme FSGT D.R.H. Pennicott FSGT L.J. O'Brien	Convoy Relocated at 3558N 02503E @1725Z Course 180 degrees, 8 knots Shadowed

Table 10.1 - Convoy Search and Shadow Crews

The Quarry is Caught

The squadron was also tasked to support the subsequent attack and three aircraft were dispatched to Tobruk to take part in the raid. Squadron Leader George Gray¹⁰ was bombing leader at 454 and because of his experience in both bombing techniques and long range navigation, led the raid as a key member on Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore's crew. He later described preparations for the attack¹¹:

¹⁰ SQNLDR George Andrew Gray, DFC, RAAF Nav(B) No 402346. b. 19 Jun 16, Goulburn, NSW. d. 12 Jul 05, Sydney, NSW. 454 Sqn – 11 Feb 44 – 8 Jan 45.

¹¹ Pearson, Ross, *Australians at War in the Air 1939-45*, Vol II, Kangaroo Press, 1995, pp 48-49, supplemented by George Gray recollections to the author.



We were sent with three other crews down to a strip near Tobruk [Bu Amud] to provide the leaders for a strike force of 15 South African Baltimores (of 15 Squadron) who were fitted to carry bombs. We were to lead them because we had trained most of the South African crews at the OTU at Shandur in Egypt.

We went off in two boxes of nine to rendezvous with nine Spits to escort us and the rest of the strike force – 12 Marauders (24 Sqn, SAAF) and 26 Beaufighters from 252 and 603 Squadrons (including rocket, escort and ‘suppression’ Beaus armed with cannon).

The attack by the air striking force was to be two-pronged. First, the Baltimores and Marauders were to bomb the merchant ships, with the Beaufighters coming in on a second wave to hit the merchants and escort vessels with rockets. Overhead, the Spitfires and Mustangs would deal with any Me-109s, Arados and Ju-88s thrown at them. In transit, one SAAF Baltimore and two Beaufighters returned early. At 18.57, the convoy was sighted about 27 miles north of Candia, flying eight barrage balloons and circled by German fighter escort. At 19.03 the Marauders went in followed two minutes later by the Baltimores. Located where it was, meant the convoy was at the very edge of the Baltimore’s range. Everything had to be perfect – timing, navigation and bombing accuracy – if the day was to be a success. George Gray continued...

It was about 7 pm and still daylight when we attacked. We managed to straddle a merchant ship and the South African Baltimores,



Warrant Officer David ‘Grim’ Armstrong (WOP/AG), Squadron Leader George Gray (Nav), Flying Officer Noel ‘Dagwood’ Lynch (top Gunner) and Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore (Pilot). At Falconara with aircraft FW407:F.
Gray Collection



another. The rocket Beaus had a go at the merchant ships and some of the rockets went straight through without damaging them significantly. I think about six Beaus were lost but a South African box shot down a 109. Interestingly the burning 109 passed right across my view through the bombsight as we were on the run in and caused a bit of a distraction. There was a lot of flak from the destroyers, but we were high enough to get away with it.

Squadron	Aircraft Type	No of Aircraft	Losses	Remarks
24 Sqn, SAAF	Marauders	12	-	Bombers
15 Sqn, SAAF	Baltimore	15	-	Bombers
454 Sqn, RAAF	Baltimore	3	1	Bombing leader
252 Sqn, RAF	Beaufighter	8	1	Anti-ship rockets
		2	-	Anti-flak
603 Sqn, RAF	Beaufighter	8	1	Anti-ship rockets
227 Sqn, RAF	Beaufighter	2	1	Fighter escort
16 Sqn, SAAF	Beaufighter	4	1	Anti-flak
94 Sqn, RAF	Spitfires	7	-	Escort fighters
213 Sqn, RAF	Spitfires	6	-	Escort fighters
	Mustangs	4	-	
38 Sqn, RAF	Wellington	9	1	Recce and bombers
				(Night of 1/2 June)
Totals		72	6	

Table 10.2 – 1 June 1944 Convoy Attack Package

However, much of the bombing was inaccurate, with many of the Marauder and following Baltimore bombs missing their targets completely, although George Gray claimed at least one direct hit on *Sabine*. The second wave of rocket firing Beaufighters had more success. They severely damaged two merchant vessels, one destroyer and a smaller escort. In addition, a Me-109 and an Arado were destroyed, two Arados claimed as probably destroyed and a further damaged.



A high-level shot of the action. The wakes of ships taking evasive action can be seen, some already on fire. The black smoke at centre is the trail of a crashing Me-109.

Gray Collection



Squadron Leader George Gray takes aim through the Baltimore's bombsight.

Gray Collection

By the end of the strike, only two merchant vessels (both on fire) and one destroyer made it into Candia Harbour.

In all, 105 x 500 lb and 42 x 250 lb bombs were dropped. But the job was not finished and had to be completed. That night, nine 38 Squadron Wellingtons and eleven SAAF Liberators continued the assault, bombing Candia Harbour and docks, while losing one of the Wellingtons in the process. The results were unobserved.



Candia Harbour being attacked - 2 June 1944.

Gray Collection



Date Take-off	Aircraft	Crew	Remarks
1 Jun 44 1712	FA603	SQNLDR V. Cashmore FLTLT G.A. Gray FLGOFF N.B. Lynch WOFF D. Armstrong	Attacked convoy at 3547N 02507E @1900C Course 180 degrees
1712	FA368	FSGT W.D. Milne FSGT L. Sattin FSGT G.J.C. Aldous FSGT R.W. Brooks	Attacked convoy
1712	FW405	FSGT V.C. Mitchell FLGOFF J.A. Clough FLGOFF A.H.F. Lindley WOFF L.A. Holley	Attacked convoy
2 June 44 1700	FA603	SQNLDR V. Cashmore FLTLT G.A. Gray FLGOFF N.B. Lynch WOFF D. Armstrong	Attacked remaining shipping and docks in Candia Harbour
1700	FA368	FSGT W.D. Milne FSGT L. Sattin FSGT G.J.C. Aldous FSGT R.W. Brooks	Attacked remaining shipping and docks in Candia Harbour
1700	FW405	FSGT V.C. Mitchell FLGOFF J.A. Clough FLGOFF A.H.F. Lindley WOFF L.A. Holley	Returned to Gambut owing to engine trouble

Table 10.3 – 454 Squadron Crews on Convoy Attack, 1 & 2 June 1944.

The next morning, a pair of recce 213 Squadron Mustangs found *Gertrude* in the centre of the harbour well ablaze with *Tanais* and a destroyer dockside. *Sabine* was nowhere to be seen. Consequently, it was decided a further raid was required and another force of 11 SAAF Marauders, 11 SAAF Baltimores and three 454 Squadron Baltimores were ordered for an evening attack. They were escorted by 14 Spitfires.

Both Marauders and Baltimores bombed in two boxes from heights ranging from 11-14,000 ft. At least one direct hit was claimed on *Gertrude* and other bombs fell close to the ships dockside at the west quay. George Gray continued...

So we were despatched early next evening to do them over in Candia Harbour. There were 96 *flak* guns looking after the harbour... I remember going over Mount Ida – 10,000 ft and snow-

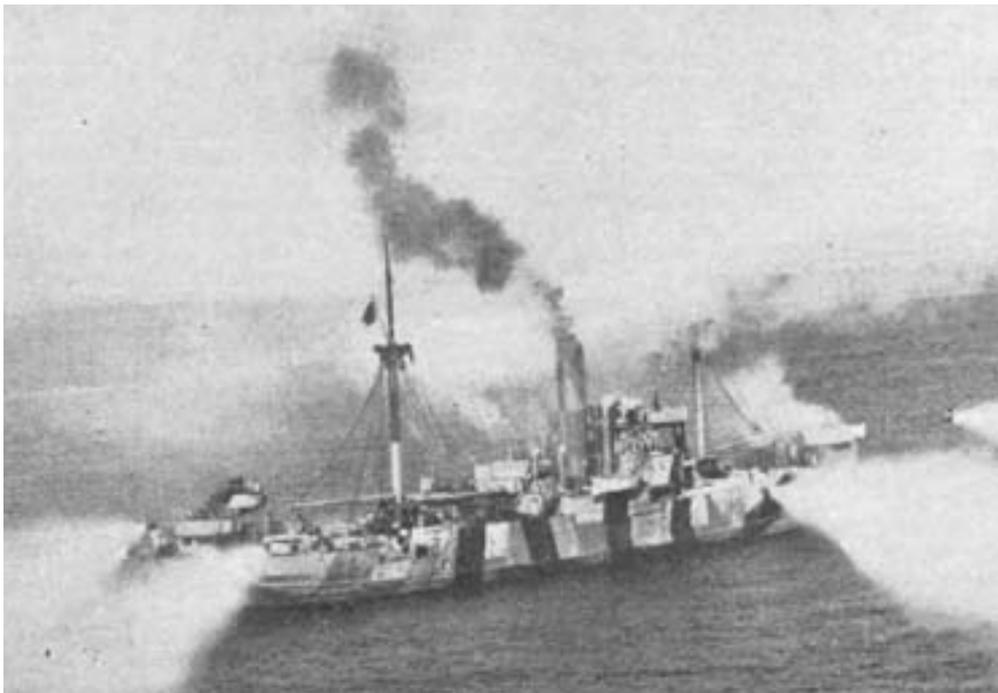


capped on occasions – into a very clear harbour. We were at 14,000 ft and I picked out two vessels, one against the wharf and one out in the middle on fire. The aim was to drop a string between them to damage one or both. I think we damaged both with the bombs from the group of six.

Every aircraft was hit but none was lost. We were under fire for about five minutes on the run in and again on the run out. It was a bit distracting, but one of the things which relaxed me was my pilot. He was singing.

That turned out to be a very successful attack because subsequent intelligence indicated that all the merchant ships were sunk – one of them limping along on fire outside the harbour after our second strike – by a submarine. All the destroyers and escort vessels were sunk [too].

The raids had been a great success and marked the end of major German convoy activity in the eastern Med. It was by far the most successful operation in the Squadron's history to date. Congratulations were received from far and wide including the Air Officer Commanding in Chief and the Air Officer Commanding 212 Group, Air Commodore Norm Allinson. The Air Force paper, *Wings*, took up the story some months later and reporter Stan Summers called the strike 'one of the most brilliantly organised and spectacularly carried out of the many planned in the Mediterranean.'¹²



Gertrude under attack by rocket firing Beaufighters of 252 Sqn, RAF.

RAAF Museum



Sabine getting the same treatment, but also hitting the attacker - here the Beaufighter (at top) is on fire. **RAAF Museum**

In post script to this event, a number of crew members were awarded DFCs for this and other actions including Jack Ennis, Jimmy Scott¹³, George Gray, Vic Cashmore and Alex Dryden. Dryden, who located the convoy, had a citation to his award which shows a little more of this remarkable man¹⁴.

This officer has completed three tours of operational duty and has served as an air gunner, air observer and since January, 1944, as a pilot. In

June 1944, he was captain of an aircraft and located, shadowed and reported an important enemy convoy in the Aegean Sea. Despite repeated attacks from four escorting Me-109s, Captain Dryden's accurate report resulted in the destruction of three merchant vessels, a corvette and a destroyer. An excellent leader, this officer has invariably displayed outstanding ability and skill.

Dryden remained with 454 until December 1944 when he was repatriated to his native South Africa, tour expired after 78 operations.



The convoy attack was devastating.

RAAF Museum

¹² Summers, Stan, 'Look that Sank a Nazi Convoy', *Wings*, Vol 4 No 10, February 20, 1945, p 11.

¹³ FLGOFF James Bryan 'Jim' Scott, RAFVR Nav No 144614. DFC* (later CBE). 454 Sqn - 21 Jan 44 - 24 Mar 45.

¹⁴ *London Gazette* - 20 March 1945. Dryden's operational career as a gunner, observer and pilot is surely unique.



The Squadron camp at Cesenatico in Italy shortly to be the Squadron's new home with Officers' Mess at left and car park.

Godfrey Collection



CO, WGC DR Mick Moore, with FLTLT Gordon Hissey, FLGOFF Reg Magee and FLTLT's Karl Basedow and John Howard.

RHS Collection



CHAPTER 11

A CHANGE OF FORTUNE



Despite the excitement of a successful three days of convoy attacks, the Squadron soon returned to normal operations – convoy escort, reconnaissance and the occasional bombing sortie. Meanwhile, the German air Force was now under increasing pressure. By May 1944, their operations over Italy had almost ceased, such was the domination of Allied air power. In preparation for the expected Allied landings in Europe, *Luftwaffe* command headquarters *Fliegerkorps II* – responsible for operations in Italy – and *Fliegerkorps X* – responsible for operations in Greece and the Balkans, had been withdrawn. With these command elements, aircraft numbers too were down to about 115 from around 300 just a few months prior. The German centre of gravity had shifted to Europe. After the fall of Rome on 4 June, all remaining single-engined enemy fighters were pulled back to the north of Italy for air defence, and the *Luftwaffe* effectively took little part in the remainder of the Italian campaign. With the German recapture of the Dodecanese Islands, the small number of fighters continued to harass the Allied air forces in the Eastern Med, but after the loss of Liels and crew on 1 June, the Squadron would not suffer further until their move onto the Italian mainland.

Operations continued in the Aegean, but these would only be brief. On 5 June, Flying Officers Lem Gray, 'Fiji' Thompson and Ken Ilott bombed Navarino from 8,000ft, their objective being the olive oil factory. Their bombs were dropped in a long stick, but slightly overshoot and despite the light *flak*, their aircraft and crews suffered no damage. The factory was again visited on the 9th, and again the target was missed although a nearby factory producing alcohol was damaged. While other targets were hit throughout the month, another move was rumoured. On 27 June, the final bombing sorties for the month were flown by Squadron Leader Don Beaton, Flying Officer Lem Gray and Pilot Officer Dave Johnston who flew in box formation with 13 Baltimores of 15 Squadron SAAF to revisit Heraklion to attack an ammunition dump reported to the east of the town. Also in the raid were seven Spitfires from 94 Squadron acting as escort. No results were observed except the usual smoke and dust. Most Baltimores were holed, including those from 454, but all returned safely.

The Situation in Italy

Given the need for even longer range and endurance aircraft to patrol the Med, in May 1944, the RAF authorities proposed a change of aircraft type for



454.¹ It would be the Warwick – a version of the Wellington bomber. Needing a crew of two pilots, a navigator, four WOP/AGs and a gunner, it meant the Squadron numbers would have to double to maintain the same rate of effort. Rearming was scheduled for July with 15 SAAF and 454 the first of seven units to be so equipped. Crew conversion courses would have to commence almost immediately.

However, by mid-1944, the fluid situation on the ground in Italy saw a demand for more light-bomber aircraft to support the US 5th and British 8th Armies now racing up each coast of the Italian ‘boot’. Rome’s fall to the Allies was a big morale boost, and with the second front of Normandy just two day’s away, a renewed vigour to push the Germans right through to Vienna ensued. Yet the Germans maintained a dogged defence, placing several perimeter lines across the country. The first, known as the Gustav Line, was established East-West, just south of Rome, which had been breached by both the American and British forces by mid-year. With the fall of Rome on 4 June, the German Commander, Albert Kesselring, pulled back and organised a second defensive perimeter, the *Gothic Line*, which likewise ran East-West, between Pesaro and Carrara. It was essentially a series of strong points where the enemy had dug in, but again, the 8th Army attack between 23-28 August broke through. This time German reinforcements slowed the Allied advance to a crawl. The US 5th Army assault began on 10 September and eventually, the German Army was pushed back towards the River Po. While the 5th Army pressed towards Bologna in the centre, the 8th Army headed for the Argenta Gap – the gateway to Austria. 454 would shortly be tasked to support this push.

Needing more air power, Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor, the AOC-in-C HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Forces sent a secret cablegram to Air Marshal Sir Keith Park, the AOC HQ RAF Middle East, on 6 July asking how long it would take to rearm 459 Squadron, RAAF with Baltimores. Given 459’s westerly location near Slessor’s HQ, it seemed only natural that he would seek to transfer that Unit, the idea being a quick move to the Italian Front. Air Marshal Park replied that it would take at least a month and why didn’t the Commander take 454 instead? It was a lucky escape for 454 Squadron from ending the war doing long-range maritime patrols in Warwicks. On the 11th, the following Top Secret cablegram was received at HQ RAF ME²:

No.454 Squadron is to re-equip forthwith with light bomber Baltimore aircraft. It will embark for Italy approx. 12th August where it will operate in light bomber role under Desert Air Force.

As soon as they are ready for issue bomber aircraft for No.454

¹ AA Series A2217 Item 22/37/Org, Folio 25A.

² AA 1969/100 Item: MS 54229 Pt 1 Folios 70A-73A refer.



Squadron will be delivered by A.D.R.U. pilots. Target date for completing rearming 454 Squadron is 17th July.

No.459 Squadron is to rearm with long-range Baltimore aircraft thrown up by 454 Squadron and is to take over AEGEAN operations at present carried out by 454 Squadron.

Training on new types is to be carried out with view to becoming proficient in shortest time.

As a result of this decision, the Squadron would soon find a very changed circumstance. On 12 July, Wing Commander Mick Moore, the CO gathered all around for what promised to be a ‘pep’ talk. After announcing the award of a DFC to Flying Officer Jimmy Scott from Dryden’s crew for his efforts in locating the Piraeus convoy on 1 June, the CO broke the other news. The Squadron would be shortly moving to ‘new fields’. That day, they conducted what would be their last bombing mission into the Aegean. Dryden, Flight Lieutenant Phil Strickland and Flying Officer Dave Johnston and crews bombed the port of Pilos in Western Greece. The target was an ammunition dump in the Northeast quadrant. All bombs straddled the aim point, and judging by the enormous explosion that followed the attack, they were successful. Palls of thick smoke could be seen 20 miles away.

The next few days were spent pulling down the camp and packing and at 10.10 on 15 July, the main ground party got away under command of Squadron Leader Beaton. They were heading for 22 Personnel Transit Centre (22 PTC) at Almaza. Their route took them over many hundreds of desert miles, through Derna, Tobruk and Mersa Matruh – all scenes of tough fighting between Rommel’s *Afrika Korps* and the Desert Rats. They arrived at Almaza on the 20th. However as well as bad sunburn and blisters, there was more drama along the way, with some trucks getting hopelessly bogged in the loose sand at various locations and to top it off, unfortunately for Flying Officers Scott, Jarvis and Ilott, their tent caught fire and they lost all their belongings. After a short stopover, still none the wiser of their ultimate destination, the ground party again set off for Amiriya – a base familiar to the old hands amongst them. Here they would shortly depart Africa for good. Their next and final destination for the war was Italy, but the immediate location



Officer's lines, Pescara, August 1944.

Basedow Collection



would only be a short stay – an airbase abandoned by the retreating Germans at Pescara. They embarked at Alexandria Harbour on *HMT Batory*, an old Polish liner, and waved goodbye to the dust and sand of the desert. Little did they realise the climate change would be dramatic with cold weather, rain and mud all awaiting them. The trip across the Med was quiet, and crews from 454 Squadron manned the anti-aircraft guns aboard the vessel, however, they were not needed. At 1700 on 2 August, the *Batory* docked at Taranto, scene of one of the first naval-air battles of the war. There, the main party disembarked for an overnight stopover at the Hotel Miramare (an RAF billeting office) until continuing their journey by road.

Meanwhile, after receiving their new model Baltimore Mk Vs, and handing over their long-range tank fitted Mk IVs to 459 Squadron, the remainder of 454 Squadron took off from Berka for their relatively short flight to the new ground. As well as the Baltimores, ribald notes to their Aussie friends in 459 were scrawled in abundance. Gone too with the change of aircraft were the homing pigeon passengers used to send message back to base if the radio failed or the aircraft crashed. Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore recalled ‘we celebrated our departure from Benghazi with a seventeen aircraft ‘Balbo’ and flew out on the 25 July 1944.’³ That day at 0700, the CO took the first box of eight and two hours later, the second box of nine under Cashmore made their way out across the Med. They landed at Luga, Malta for a refuel and then flew on to Pescara, a small airfield about halfway up the Italian ‘boot’ on the eastern coast.

Pescara airfield was situated in a valley alongside the Pescara River and about four miles from the Pescara township. The valley was about two miles wide and



Flight Lieutenant Karl ‘Doc’ Basedow and Flying Officer Ken ‘Brad’ Bradshaw, the Intel Officer.

Basedow Collection

surrounded by land under cultivation with trees, vines and cereal crops in abundance. It had been heavily bombed and craters were everywhere. Given the haste to site airfields, use was made of ex-German and Italian fields wherever possible. Such was the case with Pescara and the engineers wasted little time in preparing a useable strip on river flat. Pescara camp was in a vineyard making accommodation pleasant but the runway had an uneven surface causing the Balts to bounce several times during landings, a feature more disconcerting during take-offs. Nevertheless, the crews coped, and the lush green orchards and cool rivers more than made up for it. A campsite was chosen on the south side of the aerodrome,

³ Cashmore, Vic, *An Oz at War*, Self Published, Goolwa, 1999, p 54. A ‘Balbo’ was a large formation.



as some of the better locations had already been occupied by 3 Wing and 21 and 30 Squadrons, SAAF. ‘Doc’ Basedow described the surroundings⁴:

The country around Pescara is very pretty. The valley of the Pescara River and the surrounding hills are very intensively cultivated, There are many small villages. The town is at the mouth of the river. It is fairly large and has been badly bombed [*sic*]. The aerodrome is between the main road and the river, about 2 miles from the town. Our camp is on the opposite side of the road to the drome. The site is small and is on ploughed ground between hedges and vineyards.

The remaining ground crew boarded C-46 transport aircraft and arrived via a stopover in Tunis and Bari. Jack Ennis who accompanied the last ground crew wrote in his diary:

Monday 24/7/44 Berka II. Very disappointing day. Everything was cocked up in true AF fashion. The first C-46 got away OK. The second arrived half full and took only half our load and the third didn’t come at all. Had to off load all the freight from our trucks – what a job. Expect to leave tomorrow morning.

The final leg took them across Italy where they could see the damage caused by the war. The road convoy left Taranto on the 8th, joined up with the party waiting at Bari and headed for Pescara via the Galloway transit camp and San Severo. By 11 August 1944, the squadron was finally back together.

A New Command

Here the war would be about landing grounds, communications and weather. Now in Italy, from 27 July 1944, 454 Squadron came under the command of the now famous Desert Air Force or DAF, initially as part of 3 (SAAF) Wing. They would operate as a light bomber squadron carrying out close support bombing in cooperation with the army to help push the Germans across the strongly fortified *Gothic Line* and eventually across the River Po. According to Squadron Leader George Gray:

The Squadron’s task was to provide the ‘Tedder Bomb Carpet’ (a bomb spread of 1000 yards by 300 yards) aimed at saturating close support targets, usually by a box of six aircraft in a tight, very manoeuvrable formation, bombing on a leader from medium heights (10,000 to 13,000 feet) often above mountainous terrain. The technique, developed and tested before the Alamein battles in 1942,

⁴ SQNLDR Basedow’s diary entry for 16 August 1944.



was standard battlefield and tactical practice and was employed relentlessly and with devastating effect by DAF day light bomber (Baltimore and Boston) Squadrons until Jan 1945.

The safe maximum limit for straight and level flying at 10,000 feet to evade accurately predicted heavy AA was 15 seconds. Hence the Mess song lamenting ‘so and so’s 60 seconds bombing run!’ after a formation had been badly ‘plastered’ by *flak*; and the Squadron Line Book entries for Dryden (SAAF):- ‘A couple of weaves - steep turn on - straight and level - bombs dropped on seven seconds - pilot to wireless operator, send ‘Apples!’; and for Gray:- ‘It is CLOSE formation when the Nav Bs in (numbers) 2 and 3 (of the Vic) can read (number) 1’s Nav Log entries!’

‘Apples’ was the plain language radio call for a direct target ‘straddle’; ‘Oranges’ for ‘some on’; and ‘Lemons’ for a miss. Targets were sometimes only 800 yards ahead of forward troops, and the Army Forward Bombing Control Team, ‘calling the shots’ for set piece light bomber formation ‘patterns’, and the subsequent ‘Rover David cab-rank’ direction of follow-up dive bombing by escorting fighter bombers, among them aircraft from Nos. 3, 450 and 451 RAAF fighter Squadrons.

The direct hit call of ‘apples’ of course came from good old Aussie slang for ‘she’s apples’. From now on, bombing would be done in two boxes of six aircraft in formation, each box bombing on its leader’s call with a small interval between each box. Formations of six aircraft per box flew in two waves of threes in a ‘v’ shaped formation known as ‘vics’. Standard bomb load would be two 500 lb and three 250 lb bombs. Formations were also named: Lead – Red Box and second wave – Blue Box until 13 Dec 44 when they were renamed A Flight – Red Box and B Flight Yellow Box. Crews were also briefed about historic and cultural sites that were not to be bombed and the different weather patterns, terrain and landscape features.

Operations soon took on a more regimented form with the introduction of a two-stage standby system. Crews first on standby were required to remain within earshot of a gong which called them to briefing, while those on second standby could please themselves as long as they could return to ops when the first wave became airborne. This system was necessary due to the Army air support requirements. Also introduced was the ‘Rover cab rank’ system to better manage command and control of close air support requests in the congested airspace above the Italian countryside, mainly used by the fighter-bomber squadrons. The system had been developed in the desert, but was refined for the operations in Italy, particularly since the *Luftwaffe* air threat had effectively been removed. Under Rover, both fighter-bombers and light bombers were dispatched to a



waiting area and were called on when the Army-Air liaison officers found a target, much as the wait at a taxi cab rank – hence the simile. Known as *Rover David* by the British and Commonwealth and *Rover Joe* by the US⁵, the system used a combat pilot and an army officer together at a ground vantage point where they could coordinate air strikes on suitable targets, usually very close to troops. Using air-ground radios, these officers would eventually become known as forward air controllers. Aircraft orbited in ‘cab rank’ style until called and occasionally, 454 Squadron would provide the airborne service.

As to the change in scenery, Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore summed up the feeling of most of the men when he continued in his memoirs⁶:

In some ways we regretted leaving Africa as we had become so accustomed to the unusual life we led there. But in Italy, the peaches were ripe, everything was green, the very air smelled of fertility and abundance. We



Flying over Italian farming country between the Apennines and the Adriatic.
Bob Mitchell Collection

We had a fast flowing stream alongside the camp and certainly took advantage of that. Everything was fine but the sounds of explosions in the town came to us day and night as the citizens, returning from a period of evacuation, triggered booby traps set in their homes by the retreating Germans. So we were now closer to the war and we just had to adjust to it.

In early August, the Squadron were clearly eager to get on with the job but were short of ground staff while they awaited the arrival of their convoy. So

⁵ Named after Group Captain David Haysom, a well known fighter pilot and developer of the idea. *Rover Joe* was virtually the same, but named after the US military character GI Joe.

⁶ Cashmore, p 55.



arrangements were made to combine operations with 223 Squadron, with each unit providing a flight of eight aircraft. Aircrew were required to help load, fuel and service the aircraft. Operational trips would take six aircraft from each squadron and each would take turns to lead. So on 2 August, Wing Commander Moore led 454's first daylight formation bombing mission in the second box of six to bomb the marshalling yards at Lugo. Combining with 223 Squadron like this lasted until the 11th.

The Mark V Baltimores now operational had some good and bad points. Wing Commander Jack Coates recalled⁷ the Mk V had a flat plate windscreen, a big improvement on the earlier versions which had a curved Perspex screen. The previous fitment produced reflections off the instrument panel making night flying particularly hazardous. Pat Humphreys also discussed another problem, the rudder sensitivity⁸:

This particular Mark had a most unfortunate re-design feature, in the shape of a forward-projecting horn on the rudder. The idea behind this modification was to make it easier for the pilot to correct the Baltimore's tendency to swing on take-off or landing, but the result was that the aircraft was so light on the rudder that it wiggled its tail, which added to the difficulty of maintaining tight formation. Within a short time, an enterprising partnership between the Engineer Officer and the Equipment Officer resulted in the acquisition of a stock of tail-units from crashed Mark IV Baltimores which were fitted to the Mark Vs, much to the relief of the aircrews.

Targets during this period were well north of the battle lines and included rail and marshalling yards at Ravenna, Faenza and Forli amongst others. The squadron's role in Italy would be daylight medium bombing and targets would include factories, storage depots, rail yards, bridges, Todt labour camps and gun emplacements. Sorties would be much shorter than the 5-6 hours experienced at Berka and crews would work even more closely with the British 8th Army with close bombing missions requiring high navigation accuracy and utmost crew concentration. There would be nothing worse than bombing one's own side. Alan Godfrey⁹, a WOP/AG on Jeff Gillingham's¹⁰ crew recalled the early operations in Italy¹¹:

The shorter duration of flights, many less than two hours, meant time was spent forming a 6-aircraft box, climbing to a bombing

⁷ Letter Coates to Gray, 11 Apr 1994.

⁸ Letter Humphreys to author, 19 Apr 01.

⁹ WOFF (later PLTOFF) Alan Norman Godfrey, RAAF WOP/AG No 437126. b. 26 Apr 24, Prospect, SA. 454 Sqn – 2 Oct 44 – 14 Aug 45.

¹⁰ FLTTLT John Jeffrey 'Jeff' Gillingham, RAAF Pilot No 419858. b. 8 Feb 13, Stratford, Vic. d. 19 Apr 97. 454 Sqn – 9 Oct 44 – 20 Aug 45.

¹¹ Correspondence with the author – 29 Jan 02.



altitude of 10,000 ft, dropping bombs after a 10 second bomb run and going home as fast as possible. I recall one raid when the time from bomb drop to touch-down was 7 minutes. (When I first operated from Cesenatico we were within artillery range of the front line and were described as being the closest air strip to a front line on any Allied field of operations). The effect of this type of operation was that the pilot was fully occupied, including making sure that he kept an appropriate space between him and the closest formation member, and the navigator/bomb aimer was also gainfully occupied.

With this in mind and during a spell of particularly bad weather, Rod Pederson¹² suggested a visit to the front lines, about 20 miles from the base. They came across a Canadian Unit and joined a mail run jeep up to a mortar position. Ted Denton, one of the adventurers continued the story¹³:

Just before reaching the mortar position we must have been spotted by Jerry and before long, we came under fire. I presume it was mortar fire from a hill top which the Axis still held and we were certainly not taking mail to that mortar position. The Canadian driver told us to abandon the Jeep immediately, and to go to ground;



In truck enroute to aircraft, Falconara. L-R: Don Fraser (Pilot), Charlie McLeod (Pilot), Kanga Davis (WOP/AG), Charlie Matthew (Nav) and Mac Hume (Pilot). Gray Collection

¹² FSGT Iver Roderick Pederson, RAAF Pilot No 35018. b. 15 Jun 20, Marrickville, NSW. 454 Sqn – 1 Mar 44 – 6 Jan 45.

¹³ 'A Visit to the Front Line', *454/459 Squadrons Association Newsletter*, Addendum to 1999 Bulletin and correspondence with George Gray.



the next thing I was flat on my face in sticky mud. After a short period of time the firing ceased and we made our way on foot a few yards to the Canadian mortar position.

These enemy positions were the kind of target that our aircraft were called on to attack to soften up the area and help the ground forces to advance.

Youthful exuberance maybe, but the aircrew had an added respect for the ground forces from then on. The Squadron quickly adapted to its new role and new location. Only 21 days had elapsed between official notice to move and the first formation bombing raid.



Ancona signposts.

Rimmer Collection

While at Pescara, a competition arose to see which unit could ‘acquire’ the biggest portrait of Mussolini to mount in their toilets. Not wanting to be beaten by ‘Poms’ or South Africans, the 454 lads found the largest portrait of *Il Duce* and constructed a ‘three-holer’ of thunderboxes to accommodate their treasure.

Within three weeks of arrival, the Squadron was on the move again, the CO announcing the news on 16 August. Given the rapid advances up the Italian east coast, the Army was moving further and further away. Consequently, they moved over the next few days to Falconara and were again billeted under canvas. Falconara is at the mouth of the Esino River on the east coast of Italy and about two-thirds up. It is about eight miles north of Ancona, the main town nearby, which can be seen from the beach. At least there were hot showers and Rome was relatively close when leave was granted, but Falconara was shortly to bring another unpleasant surprise.

With the advance of the Allies up the eastern coast and the continual build up of air power over Italy, serviceable airfields were in short supply. Falconara appeared to offer everything needed to conduct bombing operations and army support and was closer to targets across the *Gothic Line*, south of Bologna. Little did the RAF realise that Falconara was only an emergency landing ground, as both the Italians and Germans knew of its turning into a quagmire once the rains came. Despite the misery it would create, Falconara was at least relatively safe from enemy attack. Doc Basedow wrote in his diary entry for 19 August 1944:

We are about 16-20 miles from the front line and yet we live here in almost perfect security. No enemy aircraft come over at



all and the big guns cannot reach us. It is possible, though, that a commando raid or something like that could be made on us – an unpleasant thought. It is truly a reliable sign of how the *Luftwaffe* is beaten and that it is unable to do us any damage at all, and that only 20 miles from the front line.

As well as the move to Falconara, seventeen of the original Australian groundcrew received the news they had waited two years for – they were to be repatriated home. This first tranche left soon afterwards on 19 August, but it would be well into the new year before any of their mates would follow.

Flak

With the move to the mainland, and as the Germans withdrew up the Italian peninsula, the problem of *flak* intensified. It was now virtually impossible to avoid, ranging from the ubiquitous 88mm through the 105mm and up to the 150mm calibre. With accurate track and altitude, it was relatively easy for the gunners to upset bomb runs, break up formations and score hits. Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore later described the *flak* problem¹⁴:



Flak over Ponaconegiliano.

Gray Collection

Our usual bombing height was about 12,000 ft. We knew that the enemy *flak* gunners would take 15 seconds to predict, fire and get an 88 mm shell to our height. Therefore it was inadvisable, when over enemy territory, to fly straight and level any longer than 12 seconds. So that period was all we had in which to aim our bombs. I often marvelled at the accuracy of our bombing in view of this constraint. Of course we were in boxes of six aircraft which gave quite an extensive carpet around the target.

Losses of aircraft to *flak* were rather unusual and this was remarkable when considering the hundreds of shells fired at a formation during a raid and the large number of shrapnel holes

¹⁴ Cashmore, *op cit*, p 56.



resulting. But we did lose crews at times and it was often associated with targets which were isolated – that is, targets which were surrounded with forests and mountains. On occasions the gunners, knowing the target, would be able to plot the point of bomb release. Then all that was required was to get a bracket of shells to the point of release at that time. And sometimes it worked and aircraft were shot down with a minimum of rounds expended.

Flight Lieutenant Pat Humphreys later recalled some crews had more luck than others¹⁵. According to Pat, ‘Flying Officer Ron Barton¹⁶ and crew must have had a charmed life. Not once, but twice his aircraft received a direct hit, and on both occasions the 88mm shell punched a clean hole in his tailplane without exploding!’ WOP/AG Ray Heathwood described the effect during one raid in August 1944¹⁷:

... the ‘stonck’ of exploding shells and black woolsacks are appearing around the formation. A running commentary has been taking place over the intercom, mainly between pilot and navigator calling courses, speeds and altitude – and me calling location of *flak* bursts. If *flak* is bursting close, dead ahead, quick reaction of course change is taken by the formation – if *flak* is close 10 o’clock – 500’ up Don [Beaton] will veer the formation upwards to a 10 o’clock position, working on the expectation that the next salvo will be aimed with a correction for altitude and direction. Each anti-aircraft gun below trained on us is electronically computer aimed, predicted and fired, though each gun may be miles apart their trajectories are calculated to burst in the one area of our altitude. Since at our altitude, it takes some 11 seconds for shells to traverse from gun barrels to us, we, as a very manoeuvrable formation attempt to utilise this time lapse to be elsewhere in the sky in that short period.

The RAF soon worked out a means of evasive action¹⁸ based upon two premises; first, that they would have to present a large a target as possible by filling the sky and second, to reduce the time over target to a minimum. Jinking and random manoeuvres also made a big difference as it took time to move the guns, but a significant problem remained. Pilots had to hold the aircraft steady for at least ten seconds during the final run in to bomb release. If the gunners could figure

¹⁵ Correspondence with the author – 19 Apr 2001.

¹⁶ FLGOFF Ronald William Barton, RAAF Pilot No 421556. b. 1 Mar 23, Randwick, NSW. 454 Sqn – 13 Apr 44 - 25 Jan 45.

¹⁷ Ray Heathwood Diary entry – 15 Aug 44.

¹⁸ PRO Air 20/4465. *Tactical and Operational Notes for Light Bombers in the Western Desert*, 2nd Ed, Aug 43, Part 9, p 26.



out the target and track the bombers approach, it was only a matter of time before aircraft were hit. And hit they were.

There is a long held air force superstition that bad things come in threes, and so it was in August 1944. It was *flak* which caused the next two losses, the first in nearly two months. On 21 August, Wing Commander Mike Moore led a formation to bomb the fuel dumps at Limestre, near Florence, but the target could not be located. However, all six aircraft were holed by the accurate *flak*. The next day, a similar mission was organised and again, the bombs missed their target, but this time eight aircraft were holed. For the third day running, the Squadron mounted another two raids on Limestre and this time the gunners were waiting. On the second sortie, 454's luck ran out. The first box was again led by Wing Commander Moore, the second by Lieutenant Alex Dryden. While Moore's aircraft was hit in the tail and turret, he completed the sortie. But as aircraft FW701:D, flown by Flying Officer 'Snow' Howard,¹⁹ No. 3 in the first box, dropped his bombs, he was immediately hit. Two huge flashes from both engines were seen and the nose section had been blown completely off. Then, according to the Unit Historian²⁰; 'The aircraft rose almost vertically, with flames pouring from the port engine, then spun to earth in flames. One parachute was definitely seen to open, and other black objects come out of the aircraft, but no more parachutes were reported with certainty'. Fortunately, three of the crew had escaped and became POWs including Flight Sergeant Sam Birtles²¹ and Chris Murray²². The other crewmember was not so fortunate. Flight Lieutenant Dick Litchfield²³, one of the most experienced gunners on the Squadron, had replaced Flight Sergeant Jim McGrath²⁴ at the last minute while Jim was been hospitalised with a badly infected leg. Dick was killed by the *flak* and ensuing crash. Keith Howard later recalled the event:

I had just pulled the lever to close the bomb bay doors and was about to follow the CO in doing a diving turn off target when all hell broke loose. There was a loud explosion which stunned me for some time. How long, I have no idea, perhaps a few seconds or half a minute. When I came to, I found the cockpit a shambles with debris and smoke everywhere. My head was ringing from

¹⁹ † FLGOFF Keith Alister 'Snow' Howard, RAAF Pilot No 423741. b. 10 Apr 19, Temora, NSW. 454 Sqn – 7 May 44 – 23 Aug 44. POW. d. 23 Jun 99.

²⁰ 454 Sqn. A.50 Entry for 23 August 1944.

²¹ † WOFF Samuel George Birtles, RAAF, Nav No 418049. b. 31 May 22, Albury, NSW. 454 Sqn – 5 May 43 – 23 Aug 44. POW Stalag Luft VII. d. 22 Mar 01.

²² † WOFF Christian Auriol Fervig Murray, RAAF WOP/AG No 426648. b. 7 Jun 18, Ingham, Qld. 454 Sqn – 3 May 43 – 23 Aug 44. POW Stalag Luft VII.

²³ † FLTLT Richard William Litchfield, RAAF, WOP/AG No 401239. b. 20 Jan 17, Merbein, Vic. 454 Sqn – 8 Apr 44 - 23 Aug 44. KIA – 23 Aug 44. Buried: Florence War Cemetery, I, B, 2, Italy.

²⁴ WOFF Leslie James 'Jim' McGrath, RAAF WOP/AG No 425958. b. 23 May 23, Toowoomba, Qld. 454 Sqn - 3 May 43 - 8 Jun 45.



the noise of the explosion and there was excruciating pain in the region of my left foot. There was also a very high noise level and probably due to the fact that I wasn't wearing goggles, I was unable to see anything clearly. Whilst flying in formation it was usual to keep one's left hand on the two throttle levers with constant small adjustments to maintain formation position in respect to the leader. Amidst the turmoil I somehow had, on regaining consciousness, a vague recollection of finding myself holding two loose throttle levers in my hand, realising they were useless and throwing them away. My next actions were instinctive towards self preservation or pure reaction stimulated by fear.

First, I attempted to fly the aircraft, but could not get any reaction from the controls to indicate that the aircraft was responding. The confusion was exacerbated by not being able to see where I was going to see what was happening. My action in trying to fly the aircraft had probably been due to some thought activation telling ME to control the aircraft long enough for the crew to abandon the "dead duck" through the bottom escape hatches from which they could clear any aircraft protuberances...

...The navigator, who fortunately had his parachute pack attached, was wounded in the arm, back and thigh with shrapnel, struggled out of the aircraft through the open nose and by some miracle managed to miss both propellers in falling clear. As for myself, I could not communicate with the crew and my oxygen mask and microphone had been blown off and as the fire was rapidly spreading to the cockpit I abandoned the aircraft as it rolled on its back and was thrown clear.

Dick was in the upper gun turret when we were hit and the other gunner, Warrant Officer Murray was at the lower escape hatch. ...it was customary practice to fly over enemy territory with the lower guns mounted ready for action in a position which made it impossible to use the lower escape hatch without first jettisoning the guns which is normally quite a fairly simple matter. It appears that the aircraft went out of control immediately it was hit and Warrant Officer Murray relates that he was thrown around the inside of the fuselage considerably before he could jettison the guns and follow them out.

Dick Litchfield had little chance. He would have had to clear the turret, find his parachute, clip it on and jump clear – all while possibly being badly wounded and buffeted by wind blast through the open fuselage and under the stress of high 'g' forces pulling him down caused by the aircraft spin.



Almost at the same time, Aircraft FW602:E was also hit by *flak*. Flying as Number two and also in the first box, it was seen just after bombing to be losing height with smoke pouring from the bomb bay. Flown by Canadian pilot, Flying Officer Lem Gray from Westville, Nova Scotia, the aircraft turned south-west and crashed inside friendly lines. The aircraft caught fire and although some Army members nearby got the crew out, they could not rescue the pilot. Gray was killed, but the three crew of Flight Sergeant Bill Smith²⁵, and Warrant Officers Bob Hamilton²⁶ and Ken Harding²⁷ were hospitalised and survived the war²⁸. Gordon Hissey, a WOP/AG on the CO's crew watched both aircraft beside him get hit. He later recalled what happened²⁹:

We were on a bombing raid north of Florence in Italy and we'd been there before but didn't hit the target. We went back this time and it was the only occasion we had ever been escorted by fighters. They seemed to be way above us as we came in for the bombing. We settled down on the line, but everything went cock-eyed. On levelling off on our bombing run, the ack-ack opened up and was very accurate. We were the leading aircraft and the aircraft on either side of us were shot down. John [Howard] was the gunner that day, in the turret. When we returned to base and stepped out of the plane I noticed he was bleeding from his right eye. If I'd known that I would have had him out of the turret and given him an injection of morphine but he hadn't mentioned it. We had the ambulance to him there and off he went to hospital. One of the other planes that was shot down was piloted by my other tent mate. He was a Canadian, Lenny Gray, he was a very quiet, decent fellow. That night, to be by myself without two tent mates, was a bit of a drain on me and I remember cleaning up and going to have my tea. I think I had my usual scotch and a beer, and then went back to the tent and went to bed about 9 p.m. I was surprised that I didn't wake until 6 o'clock in the morning and that I didn't lie awake thinking about it. It was very sad for me.

It was the start of another bad run. The next day, Flying Officer 'Mac' Hume³⁰ flying FW658, crashed on landing after a raid on Ravenna when one wheel folded while the aircraft was still doing around 100 mph. None of the crew were injured, but the aircraft was wrecked.

²⁵ FSGT William Smith, RAFVR Nav No 654091. 454 Sqn – 29 Dec 44 - 23 Aug 44.

²⁶ WOFF Robert Hamilton, RAFVR WOP/AG No 657339. 454 Sqn – 29 Dec 44 - 23 Aug 44.

²⁷ WOFF Kenneth Harding, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1312031. 454 Sqn – 29 Dec 43 - 23 Aug 44.

²⁸ Information from the Gray entry: Allison, Les and Hayward, Harry, *The Shall Not Grow Old: A Book of Remembrance*, Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum Inc. 1996.

²⁹ Gordon Hissey, *From Go to Whoa*, Unpublished RAAF Heritage Award entry, 2003.

³⁰ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) George McNaught Hume, RAAF Pilot No 401444. b. Melbourne, Vic, 4 Dec 16. d. 15 Aug 98. 454 Sqn – 3 Jun 44 – 1 Feb 45.



Lieutenant Wally Tite, SAAF.

Basedow Collection

Up until 26 August, the Squadron had flown with fighter escort – usually Spitfires flying high above, keeping watch like soaring Eagles – but given the lack of appearance of the *Luftwaffe*, it was decided to discontinue the escorts. The 26th of August also coincided with the Eighth Army's *Plan Olive*, the planned push across the Apennines and up the Adriatic Coast. The Squadron would now concentrate on assisting the Eighth Army to break the eastern defences of the *Gothic Line*. On the first day of *Olive*, 664 sorties were ordered of which 454 provided 24. Despite the medium altitude from which they dropped their bombs, 454's operational accuracy was good and

the Army were pleased with results. Jack Ennis recorded in his diary for 7 September 1944:

Still the same short trips on the *Gothic Line* which apparently is defence in depth. We have been doing some good work. 9 apples out of 10 raids and the Army are very pleased.



Charlie McLeod's wing after the prang.

Wilson Collection

Still getting pretty badly shot up. I lost an oil pipe two days ago and just got home and on the same raid Wally Tite came home on one motor and did a bonzer job.

Meanwhile Army support ops went on unabated. The first unescorted 'softening raid' under *Olive* was carried out on the Montecchio Road junction. The usual two boxes were led by Squadron Leader Beaton and Flying Officer Stinson³¹, with bombs straddling the target area. Although there was no *flak* in the target area, the formation was caught near Cattolica and all aircraft suffered some

³¹ FLGOFF (later SQNLDR) Colin Bassett Stinson DFC, RAAF Pilot No 402414. b. 12 Sep 15, Cowra, NSW. d. 28 Mar 91, Cowra, NSW. 454 Sqn – 8 May 44 – 14 Aug 45.

³² FLGOFF Charles Joseph McLeod, RAAF Pilot No 423874. b. Bondi, NSW, 4 Feb 16, d. Apr 87. 454 Sqn – 13 Apr 44 – 30 Jan 45.



damage. A second wave was sent out with similar bombing results without the *flak*, but there was an unfortunate incident. Flying Officers Charlie McLeod³² in FW595 and Ken Ilott flying FA435 had a mid-air collision. They were doing a circuit after their op when Vic Cashmore in the lead position called crews to go from the usual Vic to echelon Port – a string to the left. McLeod in changing to the new position flew under Ilott and into the aircraft propeller, which subsequently chewed off about 10 ft of McLeod's left wing. The end of the wing was hanging in the airstream and the fact the aircraft continued to fly was amazing. Ilott's aircraft had wing dents, a bent prop, a jammed rudder and a piece of prop broke off and narrowly missed his navigator, Flying Officer Norm Jarvis³³. Both aircraft landed safely and were eventually repaired. Amazingly, no crew were injured.

By the end of August 1944, the Squadron was back to full operational strength with 392 personnel. Given their relative newcomer status, the Squadron had settled into their new role very quickly. Formation bombing was new to the crews, and accuracy paramount as raids were often in sight of the advancing ground forces. Any mistake would have had tragic repercussions. It was with some pleasure that the Unit received a congratulatory telegram from Army Air Support Control at the beginning of September after a particularly accurate bombing raid on enemy gun positions west of Pesaro³⁴, the scene of fierce fighting in the last week of August:

I have watched today from an observation post the light and medium bombing operations. It was incredibly devastating. Their accuracy and the devastation they have caused is unbelievable.

The advance on Pesaro that had been orchestrated by the heavy bombers of 205 Group under *Operation Crumpet* was successful in two days and 454 supported the Army's advance until the town was occupied. However, by now, the 'soft underbelly' was being fought for inch-by-inch and would remain not so soft till the end of the war.

A mission on 4 September looked like it too would end badly. Lieutenant Wally Tite³⁵ flying number three in the second box in, FW594: L was hit in both engines by *flak*. With the port engine feathered, and the starboard running very roughly, Tite brought the aircraft and crew back, landing safely.

From 7 September 1944, the Squadron came under command of 253 Wing, RAF and with the change, the start of the autumn rains. And rain it did, quickly

³³ FLGOFF Norman Jarvis, RAFVR Nav No 144610. 454 Sqn – 21 Jan 44 – 26 Nov 44.

³⁴ 454 Sqn ORB entry for 1 Sep 44.

³⁵ LT (later CAPT) Wally Barend Tite, SAAF Pilot No SA170651V. 454 Sqn - 13 Apr 44 – 30 Jan 45.



Falconara mud.

Rimmer Collection.

making the airfield unserviceable and making life a misery. True to its reputation, the airfield and surrounding landscape turned into thick, smelly mud – a greater misery than the desert sand. This wasn't just ordinary mud either – in places it was a glutinous semi-liquid ooze, 18 inches deep. It covered ground crew, aircrew and aircraft alike. Perforated Steel Plate or PSP³⁶ had to be trucked in to keep up operations and despite their hopes for a move; they would remain for four months until well after the winter rains ceased in December. Ground crews especially suffered as they raced to prepare the aircraft for yet another sortie. The mud had to be kept away from aircraft parts and when it eventually mixed with oil, aircraft servicings became even harder to complete,

much to the chagrin of the fitters. Armourers had to load 12 aircraft, twice a day and after rolling the bombs 150 yards, they were soon caked in mud – everything sank in, boots, bombs and bombers alike. Regardless, they maintained a perfect launch rate and much due to the good work of Armament Warrant Officer Ron 'Lofty' Naylor³⁷ and his team. This base would forever be remembered as *Falconara Maritima!*



Falconara Maritima! Flight Lieutenant Gordon Saggars - RAAF Mobile Dental Officer - digging out the mud, November 1944

Basedow Collection.

All ops were cancelled on bad days, but it would not be the last time the weather turned. Most of October was lost to flying. October 1944 was

probably the low point for Squadron morale, with Flight Lieutenant Karl 'Doc' Basedow forced to write in his monthly medical report³⁸:

The morale of the Squadron was very low during the month, particularly amongst the aircrew personnel. This was largely

³⁶ Also called Perforated Steel Planking and Pierced Steel Platform (or a combination of same) – planks of interlocking steel sheeting punched with holes of a regular pattern (making them reasonably light, but strong) were chain linked together to provide hardstands and runways for the aircraft. These sheets sat atop the mud and ooze and supported the weight of a fully laden aircraft.

³⁷ WOFF (later A/WGCDR post-war) Ronald 'Lofty' Naylor, MID, RAF Arm No 570271.

³⁸ PRO Air 49/267. No 454 Squadron – reports. Entry for October 1944.



PSP at Falconara.

Basedow Collection.

due to the idleness enforced by the weather and to the very uncomfortable, cold and muddy living conditions.

Ground staff morale was improved to some extent by the institution of regular weekly leave to Rome and by the departure of the second batch of repatriates to Australia. These numbered sixteen personnel.

By mid-October, more PSP had to be laid to allow operations to continue and by month's end, only 132 sorties had been flown, down by almost two-thirds on September. With the runways and taxiways now reinforced by the PSP, November would see a pick-up in raids, and operations as far afield as northern Italy, Yugoslavia and Hungary.

Early in December 1944 there was a change of Allied command structure on the Italian Front. General Sir Harold Alexander became Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean, US General Mark Clark took over the 15th Army Group, US General Lucien Truscott the 5th (US) Army and General Richard McCreery had command of the British 8th Army. All would ensure the armies and air forces cooperated to the fullest extent. The Mediterranean Allied Air Forces were now commanded by Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor. For the Italian Campaign,

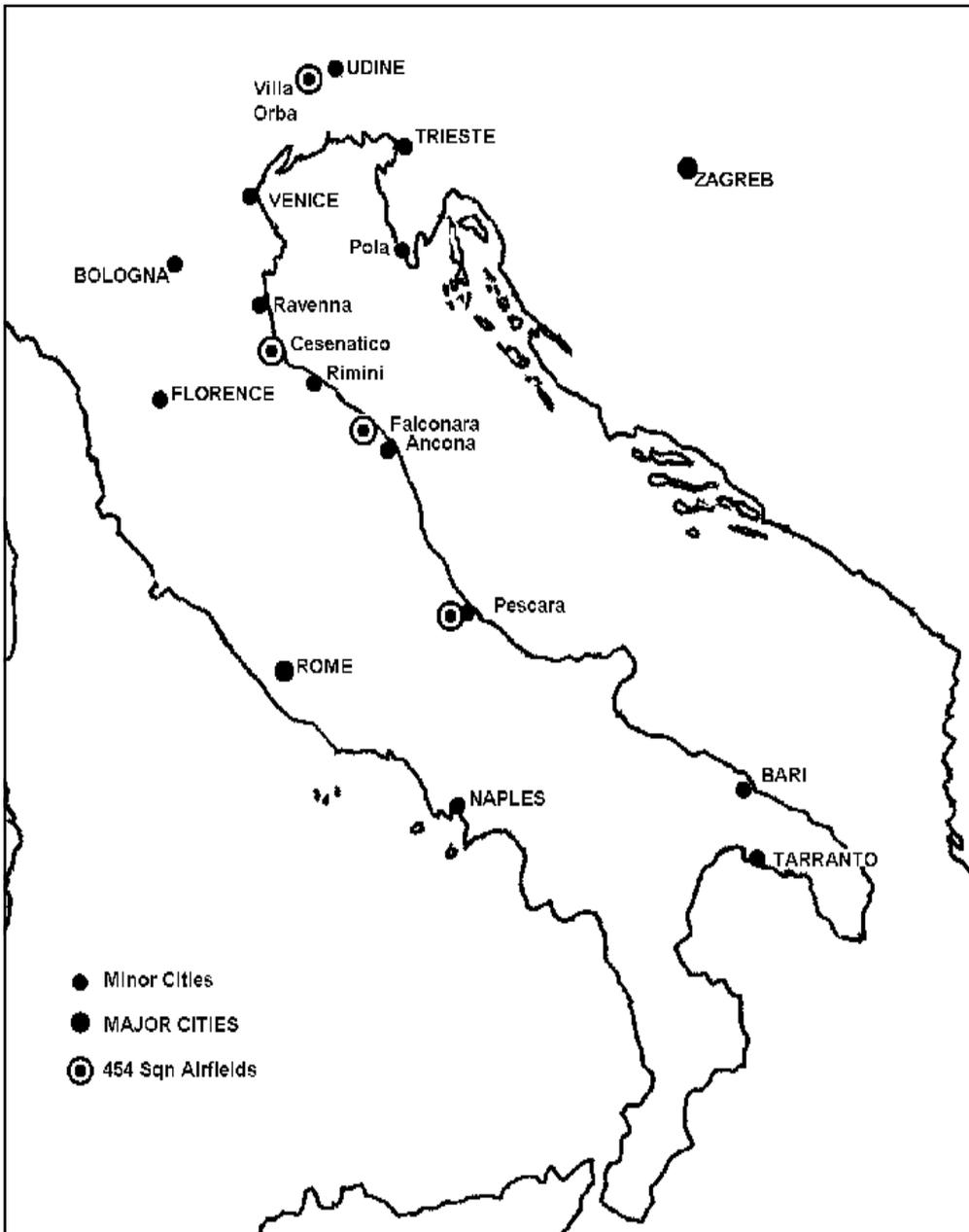


Fiume Harbour is bombed by 454 Squadron - 5 November 1944.

Moore Collection.



he had the Strategic Air Force (the heavy bombers), the Tactical Air Force (medium bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters) of which the Desert Air Force and 454 were part, the Coastal Air Force and some other supporting commands. It would be this overwhelming Allied air power that would help win the war in Italy in 1945.



Map 4: Italian Bases



CHAPTER 12

THE WINTER OF '44



Now focussed on Army cooperation and daylight bombing, the onset of the winter season would bring its own problems. Not only was Falconara a mud-swamp, the proliferation of cloud made target identification difficult. Combining with poor visibility was the cold outside air temperature. Aircraft flew without heating (the petrol driven heaters supplied were considered too dangerous in *flak* and with bombs aboard) and with an average outside air temperature of around -20°C, the cabin temperature was not much better. Crews ran the risk of frostbite, but fortunately the sorties were relatively short.

Meanwhile, the Allies began experimenting with airborne blind bombing techniques using VHF radio control, with operators on the ground vectoring the bombers over the target using triangulation methods. The first mission was flown on 9 November 1944, with a three aircraft formation over munitions buildings in Ravenna led by Flight Lieutenant Col Stinson. The crews reported a bomb overshoot, not surprising given the 12,000 ft bombing altitude and the limited practice crews had had on this type of operation. Also in early November, the Squadron commenced the first raids over Yugoslavia in support of Partisan operations.

454's regular crossings of the Adriatic were to hit German positions in northern and western Yugoslavia. Such was the



Bomb damage can clearly be seen from previous raids as well as this attack on Fabbrece - 1 September 1944.

Moore Collection



case on 18 November when two boxes from 454 with other 253 Wing Baltimores attacked Kocevje so effectively, that Partisans entered to town with little opposition¹. According to Jeff Gillingham's diary, it was...

... a good trip. The country and coastal islands were most interesting. Snow capped mountains, forests and little red-roofed villages. All the fields appear to be semi-circular. The whole four boxes reported about 30 bursts of *flak* although we did a very leisurely bomb run. Well and truly 'pranged' the target. I believe the Partisans were to attack straight after our raid.

The final loss for 1944 was recorded on 22 November. In the early afternoon, a box of six aircraft again led by Col Stinson took off to bomb defended positions just south of Faenza. It was the second wave of the day to attack the target, the morning flight recording some hits but reporting no *flak*. The situation changed drastically on the second sortie. Bombing from 11,000 ft, and just after bomb release, the *flak* opened up with well aimed shots amongst the formation. Almost immediately, aircraft FW689:E flown by Flying Officer 'Fiji' Thompson was hit inside of the port engine and was well ablaze before the other pilots in formation realised what had happened. FW689 maintained height for about 20 seconds before diving steeply into the ground, exploding in a ball of flames and leaving a pall of brown smoke near the target. Warrant Officer 'Taffy' Griffiths² and crew were flying as No. 3 and almost wore it themselves. Taffy's WOP/AG, Warrant Officer David Etheridge³, later recalled what happened:

We turned on to the bombing run as normal and after about 10 to 15 seconds Doug Hatcher⁴ in the turret spoke, saying to pilot 'Taffy' [that] Thompson (No. 2) has been hit and is on fire. At this moment we were turning starboard off the target in the usual very tight turn and No 2 was maintaining his position in the formation. 'Taffy' had seen what had happened and was concerned that the aircraft hit still had his bomb load on board. He said over the intercom 'Bugger this, if he's still got his bombs on he could blow up and bring the lot of us down. I'm going off the other way.' And so that is what we did.

We broke the golden rule which was to stay in formation at all times. Of course once we were on our own the *flak* went for us and we had quite a tricky job dodging the nasty stuff which they threw at us, but with textbook co-operation between turret and pilot we

¹ Roderic Owen, *The Desert Air Force*, p 239.

² WOFF Islwyn 'Taffy' Griffiths RAFVR Pilot No 1281489. 454 Sqn – 23 Aug 44 – 13 Apr 45.

³ WOFF David John Etheridge, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1801413. b. 26 Aug 23. 454 Sqn – 23 Aug 44 – 7 Jun 45. Correspondence with the author – 18 Dec 2000.

⁴ SGT Douglas L. Hatcher, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1359413. 454 Sqn - 23 Aug 44 - 18 Mar 45.



managed to avoid it all and get back to base unharmed. As far as we knew in all the excitement over the target area three of the crew had bailed out but this turned out to be not the case. Two had escaped but both had been burned and the pilot died from his injuries. Of the two lads in the back, we only learned much later that they had perished.

While two parachutes were seen to open, sadly only the observer, Flying Officer Bill Bourn⁵, made it to become a POW. As well as Thompson, killed were the two WOP/AGs Flight Sergeants George Bainbridge⁶ and Gerry Bebbington⁷. Taffy usually flew as No. 2, his position being taken at the last minute by Thompson and crew.

On 25 November, Wing Commander Mike Moore who had commanded the unit since April and who had previously served on the Squadron as a flight commander, handed over to the new CO, Wing Commander ‘Pete’ Henderson⁸. Henderson had arrived from HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Force in Algiers. With his arrival came another changing of the guard. By the end of 1944, many of the old hands would leave and a new breed had taken their place to carry the Unit forward to the end of the war. Soon to go were Cashmore, Beaton, Ennis, Dryden and their crews, and many more.



Wing Commander ‘Pete’ Henderson.
Henderson Collection

One sortie at the beginning of December would be well remembered by those who took part and made the news back home. Flying Officer Jack Newnham⁹, the Unit Historian, summed it up when he wrote:

Like the fly pest in summer time, it simply had to come, and today Pola was finally attacked by twelve of our aircraft. Those participating, who expected a hot reception, were not disappointed – there being 400/500 bursts of heavy, fairly accurate *flak*, and five

⁵ ‡ FLG OFF William John Bourn, RAFVR Nav No 144673. 454 Sqn - 1 Feb 44 – 22 Nov 44. POW from 22 Nov 44.

⁶ † FSGT George Bainbridge, RAF WOP/AG no 656334. 454 Sqn - 1 Feb 44 – 22 Nov 44. KIA 22 Nov 44. Buried: Forli, Col IV, C, 15, Italy.

⁷ † FSGT Gerald William Bebbington, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1065474. 454 Sqn - 1 Feb 44 – 22 Nov 44. KIA 22 Nov 44. Buried: Forli, Col VIII, C, 10, Italy.

⁸ WGC DR Andrew Dill ‘Pete’ Henderson, OBE, MID, RAAF Pilot No O217. 454 Sqn - 11 Nov 44 – 22 May 45 (as CO). PAF AIRCDRE post-War.

⁹ FLG OFF (later FLTLT) John Harvey ‘Jack’ Newnham, RAAF WOP/AG No 418163. b. 26 Feb 22, Wangaratta, Vic. 454 Sqn – 24 Jun 44 – 1 May 45. Jack was on Eddy Webb’s crew.



George Brear, David Etheridge, Doug Hatcher and 'Taffy' Griffiths.
Etheridge Collection

planes were holed. The first box overshot the 'warehouse target', and the second box overshot their leader, who selected 'flaps down' instead of 'bomb-doors open'. Bombs from this box were scattered over a wide area, and one aircraft brought all bombs back.

Accurate perhaps, but the narrative did not fully describe the drama. Flight Sergeant Peter Matthews¹⁰, the navigator on Flying Officer Geoff Bradley's¹¹ crew, later retold the story¹²:

It was my first raid and we carried it out on Pola in Yugoslavia. It was a very heavily defended naval base. When our crew first got to the squadron (in October) all the existing crews were talking about targets and one of the names which kept coming up was this name – Pola. Nobody wanted to go there because it was the scene of great anti-aircraft activity and, therefore, to be avoided at all costs.

You can imagine our feelings. Our first raid and the first time we'd seen ack-ack. We saw it! Black clouds – some of our blokes reckoned they could smell the cordite. All hell broke loose because of the tremendous fire. We all took independent evasive action. This meant diving, breaking our normal 'vic' and getting to hell out of the place. We were thrown about a bit and headed towards the sea.

Squadron Leader George Gray, on Vic Cashmore's crew and bomb formation lead continued¹³...

At 10.10 am on 2 December 1944, Squadron Leader Cashmore and myself took twelve Baltimores, with an escort of five Spitfires, to have a go at warehouses and a possible ship in Pola Harbour.

The anti-aircraft fire was very heavy and most of the aircraft were

¹⁰ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Lindsay Paxton 'Peter' or 'Junior' Matthews, RAAF NavB No 424777. b. 7 Mar 24, Moonee Ponds, Vic. d. 11 Dec 00. 454 Sqn – 19 Oct 44 – 14 Aug 45.

¹¹ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Geoffrey Hamilton 'Diamond' Bradley, RAAF Pilot No 437111. b. 30 Jun 22, Naracoorte, SA. d. 2 May 99. 454 Sqn – 2 Oct 44 – 22 May 45.

¹² Quoted from Ross Pearson, *Australians at War in the Air 1939-45*, Vol II, Kangaroo Press, 1995, p 60.



hit on the run in. One or two aircraft skidded and their bombs fell on an infantry barracks that were near the wharf.

I think we were one of the first to get our bombs away but just as we were making our run in, all hell had broken loose and the *flak* included some ‘flaming-onions’ – an anti-aircraft rocket which was not very accurate. Suddenly, I was not in communication with my pilot...

...On this run in, the intercom had gone out and the pilot thought his bomb-aimer had ‘had it’. He thought he’d make the run on his own but found that the bombs had gone.

The Pola raid and similar escapades by 454 Squadron was not missed by the Press at home. On Wednesday, 3 January 1945, the Herald reported:¹⁴

AUSTRALIAN SUCCESS IN ITALY

Distinction of
being the most

forward squadron of the Allied air forces in Italy is shared by an Australian Baltimore Squadron, commanded by Wing Commander A.D. Henderson, of Bathurst, N.S.W., and an RAF Squadron of the same wing.

The Australian squadron was perhaps, the most forward RAAF unit on any war front, the Department of Air stated today. They were so close to the front line that, after taking off, they had to circle their aerodrome to gain height.

From high ground nearby, the remainder of the squadron could see anti-aircraft gunfire bursting around the Baltimores as they went in to bomb.

Bad weather interfered with the squadron’s activities last month, but recently it had been operating in close support of troops from New Zealand and Canada.

It supported the Canadians in a push to establish bridgeheads over the Lamone River.



Flying Officer Keith ‘Fiji’ Thompson (Pilot), Flight Sergeant George Bainbridge (WOP/AG), Flight Sergeant Gerry Bebbington (WOP/AG) and Flying Officer Bill Bourn (NavB).

Gray Collection

¹³ *Op cit*, p 60.

¹⁴ *The Herald*, Wednesday, Jan 3, 1945. Norm Gilham records.



TOUGH TASKS

The Baltimore's job was to blast gun positions with high explosive and troop concentrations with fragmentation bombs.

In one spell of good weather they flew 24 sorties on successive days. Early in the month they attacked harbour installations at Pola, near the top of the Adriatic.

Pola was a heavily defended target, and the Baltimores had to fly through 400 or 500 bursts of heavy calibre ack ack.

The squadron had also operated across the Adriatic in support of Tito's partisans in Jugoslavia, bombing towns sheltering Germans.

Leaders in these operations came from four States: Squadron Leader V. Cashmore, of Henley Beach, S.A.; Squadron Leader P.A. Strickland of West Perth; Flight-Lieutenant C.B. Stinson, of Canowindra N.S.W.; and Flight Lieut. D.D. Fraser¹⁵ of Myrning, Vic.

By the end of the autumn, the growing number of cancelled sorties due to the poor state of the airfield combined with expected bad weather and the Allied advance up the Italian spine meant a move was on the cards. It was a tremendous boost to morale to get out of the awful mud. So between 4 and 7 December the squadron returned to the sand – the sand dunes of the Adriatic at Cesenatico, a small coastal landing ground about fifteen miles north-west of Rimini. On the edge of the Po Valley, the airfield was relatively flat and already prepared with PSP. It would be shared with other 253 Wing units and Baltimore buddies - 500 Sqn RAF and 15 Sqn SAAF - the three now rightly claiming to be the most northerly operational squadrons in Italy. Here 454 would spend their first and only Christmas in Italy. Doc Basedow described the site:

What a relief
to leave the
mud at last!
We had a good
trip up. The



454's camp was just off to the right of this photo. Cesenatico was a large base and included on the ramp are 15 SAAF/500 RAF/79th FG, USAAF. Also Warwicks, Walrus, Mosquitoes, Baltimores and Mitchells.

Rimmer Collection

¹⁵ SQNLDR Donald Duncan Frazer, RAAF Pilot No 400672. b. 20 May 18, Ballan, Vic. 454 Sqn - 11 Apr 44 - 24 Feb 45.



roads were reasonably clear and everything went well. We arrived at our new camp at 6. We found no tents up for the Squadron Sick Quarters but the rest of the camp is fairly well organised. The Mess is very comfortable already. It is good to be able to walk around on clean sand and to put things down without them being plastered with mud.



Cesenatico camp - January 1945.

Basedow Collection

Warrant Officer Bob Andrews¹⁶, a WOP/AG on Jim Lysaght's¹⁷ crew, arrived as a newcomer just after the Squadron had moved. He recalled the domestic arrangements and the ingenuity some crews went to¹⁷:

At Cesenatico, our crew were given two blankets each and a tent. That was the total issue. The tent space was increased by digging away the floor area so we had standing room. I remember I got a few saplings and bags and made a stretcher. We then considered the question of lighting. A power cable ran past our tent on the ground, and the generator did not run full time, so I cut into the power line and ran from it a line into our tent and attached a globe. It was said to be forbidden to cut into the power line but I think many crews did it and nothing was said about it.

I obtained an oxygen supply tap from a wrecked Beaufighter of 600 Squadron on our same airfield, plus some tubing. We got hold of a four-gallon drum, and a metal bomb tail container and went into Cesenatico where we were able to obtain access to an Italian sheet metal worker who rolled out a flue and brazed it in place on the four-gallon drum.

We put a door in the drum and installed our new 'choofer' stove, finished off by installing a mounted drum on the other side of the tent wall with a tube leading to the stove with the Beaufighter tap and onto a tube coiled inside the stove. The tap was turned on slightly and the petrol dripped onto a tin lid and was lit until the

¹⁶ WOFF Robert Sidney Thorburn Andrews, RAAF WOP/AG No 422369. b. 4 Nov 23, Gladesville, NSW. 454 Sqn – 22 Dec 44 – 14 Aug 45. Correspondence with the author – 8 Dec 2000.

¹⁷ FLT LT Henry James 'Jim' Lysaght, RAAF Pilot No 422598.b.1 Sep 23, Ayr Qld.d.15 Aug 99. 454 Sqn – 22 Dec 44



system warmed up and came out as gas, whereupon the throttle was opened.

Our fuel was Avgas (aviation grade petrol) and as the tent wall of canvas was our separation it was a wonder we didn't go sky high.

Most crews invented something similar to get them through the severe cold of the winter of '44. As to the move itself, according to the Unit Historian¹⁸:

An orgy of digging marked the first day in the now mud-free location. There were slit trenches in various stages of excavation, and tent sites dug in on all sides; one airman looking up from behind a pile of sand indicated that he intended to keep digging, and hoped to be home in Australia for Christmas.

Such precautions were wise. Forli Aerodrome some 25 miles to the west had been attacked by the remanent *Luftwaffe* on a number of occasions and the constant rumble of the guns at the front could clearly be heard, reminding all of how close the war really was. The last thing the squadron needed was to suffer an air raid.

In an effort to relieve the monotony and priv-ations of camp life and to keep the troops out of mischief, the Anglican padre Bob Davies implemented an



Kookaburra Casa complete with Italian waiters. Rimmer Collection

idea he had had while working with the Toc H organisation before he joined the RAAF. He would set up a number of hostels where airmen could take a break from the war and relax. Known as *Casas* (Italian for house), Padre Davies set about his task with vigour and later asked Wing Commander Henderson to open the first for 454 - named the *Kookaburra*

Casa - on 19 December 1944. Bob Davies later recalled how it all started¹⁹:

When we got to Italy I got the idea of establishing clubs, and I established clubs in Italy and we called them *Casas*. The first one we called the *Koala Casa*. They could go in there and have coffee

¹⁸ 454 Sqn ORB, entry for 8 Dec 44.

¹⁹ A wonderful interview with the author at RAAF Base Richmond – 16 Jul 00.



and cakes for practically nothing. The next place we came to had *Kookaburra Casa* and so on. We had a chap who was pretty good on murals. And as you went into each *Casa* there was a mural from *The Bulletin*... an aboriginal sitting in front of a fire with a lizard on a stick, and so on.

Every time we opened a *Casa*, we'd put another lizard on a stick. They were great places where chaps could write letters, and have a bit of a rest. We'd have dances there sometimes with the Italian girls. We would have a little orchestra, a local Italian orchestra. And how we got them going? We found the first place we started was at Farno, and it was an old factory. I thought the premises would be all right. But where were we going to get all the equipment for this place? I made enquiries and I discovered there was a man who had a hotel in the village and I said listen, we want to equip this club with coffee machines and billiard tables. Any idea where we could get this gear for it? I [then] said when we move as we will in a few weeks time, it's yours as a running concern. And they jumped at it. Before long we had the whole place equipped. At the next place, we got a chap to restore his own place. It was good for the Italians as it gave some of them work and they could get a little bit of tea and sugar, which they found hard to get. We finished up making a few hundred pounds at the end of the war, which went into RAAF welfare.



The *Casas* became an immediate hit and when weather prevented ops, became hives of activity. Billiards, darts, a piano for music or just a read and a cuppa were all available and a welcome break from the war. When an early morning fire in late January almost destroyed the *Casa*, Squadron members rallied and quickly repaired the damage.

To put their own stamp on their *Casa*, Squadron artists painted murals, badges and other decorations on the bar and walls, all designed to remind them of home as well as stamp their mark of ownership. One talented artist was Flying Officer Alan McIntyre²⁰, the navigator from Geoff Levy's crew²¹ who also prepared ornate

²⁰ FLGOFF Alan Lester McIntyre, RAAF NavB No 408337. b. 21 Nov 13, Hobart, Tas. d. 17 Aug 03, Launceston, Tas. 454 Sqn – 3 May 44 – 21 Jan 45. Became well known as a gifted Tasmanian artist and poet post-war.



menus for mess functions, illustrated Christmas cards and idled his spare time airborne doodling on his plotting charts. Like many, to Alan war was anathema and although a good ten years older than the rest of his crew, felt it his duty as he said, ‘to do his bit’²².

An unfortunate motor vehicle accident in late December sent Squadron Leader Vic Cashmore into No. 4 General Hospital with a dislocated hip – it would ground him for quite a while. In fact, he would not fly with the Squadron again and would be repatriated to Australia aboard a hospital ship. With him in the vehicle was Flying Officer Charlie McLeod, who suffered shock and minor lacerations although he returned to the Squadron. Cashmore and his navigator, George Gray, were both later each awarded a DFC for their tireless efforts in converting the squadron to daylight formation bombing operations and for leading many of the subsequent missions. Both awards were well deserved.

Date	Sorties	Ops Hours	Losses	Bombs (Tons)
Jan	134	663		
Feb	181	920	2	
Mar	144	687	2	
Apr	173	844	1	
May	175	872		
Jun	165	797		9
Jul	79	393		9
Aug	335	686	2	245
Sep	328	574		328
Oct	132	258		90
Nov	266	530	1	169
Dec	182	303		97

Table 12.1 – Operational Flying Summary for 1944



Fitters and Armourers beside an aircraft. Cesenatico. This Baltimore still shows signs of the reconnaissance light colour undersides.
Rimmer Collection

Bring on the New Year

At the beginning of 1945, the squadron could boast a strength of 421²³ members and 18 serviceable Baltimores. Operations continued unabated despite the rain,

²¹ FLGOffs Geoffrey Morris Levy, RAAF Pilot No 424494, John Alfred ‘Doc’ Hughes, RAAF WOP/AG 426881, and John George James ‘Doover’ MacMahon, RAAF WOP/AG No 428818. All with 454 Sqn - 5 May 44 – 21 Jan 45.

²² Correspondence with Mrs Jo McIntyre, Launceston, Tas, 7 Dec 2000.

²³ Consisting of 68 Officers, 121 SNCOs and 232 airmen.



sleet and later, the snow - all in very cold conditions. Many Australians had never seen the snow, but the novelty soon wore off. Ground crews reported aircraft brakes freezing solid and engines needing to be heated before they could be worked on. Bad weather also prevented the bombing sorties. A cloud base of 600-1000 ft towering to over 18,000 ft was a regular occurrence and ground mist often drifted over the Cesenatico aerodrome, making both maintenance and flying impossible.



Lister's aircraft FW643:J - amazing how anyone survived.

Andrews Collection

Despite threatening weather, the year got off to a busy start. On 3 January 1945, three squadrons of 253 Wing (454, 500 and 15 SAAF) attacked Conegliano marshalling yards dropping sixty 500 lb and eighty-nine 250lb bombs. Results were unobserved because of cloud cover. The next day, Sergeant Frank Lister²⁴, a relative newcomer to the Squadron, crashed FW643:J on landing from the morning sortie - a close support raid on San Alberto. On hitting the ground heavily, the aircraft bounced and drifted to port, the left wing scraping a sand dune and causing a spectacular cartwheel finishing on its belly 40 metres from the runway, with a battered nose twisted around towards the tail. The crew of Sergeants Ian Hendry²⁵, Gordon Lauder²⁶ and Jim Buxton²⁷ were all injured, but quickly returned to flying. Not so the aircraft - It was a write-off.

Later that day, the afternoon raid of two boxes set off to bomb the Battalion and SS Headquarters of *Feldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, the German Commander on the Italian Front²⁸. They met misfortune at every turn. One aircraft returned before setting off with an unserviceable turret. Then, the second box leader didn't even get to take off. The first box eventually bombed, with overshoots observed. The second box returned before bombing as the lead navigator's

²⁴ † SGT Frank Gilmore Lister, RAFVR Pilot No 1673359. 454 Sqn - 12 Dec 44 – 19 Apr 45. KIA 19 Apr 45. Buried: Padua, Col V, C, 3-6, Italy.

²⁵ † SGT Ian James Hendry, RAFVR NavB No 1804795. 454 Sqn - 12 Dec 44 – 19 Apr 45. KIA 19 Apr 45. Buried: Padua, Col V, C, 3-6, Italy.

²⁶ † SGT Gordon William Lauder, RAFVR WOP/AG No 1865921. 454 Sqn - 12 Dec 44 – 19 Apr 45. KIA 19 Apr 45. Buried: Padua, Col V, C, 3-6, Italy.

²⁷ † SGT James Leonard Buxton, RAFVR AG No 1387989. 454 Sqn - 12 Dec 44 – 19 Apr 45. KIA 19 Apr 45. Buried: Padua, Col V, C, 3-6, Italy.

²⁸ While notionally Kesselring's HQ, Kesselring was in hospital recovering from a traffic accident. While absent, General Heinrich von Vietinghoff (Commander of the German X Army) has taken over command.



intercom went unserviceable. Given the prime role of the lead navigator was formation bombing leader and the one who called formation bomb release, nothing could be done. It was an unfortunate day all round.

Into the Night

On 17 Jan, DAF HQ issued instructions to reduce the number of aircraft in two boxes of six apiece to three ‘Vics’ of nine in order to release aircraft and crews to prepare for a planned spring offensive. Two days later, Squadron Leader Phil Strickland,²⁹ the acting CO, announced to the assembly that the Squadron together with sister unit 15 Squadron SAAF would convert to night intruder work, and that night flying would commence in a few days. From 28 July 44 to 25 Jan 45, the Squadron had been occupied with daylight bombing of northern Italian targets, during which time 1,420 sorties were flown for a total of 2,539 operational hours. 1013 tons of bombs were dropped in close support of the 8th Army – all were against tactical targets³⁰.

Snow again began to fall in late January, increasing the weather problems and forcing closure of runways and adding to life’s miseries for the men encamped in tents. On 27 January after the weather cleared, ‘A’ Flight deployed to Forli in order to practise night circuits and ease the load on the Cesenatico circuit. They would remain until 4 February, although weather would continue to hamper training. Eventually all crews got night circuits, night cross country and night gunnery practise in. Despite the care taken during night conversion, the training was not without loss. Just before midnight on 10 February, Flying Officer Jack Hobby³¹ flying solo in FW845:T crashed into a lake just after take-off, about two miles north of the aerodrome. He was seen to be turning to port when he just flew into the ground. He was killed instantly, the inquiry finding no obvious cause and putting it down to inexperience.

By early March, the Squadron had converted to night bombing intruder operations, which would last for the final months of the war. These operations were intended to provide the Army with information regarding enemy road and rail movement and 454 aircraft where possible, were to intercept and harass such movement. Unlike the intruders performed by the fighters, these raids were by single aircraft flying between 6000 feet and ground level. Without any night vision aids, the flying would be extremely dangerous and was often conducted under ground radar control. Known as ‘Bonnet’, the station established near Ravenna gradually improved its accuracy as time progressed and became

²⁹ SQNLDR Phillip Alexander Strickland, RAAF Pilot No 406264. b. 21 Aug 14, Katanning, WA. 454 Sqn - 2 Jun 44 - 26 Apr 45.

³⁰ AA A11362/1 725/P1 – Weekly Summary of Activities – RAAF Personnel, Folio 10A.

³¹ † FLGOFF John Charles ‘Jack’ Hobby, RAFVR Pilot No 159407. 454 Sqn - 21 Dec 44 – 10 Feb 45. KIAA 10 Feb 45. Age 21. Buried: Coriano, Col XVI, E, 2, Italy.



particularly useful once night operations commenced. Blind bombing techniques were in their infancy, so results could only be described as mixed. The Mobile Operations Room Unit or MORU was visited by squadron crews on a number of occasions to discuss tactics and results. In Italy, there were two MORUs – MORU A on the East Coast supporting the British 8th Army (and the one under which 454 would eventually operate) and MORU B on the West Coast supporting the US 5th Army.

In addition, the aircraft had to be modified with new bombsights, flare racks were fitted to the rear compartments to drop illumination flares, and turret guns re-harmonised to achieve the best results from strafing. As well as bombing, the Squadron would also regularly perform ‘nickelling’ or leaflet drops, intended to encourage the enemy to surrender.



Moore's Nav, Don Surtees, holds the bulky F.24 camera.

Moore Collection

It was also during this phase that Flight Lieutenant Joe ‘Fizz’ Wright³², the navigator on Col Stinson’s crew, developed a special night photographic technique which provided excellent results using the F.24 aerial camera, flares and photo flash incendiaries. The F.24 cameras were standard RAF photographic equipment and weighing around 20lbs,

were bulky and hard to handle. Crews had to hand-hold them to take a bombing or reconnaissance photograph by sighting through a sliding side window in the nose, or through an open rear hatch. They took 5” x 5” negatives which were used by Allied intelligence to rate bombing accuracy and identify possible targets for later strikes.

At 00.27 hours on 6 March 1945, Phil Strickland took off on the Squadron’s first night intruder, the target being a stores dump just north of Lake Comacchio. Flares were dropped on ground radar instructions, followed quickly by the

³² FLTLT Joseph ‘Fizz’ Wright, DFC, RAAF NavB No 400948. b. 18 Mar 17, Bendigo, Vic. d. Jul 94, Vic. 454 Sqn – 27 May 44 – 14 Aug 45.



bomb run, but no results were observed. Three other intruders followed at one hour intervals.

Meanwhile, on the ground, German Commander *Feldmarschall* Albert Kesselring departed on 23 March, off to command the German armies in the West leaving his Army Group ‘C’ to General von Vietinghoff. But even at this late stage, von Vietinghoff could still muster 23 German and four Fascist Divisions against Field Marshal Alexander’s 17 Allied divisions and four Italian combat groups – a fairly even match. But it was in air power that the Allies had the advantage. Apart from sporadic FW-190 and Me-109 fighter incursions and a few Ju-87 raids, the *Luftwaffe* in Italy was by now a totally defeated force. The only threats to the Allied airmen remained *flak*, mountainous terrain and the weather.

As if to illustrate the point, on 25 March and during a night road reconnaissance at 300 feet, Warrant Officer Syd Holmes³³ flying FW853:J ‘Just Jane’ was hit by *flak*, which seized an engine. Unable to feather the propeller, with flaps out of action and with his bomb doors frozen open, he returned to base and made an uneventful landing. It was his crew’s second brush with the enemy in three nights. On the 23rd, he had his airspeed indicator damaged by *flak* over the Latisava-San Giorgio di Fogara Road as he was strafing 90 trucks and had to be escorted to land by Squadron Leader Strickland in order to get the landing speed right. Again, a successful landing was accomplished. He later recalled what happened at debrief on his second clash with death:

We were flying at 200 feet about a third of our way home on an Armed Recce and had just completed our “dog-leg” around Mestre, when we were hit. Firing seemed to come from almost directly below us and I think it was one of the first bursts which did the damage.

The first thing which caught my eye was the green bomb bay light – I’ve since learnt that my hydraulic jack was pierced and the elastic bands had flung the bomb doors open. There was next a strong smell of oil, and on running my eye over the pressure and temperature gauges I discovered that the starboard oil pressure wasn’t registering and realised our starboard engine had been hit and the hydraulic and oil systems damaged. I commenced to trim for single engine flying and, on finding that the starboard “prop” wouldn’t feather, switched the engine off – being afraid of fire.

Naturally my next thought was to get home, and it looked like an “even money” chance, although at 2-300 ft and 140 mph we couldn’t do much dodging if ‘Jerry’ opened up.

³³ WOFF (later PLTOFF) Sydney William Holmes, DFC, RAAF Pilot No 422562. b. 14 Sep 18, Abbotsford, NSW. d. 18 Jul 96. 454 Sqn – 25 Nov 44 – 14 Sep 45.



My navigator and myself [*sic*] decided to keep over land and not take the more accurate track home which would have taken us over the sea for part of the trip. While our WOP/AG tried for a homing, I steered various courses around the ‘hot spots’ and, being good, we all became more confident the farther we went and struck no opposition. I had decided to keep to my original height as in the moonlight I considered we had less chance of being picked up low than climbing slowly to 1500 ft. Anyhow luck was really our way, and the port motor was behaving excellently. Our base had been informed of our position and had everything ready for us to come straight in. When about seven miles away I commenced to pump the wheels down and whilst doing this, wandered off course, so that we found ourselves almost parallel with the field when the wheels were finally down. I then asked for permission to land in the opposite direction to that in use at the time and this was immediately granted.

We came straight in, running off the side of the runway about 50 yards after touchdown and doing a slow ground loop.

The only time we were fired on was when crossing the bomb line. I had just switched my navigation lights on, and someone started “pooping” away so naturally the lights were switched off again. Thanks to a lot of luck, good navigation and a “wizard kite” we were safe at base.

For this and his previous incident where he brought the crew home safely, Holmes was later awarded a DFC.

April would prove to be the final month of the war as far as 454 Squadron were concerned, but the heavy fighting was not yet over. Operations would



Po River bridge targets became a focus of 454's bombing in the last months.

Rimmer Collection

almost exclusively entail sorties against Po River Valley targets and interdiction of the road movements of the fleeing enemy. On the 9 April, all crews were called to a briefing by the Wing Army Liaison Officer on a ‘big push’ due to begin at dusk. *Operation Buckland-Wowser* as it was called was to be a major attack by



the Polish II and British V Army Corps across the Senio River in the vicinity of Faenza. The operation was intended to dislocate and confuse the heavily dug-in German Army elements and neutralise their artillery, thus easing the job of the friendly ground forces. *Buckland* had in fact commenced earlier that day with the pounding by USAAF Liberators and Flying Fortresses and a four-hour artillery barrage of German Army targets in the Lugo-Cotignola area³⁴. It was the job of the night intruders to carry on bombing and harassing tactics over the enemy gun positions so the friendly troops moving up might receive as little trouble from the German artillery as possible. It was to be a max effort from all 253 Wing Squadrons, with each crew expected to fly twice that night. Subsequently, twenty 454 Squadron aircraft operated at regular intervals bombing gun positions at Massa Lombarda, just over the line from the advancing New Zealand 2nd Division.

Fatigue now became the big problem for Wing Commander Henderson to manage. When 454 Crews wanted to sleep during the day, P-47 Thunderbolts from the 79th Fighter Group, USAAF who were also using the Cesenatico aerodrome commenced flying, making restful sleep impossible. No sooner had night ops finished than the fighters went to work and it took a couple of weeks before crews became used to the noise.

Friday the 13th of April would become known and recorded in the Unit Operational Record Book as Black Friday. It was not just because US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died, but the Squadron lost two crews while attacking targets on the Po River and almost another. Warrant Officer Col Evans³⁵ flying FW740:O with Warrant Officers John O'Keefe³⁶ and Ed Murphy³⁷ and Flying Officer Errol Johnston³⁸ were tasked to bomb Portonuovo, approximately 10 miles due east of Bologna. Nothing further was heard of crew or aircraft. Later that night, Flying Officer Jim Duffy³⁹ with navigator Flying Officer Phil Hemsley⁴⁰ and wireless operator gunners Warrant Officers Gordon Adam⁴¹ and Ken Nunn-Patrick⁴² flying FW716:Q

³⁴ And pounded it was. 825 Strategic Air Force heavy bombers, 234 Mediums and 740 fighter bombers took part. The heavies dropped 1692 tons of bombs, the mediums 24,000 incendiaries. Christopher F. Shores, *Pictorial History of the Mediterranean Air War*, Vol II: RAF 1943-45, Ian Allen, London, 1973, 106.

³⁵ † WOFF Colin Ware Evans, RAAF Pilot 421797. b. 23 Jul 17, Bronte, NSW. 454 Sqn – 4 Nov 44 – 12 Apr 45. KIA 12 Apr 45 age 27. Buried: Argenta Gap War Cemetery, I, F, 14, Italy.

³⁶ † WOFF John Harris O'Keefe, RAAF NavB No 427723. b. 30 Aug 15, Boulder, WA. 454 Sqn – 4 Nov 44 – 12 Apr 45. KIA 12 Apr 45 age 29. Buried: Argenta Gap War Cemetery, I, F, 18, Italy.

³⁷ † WOFF Edwin George Murphy, RAAF WOP/AG No 425721. b. 23 May 21, Bundaberg, Qld. 454 Sqn – 4 Nov 44 – 12 Apr 45. KIA 12 Apr 45 age 23. Buried: Argenta Gap War Cemetery, I, F, 15, Italy.

³⁸ † FLGOFF Errol Johnston, RAAF WOP/AG No 412316. b. 31 Aug 16, Neutral Bay, NSW. 454 Sqn – 4 Nov 44 – 12 Apr 45. KIA 12 Apr 45 age 28. Buried: Argenta Gap War Cemetery, I, F, 16, Italy.

³⁹ † FLGOFF William James Alexander Duffy, RAAF Pilot No 428431. b. 24 Jun 13, Colac, Vic. 454 Sqn – 16 Oct 44 – 13 Apr 45. KIA 13 Apr 45 age 31. Malta Memorial, Panel 19, Col 1, Malta.

⁴⁰ † FLGOFF Philip Hardy Hemsley, RAFVR NavB No 162125. 454 Sqn – 22 Dec 44 – 13 Apr 45. KIA 13 Apr 45 age 35. Buried: Bologna War Cemetery, Col V, C, 9, Italy.

⁴¹ † WOFF Gordon Ross Adam, RAAF WOP/AG No 411435. b. 23 Feb 20, Atherton, Qld. 454 Sqn – 16 Oct 44 – 13 Apr 45. KIA 13 Apr 45 age 25. Buried: Bologna War Cemetery, Col V, C, 10, Italy.

⁴² † WOFF Kenneth Brennan Nunn-Patrick, RAAF WOP/AG No 424556. b. 1 Oct 21, Neutral Bay, NSW. 454 Sqn – 16 Oct 44 – 13 Apr 45. KIA 13 Apr 45 age 23. Buried: Bologna War Cemetery, Col V, C, 8, Italy.



took off to bomb Argenta and conduct armed reconnaissance of the roads in the northern Italian battle area. Later the wreckage was located near Medicina – the aircraft had crashed in flames and exploded - and three of the crew found and buried, but there was no sign of Duffy, and his body was never recovered.

To top matters off, Flight Sergeant ‘Taffy’ Griffiths landed FW793:G ‘Glamorous Greta’ very fast and overshot the runway after the night’s operations. He applied hard brakes and the aircraft went over on its back on reaching soft ground off the end of runway. His crew were unhurt, but the aircraft was a write-off. Again, his WOP/AG Warrant Officer David Etheridge recalled what happened⁴³:

We had already flown the previous evening at 1940 hours and we were off again at 0113. This operation was duly completed but trouble ensued when we landed back at base! One develops an instinctive feeling as a back seat passenger for realising that something is not quite as it should be and that night I had that very feeling. I felt - correctly as it turned out - that we were floating much too long before the wheels touched down and on such a short runway - there was little room for error (about 1500 metres only). We must have still been travelling at 60-70 mph when we stopped violently and the last thing I remember was my wireless table coming up rather fast in my direction.

When I woke up I was hanging upside down by my lap strap but apparently still in one piece and I was able to release myself and exit through the back hatch at some speed. Once outside I realised that we were upside down and that petrol was gushing from the wing tanks, Meanwhile Pilot and Navigator were both trapped and with considerable help from several South Africans, near whose camp we had crashed at the end of the runway, we were able to rescue them.

Fortunately for the squadron maintenance crews, Taffy Griffiths’ tour of operations was completed the same day and he left the squadron soon afterwards.

As if that wasn’t enough for one day. Finally, the excitement must have been extreme for Flight Sergeant Reg Withers⁴⁴ and crew when aircraft FW760:Y had its cupola shot away over Argenta, but there were no injuries. Clearly, the Germans were not a spent force and their *flak* gunners still very lethal.

⁴³ Correspondence with the author – 18 Dec 2000.

⁴⁴ FSGT (later FLGOFF) Reginald Gordon Withers RAAF Pilot No 418728. b. 29 Nov 17, Oakleigh, Vic. d. 12 Sep 00. 454 Sqn – 25 Nov 44 – 14 Aug 45.



On the night of 16/17 April 1945, Warrant Officer Hogan and crew were flying 'U' for Uncle - FW765 - when hit by its own bomb. The aircraft received 150 holes. *Andrews Collection*

Three days later, Flying Officer Frank Hogan's⁴⁵ aircraft FW765:U was badly damaged and the three crew all injured just after bomb release over Polesella ferry terminal. As there was no *flak*, it was thought that one of the 40 lb bombs detonated prematurely. Despite its small size, the explosion took out the starboard engine, flaps and weakened a tyre which blew out on landing. Hogan skilfully landed the aircraft, coming to rest in the sand at

the end of the runway. Injured were Sergeant Stan 'Lofty' Hindley⁴⁶ (a thigh wound requiring a blood transfusion) and Warrant Officers 'Trapper' Hodge⁴⁷ (a calf wound) and Norm Brook⁴⁸ (a heel wound). The aircraft was damaged beyond repair and ground crew later counted 150 holes.

The last crew loss for the Squadron was recorded on 19 April 1945. Sergeant Frank Lister and crew of FW643 went missing over the Po River area. Tasked to cover the far westward reconnaissance between Parma-Brescia-Lake Garda-Po River, their aircraft was subsequently reported as having crashed in flames, the result of bomb damage self-inflicted, by dropping too low. All four were killed.

Between 20 and 23 April, the Allied commanders planned a big push against the bridges across the Adige and Brenta Rivers to cut the lines of retreat of the German 10th and 14th Armies who were rapidly pulling back towards the Brenner Pass and Venice. The Operation, known as *Operation Corncob* was given to the heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force, but 454 and other medium bomber squadrons would help finish the job by contributing numerous sorties to prosecute the road and bridge targets, concentrating on the Adige River crossings, especially between the 23 and 25 April. Pilot Officer Alf Warner⁴⁹, the navigator on Flight Sergeant John Paterson's⁵⁰ crew, later recalled one of these operations⁵¹:

⁴⁵ FLGOFF Francis Wilfred James Hogan, RAAF Pilot No 408998. b. 16 Mar 22, Geelong West, Vic. 454 Sqn - 22 Dec 44 - 14 Aug 45.

⁴⁶ SGT Stanley 'Lofty' Hindley, RAFVR Nav(B) No 1673385. 454 Sqn - 22 Dec 44 - 14 Aug 45.

⁴⁷ WOFF Donald Charles D'Orset 'Trapper' Hodge, RAAF WOP/AG No 432015/ b. 6 Dec 14, Macksville, NSW. 454 Sqn - 22 Dec 44 - 14 Aug 45.

⁴⁸ WOFF Norman Eric Brook, RAFVR AG No 1125495. 454 Sqn - 14 Apr 45 - 14 Aug 45. This was Brook's second trip with the Squadron.

⁴⁹ PLTOFF Alfred Guy Warner, RAFVR NavB No 186161. 454 Sqn - 9 Apr 45 - 10 Jun 45.

⁵⁰ FSGT John Munn Kirk Paterson, RAFVR Pilot No 1561679. 454 Sqn - 7 Dec 44 - 15 Jun 45.

⁵¹ Letter Warner to Prof John Breihan, 12 Jan 91. With permission.



We were scrambled to incommode a bridge over the River Adige and being alone we had a free hand. The bridge was being used by the retreating Germans. As usual, we went in low using guns against the defences on the bridge and skip bombing with 250 lb'ers. It must have been quite a racket. Having dropped half our bomb load, we pulled away, pilot and gunners having a whale of a time.

While Alf Warner's trip was a 'piece of cake', not all such trips went as planned. Flying Officer Norm Gilham⁵² recalled his crew's close shave on Anzac Day Eve for what was a one hour flight⁵³:

I had been briefed for one of these intruder missions on the 24th of April 1945; but about 11 pm I was briefed for a special mission that required an experienced crew. The Army had a large number of Germans bottled up at a bend in the Adige River, and the Germans were busy building a temporary bridge, to escape during the night. Our job was to destroy the bridge and prevent their escape. It was a clear night, so I crossed the river clear of the target, and had a look at the situation. I continued north to gain the element of surprise. I turned around, dropped to 1,000 ft, and headed for the bridge. The anti-aircraft guns were a bit slow in their response, and as I turned away we could see that our bombs had badly damaged or destroyed the bridge and anyone working there. We also spotted two barges further up the river, so I quickly circled around, dropped even lower to 300ft, and came back past them, with the turret and belly guns spraying them with bullets. The anti-aircraft guns were right onto us by now, and although I answered with my forward guns, we were badly hit. All the instruments and communications were put out action. I had no contact with the rest of the crew, and I did not know if any of them were alive or dead - The crew knew I was OK because we were still flying! I flew clear of the area, and then gained height. I tried to call the crew without success. My nerves were totally on edge; and I nearly jumped out of the plane when something grabbed my foot. It was Ross, the navigator. He handed me a note to say he had been hit. He then reached up with another note with a course for base. Without instruments working, I did not know how high we were, or how fast we were going. I simply had to fly by my experience and understanding of the aircraft; by feeling and instinct. Tom and Geoff, the two wireless operator/air gunners were unhurt and did their jobs well. One sent a wireless message

⁵² FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Norman Albert Charles Gilham, RAAF Pilot No 418265. b. 3 Jul 22, Geelong, Vic. 454 Sqn – 20 Oct 44 – 19 Aug 45.

⁵³ Correspondence with the author.



that we were in trouble and as we approached base, the other set off a double red flare, which meant an emergency landing. Just as well they did because I could not contact base at all. I landed the plane quite safely, but our troubles were not over. We had no brakes! Near the end of the runway, I turned the plane sharply with full right rudder, spinning it off to the side, leaving the runway clear. The three of us got Ross out, as his compartment hatch had jammed. Then the ambulance and fire crews took over. There was always the chance of fire with damaged aircraft so they played it safe.

It was now about 1 am on the 25th April 1945, Anzac Day. We had certainly named our plane very well - “Eventful Eve” - as we had taken off on Anzac Eve, and landed on Anzac Day. Our fortieth operational mission with 454 Squadron, and our last; because the war ended while Ross was in hospital.

Navigator, Flying Officer Ross Woodhead⁵⁴ later recovered. However, *Corncob* rang the death knell of the German Army in Italy, with General von Senger⁵⁵, the German XIV Panzer Corps commander summing up the effect⁵⁶:

It was the bombing of the River Po crossings that finished us. We could have withdrawn successfully with normal rear guard action despite the heavy pressure, but owing to the destruction of the ferries and river crossings we lost all our equipment. North of the river we were no longer an army.

It was the end for von Vietinghoff’s Army Group ‘C’, and on 29 April he signed the surrender at Field Marshal Alexander’s Headquarters in Caserta, with the cease fire coming into effect on 2 May 1945. The war in Italy thus ended and with it, the Squadron practically ceased work. On the night of 1-2 May, only two sorties were flown; the honour of flying 454’s last sortie of the war falling to Geoff Bradley’s crew. With Geoff were Warrant Officer Peter Matthews, Flying Officer Jack Shipway⁵⁷ and Warrant Officer Ray Riekie⁵⁸ (who was standing in for Flight Lieutenant Cliff ‘Pappy’ Kershaw⁵⁹). Flying Officer Jack Shipway later recalled they had...

⁵⁴ FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Ross Sydney Woodhead RAAF Nav(B) No 426939. b. 22 Jul 21, Blythe, SA. 454 Sqn – 20 Oct 44 – 19 Aug 45.

⁵⁵ GEN Frido von Senger und Etterlin, Commander XIV Panzer Corps.

⁵⁶ Roderic Owen, *The Desert Air Force*, p 261.

⁵⁷ FLGOFF John William ‘Jack’ Shipway RAAF WOP/AG No 412722. b. 11 Oct 20, Waterloo, NSW. 454 Sqn – 22 Oct 44 – 14 Aug 45.

⁵⁸ WOFF (later PLTOFF) David Raymond ‘Ray’ Riekie RAAF WOP/AG No 423293. b. 11 May 17, Granville, NSW. d. 2005. 454 Sqn – 2 Nov 44 – 14 Aug 45.

⁵⁹ FLTLT Clifford ‘Pappy’ Kershaw RAAF WOP/AG No 405976. b. 12 May 19, Wigan, UK. d. 1985, Qld. 454 Sqn – 22 Oct 44 – 14 Aug 45.



...the distinction of flying the last operational trip for the Squadron, which was scheduled as a survey of the traffic moving towards the Villach Pass; then northward to the Italian-Austrian border. The moon was full, the snow on the mountains along the spine of Italy glistened and the sky was black and we were not looking forward to the trip one little bit. As we neared Villach there was a lot of searchlight activity in the distance, when the recall was received and we heaved sighs of relief as we turned for home base!

The sortie had been aborted shortly before completion due to poor weather.

Date	Sorties	Hours	A/C Losses	Bombs (Tons)
Jan	138	209	-	72
Feb	-	372 (training)	1 (accident)	
Mar	129	209	-	72
Apr	294	506	3	380
May	2	-	-	-

Table 12.2 – Operational Summary - 1945

Six days later, news arrived at the Squadron that Germany had unconditionally surrendered. 454 Squadron's war was finally over.



Baltimore 'Q' on a bombing run in Northern Italy.

Gray Collection



Bomb damage assessment photo taken over Ravenna on 15 August 1944 - the bombs can be seen exploding at lower centre.

Author's Collection

A night photoflash shot of the Polesella area. A brilliant flare was dropped which gave sufficient ground illumination to take a picture, although the results were often blurry, intelligence officers could gain much useful information.

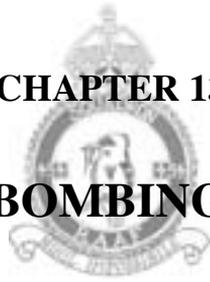
Author's Collection





CHAPTER 13

A NIGHT BOMBING MISSION



Warrant Officer Max Knight¹, a navigator/bomb aimer with Warrant Officer Bob Mitchell's² crew, describes their 24th sortie, a typical night intruder armed reconnaissance along the Po Valley³...

Crew: Warrant Officer Bob Mitchell, Pilot
Warrant Officer Max Knight, Nav(B)
Warrant Officer Max Coghlan⁴, WOP/AG
Flight Sergeant 'Taffy' Evans⁵, AG

Aircraft: FW760:Y

Bomb Load: 3 x 250 lb, 16 x 40 lb, 30 x 4 lb incendiaries, 2 flares,
6 illumination cartridges, and two bundles of leaflets

Date: 16/17 Apr 45

'Y' for Yoke is standing in the dispersal close by, her dew-covered wings shining in the moonlight. Leaping from the truck, we pull our parachutes and Mae Wests after us and dump them by the aircraft as the truck jerks into motion and hurtles down the taxi track.

A fitter and a rigger are standing by and soon activity in and around the



Joe 'Taffy' Evans (AG), Max Knight (Nav), Bob Mitchell (Pilot) and Max Coghlan (WAG) - Villa Orba, 1945.

Rimmer Collection

¹ WOFF (later FLGOFF) John Maxwell 'Max' Knight, RAAF Nav No 413394. b. 16 Jul 20, Leichhardt, NSW. 454 Sqn - 4 Nov 44 - 17 Aug 45.

² WOFF (later FLGOFF) Brian John 'Bob' Mitchell, RAAF Pilot No 417971. 3 Jul 24, Adelaide, SA. 454 Sqn - 4 Nov 44 - 17 Aug 45.

³ Acknowledgement to the late FLGOFF Max Knight. Courtesy 454/459 Squadrons Association - used with permission. This story was originally published in Roderic Owen's *The Desert Air Force*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1948 pp248-252 and later reproduced in Chaz Bowyer & Christopher Shores, *Desert Air Force at War*, Ian Allen Ltd, London, 1981, pp122-125.

⁴ WOFF Maxwell Graham Coghlan, RAAF WOP/AG No 428104. b. 30 Dec 22, Launceston, Tas. 454 Sqn - 4 Nov 44 - 17 Aug 45.

⁵ FSGT Joseph Charles 'Taffy' Evans, RAFVR AG No 1313388. 454 Sqn - 4 Nov 44 - 17 Aug 45.



Armourers loading bombs prior to a sortie. The bombs were roughly handled, safe until fuses were installed. *Gray Collection*

aircraft resemble six mice on a large lump of cheese. The fitter is hauling the tarpaulin covers from the engine, the rigger, sitting astride the nose, is wiping the dew from the Perspex with a chamois. ‘Cog’ (the W.A.G.) and ‘Taffy’ (the gunner) are in the back room stowing parachutes and checking equipment. The Nav, Max, calls up to the pilot:

‘Ready for bomb check, Mitch; all clear bomb doors.’

Mitch, standing on the wing placing his ‘chute in his cockpit, leans across and pulls a lever.

‘HA-H-H-HA-A-A-A-A.’ With a long heavy sigh, the belly of the Balt. swings down and out, revealing two rows of sleek yellow bombs. Standing in the bomb-bay the Nav, checks the fusing gear, then ducks out from under and clambers up his door-cum-ladder into the office, where the bomb selection gear is checked.

‘Load O.K.- Bomb doors closed,’ and ‘Whoosh’, the doors swing shut and the belly of the aircraft is again a smooth unbroken line.

By 21.30 all checking has been completed, the crew is aboard and the engines running. A rigger with two torches guides us out from the dispersal and gives the thumbs up as we turn down the taxi strip. Four hundred yards’ taxying brings us to the end of the runway, where the pilot does his final cockpit drill and tests his engines, then calls the Control Tower by R/T.

‘Hello Hillpath from Flippant 35 - Ready for immediate scramble



- Over.'

'Flippant 35 from Hillpath - clear to go - Over.'

'Roger Hillpath; 35 Out,' and the night intruder lumbers forward, turns, and is soon thundering down the runway between the two rows of lights on the ground.

At about 100 m.p.h. she bounces once or twice and becomes airborne. The wheels fold back into the engine nacelles and the flare path falls rapidly below and behind. A few minutes later we are over the flarepath again, at 4,000 feet, and headed north for the Po River, our patrol area for tonight.

A good moon is up and the coastline is clearly visible as it slides slowly backwards beneath us. On the way up a light on the sea is investigated but found to be a sea marker dropped by another aircraft. Soon the nav lights are switched off and the bombs fused and selected.

Looking out to port we can see the artificial moonlight and the flashes and explosions of the 8th Army's artillery fire. Just north of this, over enemy territory, an occasional flare appears in the sky. The night intruders are looking for enemy movement on the roads.

Occasionally, too, the red and white chameleon-like tongues of tracer reach up from the ground trying to pull the intruders from the sky.

As we pass Porto Garibaldi on the Comacchio Spit we ease away a little, for this is a definite 'hot spot'. Altering course at Goro we soon reach Taglio di Po and turn west along the river, beginning our patrol at 22.11. We are to cover a 40-mile section of the Po until 23.15. Passing Polesella, a noted hot spot, we are alert for any hostile action, for it was here one night that Jerry nearly claimed another aircraft destroyed – us.

Stooging along we see a light switched off in a large building in a village. Noting this, we move on looking for better targets. The country 3,000 feet below us looks dark and still; the only lights showing are fires dotted around the area, and from the sky flares are still dropping intermittently. About four miles on our port bow a flare lights up a sharp bend in the river.

Mitch's voice comes over the inter-com. 'I think I see a bridge down there Max. Should there be one there?'

'No,' replies the Nav, 'it is probably a pontoon affair—someone is bombing it now.'

Three streams of tracer slide up from the south bank almost converging at 4,000 feet, and we see four bombs exploding in the river and on the bank quite close to the bridge.



‘Let’s go in and have a ‘shoofti’. If it is still in one piece we’ll come back and bomb.’

‘Right. Here we go. Keep your eye on the bridge, Cog, and see if there are any holes in it.’

Cog is over the open hatch in the rear of the aircraft and has a good view of anything directly below. We are over the bridge at 3,000 feet and the old Balt is weaving like a bat. A single stream of tracer slides beneath us but it is not very accurate. Satisfied the bridge is in good condition, we peel off and scream for the deck heading back up the river—but we’ll be back.

Finding nothing along the river, we turn again towards our bridge, and as we approach a light blinks once near the centre.

‘See that light, Mitch?’ The Nav is kneeling over his bomb sight in the nose of the aircraft.

‘Yes, M.T., I think. The bridge is certainly in use. I’m turning in now,’ and the wing dips as we do a diving turn onto the target.

From the rear, the W.A.G.’s voice comes up, ‘Do you want me to toss out a flare, Max?’



At the end of the mission, the obligatory debrief. Flying Officer Ken Bradshaw, RAF Intello interrogates Flying Officer Bill Bourn RAF Nav (B) with Scottish Nav (B) S McBride and 8th Army Liaison Officer Cedric De Walt watching.
Gray Collection



‘No, thanks, Cog, I’ll use the moonpath — O.K. Mitch, hold her there.’

The plane levels out and the Nav speaks again:

‘Height 2,500 feet, Mitch?’

‘Yep.’

‘OK... left—left..., steady.... Bomb doors open. . . damn! Right 10 degrees. . . hold it. . . Bombing, 1—2—3 bomb doors closed—break left.’

As the aircraft makes its breakaway in a tight turn the invisible weight of the ‘g’ presses down on us, and Taffy speaks from the turret, ‘A burst of light trace well below.’

Cog reports on the bombing, ‘Overshot to the southern bank - one on the bank, one near the road and one on a house.’

‘OK. Thanks, Cog,’ the Nav replies and thinks, ‘Not good but better luck next time – ‘yimkin’.

Last night we were photographing Francolino where Jerry was suspected to be crossing, so we circle here a few times dropping flares from 2,000 feet. Satisfied there are no pontoons or ferries crossing the river we stooge off. Activity was also expected near Polesella tonight, so we circle there doing bags of evasive action and firing off illuminating cartridges. These light a section of the ground brilliantly for ten seconds each, but no movement or M.T. is seen.

‘Let’s go down a bit, Mitch, and have a ‘shoofti’ around the roads between the Po and the Adige.’ Cog is becoming restless.

‘Right. Going down.’

At something like 500 feet our descent is checked, and we go weaving and turning around roads and canals.

‘M.T. below us.’ Cog has sighted a target.

Turning, we fly back along the road and make three or four passes over a large truck parked by the roadside. Cog is strafing with his two belly guns and the smell of cordite fills the aircraft. We have only ten minutes left on patrol and we must dump our bombs on something, so we leave the truck and continue the search. During these few short minutes we see an exhibition of really good shooting but did not like it one little bit. Our aircraft was the clay pigeon.

At 500 feet we flew over the moonlit countryside, the Nav’s head thrust as far forward into the Perspex nose as possible for better vision, the pilot concentrating on his flying and at the same time looking for M.T., the W.A.G. crouched over his open hatch and Taffy constantly turning his turret searching for enemy fighters.

From the bank of a canal, without warning, a long thin yellow



tongue of tracer licks out trying to caress old ‘Y’ Yoke. The Nav’s head shoots back into the body of the aircraft like a scared tortoise. Mitch dives the aircraft to starboard and levels out quick—you can’t dive far when you start from 500 feet That thin yellow line stays just over the turret, and weave as we did we could not lose it. We are clipping along at a smart 220 m.p.h. some fifty feet above the deck when the gun, probably a 20-mm., finally lost us and ceased firing. It is just after this that we all start to breathe again.

‘Yah, missed me!’ says Mitch, and his breath comes in uneven pants through the microphone.

Max suddenly realizes that he is still alive after all and speaks up: ‘We still have these bombs on and it is almost time we went home. I think we’d better go down to the river. We’re sure to find something there.’

‘What height?’ the pilot wants to know as he turns south.

‘About four thou.’

‘Four thousand it is,’ and we start climbing.

Just as we turn along the river, a pontoon bridge is silhouetted in the moonpath.

‘Target 40 degrees port. Start turning.’ The navigator is over his bombsight again and his eyes keep the bridge in sight as his fingers feel along the bomb switches and select those required.

‘Are you going for that bridge?’ The pilot sighted it too.



Aircraft FW839:K ‘Kuddlesome Kitty’ gets a refuel prior to a sortie.

Godfrey Collection



‘That’s right. Weave right, then back again. . . O.K., steady there... bomb doors open. . . left—left... hold it. . . bombing, 1—2—3, bomb doors closed, break left.’

The bombs hurl up geysers of water about fifty yards east of the bridge. Not good enough. The Nav speaks again.

‘Your course 160 degrees more or less.’

‘Are we going home now?’ comes a query from the turret.

‘Yes, Taff,’ says Mitch. ‘We’re pointing right at it, more or less.’

‘Goodie, goodie,’ says Taffy.

We are late leaving patrol, for it is now 23.25, so we try to send an E.T.A. to base by W/T, but cannot get through.

We fly down over the lake watching the terrific 8th Army barrage. Looking back over enemy territory fires can be seen scattered everywhere. Flares and bombs are still going down and tracer is still coming up. It will be like that all night. In the morning the fighter and daylight formation bombers will continue the harassing and the pounding. Reaching the southern shore of the lake we alter course and head down towards base.

At 23.45 we are calling the Control Tower.

‘Hello, Hillpath, this is Flippant 35 Landing instructions, please. Over.’

‘Hello, Flippant 35 from Hillpath. You are No. 1 and clear to land. Over.’

‘Roger Hillpath. 35 out,’ and we complete the circuit of the ‘drome and come in.

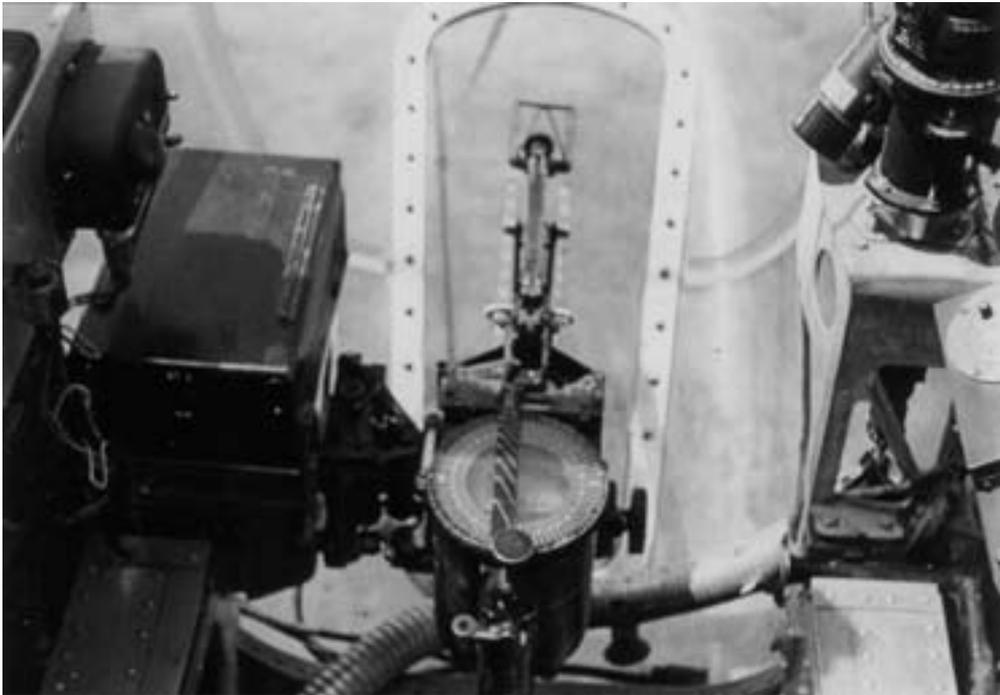
Safety harnesses are fastened and we settle back into our seats as the aircraft is aimed as though to dive into the ground just short of the flarepath.

As usual, though, we level out, sink, bump once and we are rushing down a lane between the two rows of lights at 100 m.p.h. The Nav enters in his log, ‘LANDED BASE 23.48’. as we taxi back to the dispersal.

The aircraft is parked, engines stopped and we clamber out among the waiting ground crew.

‘How was the trip, Mitch?’ one of them asks.

‘A PIECE OF CAKE,’ is the reply...



*The Baltimore's bombsight. The navigator would use this device to calculate the bomb release point after taking height, speed and drift into consideration. Results were not always perfect. **Godfrey Collection***



*The Squadron's final resting place - Villa Orba - nothing more than open countryside. Clearly seen are the Squadron's tent lines and aircraft parked in the upper centre of the photo. **Godfrey Collection***



CHAPTER 14

THE FINAL DAYS



With the end of the war in Italy, 454 Squadron could return to the joys of daylight flying without fear of enemy action. Twelve aircraft flew air tests on 2 May, and crews were amazed at the damage to the countryside the bombing and ravages of war had done – finally after two months of night flying, they could see the result of their work. Soon, congratulatory messages arrived thanking the Squadron for its efforts in helping to win the war. One in particular from Air Vice-Marshal Robert Foster¹, the Air Officer Commanding Desert Air Force, summed up the effort:

I wish to add my personal message to those you have already received concerning our victory in this theatre of operations. Desert Air Force has played a conspicuous part in the decisive defeat which we have inflicted on the enemy during the past few weeks. This is the culmination of over four years continuous fighting. We started in Egypt and have come all the way to North Italy to deliver the knockout blow. Throughout the whole period Desert Air Force has shown a consistently high standard of achievement of which we are justly proud.

Meanwhile flying continued. The Squadron was told to continue formation and flying practice for possible peace keeping duties in Italy and until the Greek and Yugoslavian political situation had stabilised. Memories of the many daylight formation bombing raids were no doubt stirred when on 4 May, twelve aircraft flew a three-hour formation victory flight over Trieste and Fiume – two old targets familiar to most crews.

To break the monotony of waiting to find out what would happen to both Squadron and members, crews rotated to Treviso for Communications Flight duties. This offered time away and the opportunity to visit towns around Italy.

It would become a waiting period and sporting events flourished. 454 Squadron had appointed a full sports committee and took on all challengers, starting with

¹ Acting AVM (later ACM Sir) Robert Mordaunt Foster, KCB, CBE, DFC, RAF. AOC Desert Air Force. b. 3 Sep 1898. Retired 1 Feb 54.



their South African colleagues on the other side of the Cesenatico aerodrome. After President of the General Sports Committee, Flying Officer ‘Pat’ Gayer², had prepared a pitch out of the old football oval, 454 thrashed 15 SAAF at a cricket match to inaugurate the ground.

Although the war had ended and 454 Squadron members expected a quick posting home, many would be disappointed. Although VE Day had been pronounced on 8 May, news also arrived that 454 Squadron would shortly move further north still, to Villa Orba near Udine. The Unit Historian, Warrant Officer Max Knight, wrote:



The Squadron prepares to move out to Villa Orba.
Godfrey Collection

‘The reason is as yet obscure, but rumours cover every possible combination from ‘the boat’ from Trieste to policing Austria for six months. We shall see.’³ Subsequently, on 9th, the advance party left by road, with the main party following later on the 16th. Then, fourteen Baltimores flew up with aircrews and over twenty trucks went off by road.

At Villa Orba, the Squadron would continue flying operations – training, communications and peace-keeping duties with the opportunity to enjoy the countryside and venture as far north as Klagenfurt, Austria. Villa Orba was another ex-*Luftwaffe* airfield about ten miles west of the Udine township. The views were spectacular with the Alps just 15 miles to the north. The Squadron camped in the open, well-grassed meadow making 454 Squadron the most northerly unit in DAF. According to Bob Mitchell, the aerodrome ‘was a paddock with some nasty rough patches in the middle. We used to cart bombs up from Cesenatico, land at Campo Formido and taxi the three miles over the main road to our ex-German fighter paddock. The mess was part of our tented camp and [had] a hanging light to show us the way home after dark’.

With the move to Villa Orba, the Squadron needed a new Casa, so the *Anzac Casa* was set up (initially called the *Kookaburra Casa Mk II*) in Pantieneco, the local village, to replicate the most successful *Kookaburra Casa* of Cesenatico.

As well as Baltimores, early in 1945, the Squadron had unofficially ‘acquired’ a Fairchild Argus light observation aeroplane. It was the military

² FLGOFF (later FLTLT) Edward Ventry ‘Pat’ Gayer, RAAF WOP/AG No 400704. b. 11 Mar 10, Hamilton, Vic d. 1990. 454 Sqn – 8 May 44 – 14 Aug 45. A member of Col Stinson’s crew.

³ ORB entry 8 May 45.



The Squadron flight line with the Argus in the foreground.

Basedow Collection

version of the Fairchild 24, a light commercial over wing monoplane first introduced in 1934. The Argus was handy as a transport ferry, pilot check plane and general purpose ‘Squadron Hack’. Powered by a Ranger L-440 six-cylinder inverted air-cooled motor, the Argus carried a pilot and three passengers, and could cruise at an enjoyable speed of 117 mph. With a range of over

600 miles it became a useful addition to the Squadron’s aircraft inventory. But it was looked upon with envious eyes, and at a party in the Squadron Mess one evening, ‘Pete’ Henderson agreed with a local fighter squadron’s commander to swap it for a Spitfire. Now as everyone knows, all bomber pilots want to fly fighters at least once in their career, so the offer was accepted without hesitation. But there was a catch – the Spitfire turned out to be a Mk IV photo-reconnaissance variant, not a fighter at all. To make matters worse, there was no documentation and no flight manuals, so it was viewed upon as not such a good deal. Henderson, somewhat wiser than most, deferred the first flight to Squadron Leader Col Stinson, the Squadron Leader in charge of flying. Stinson flew the Spitfire on 11 May and again the next day where it reputedly scared him so much, that no-one else would dare try it on. So at another party in late May, the Spitfire was likewise swapped for a much more practical and controllable aircraft, an Air Observation Post (AOP) Auster Mk III, NJ923. The Auster proved to be a real bonus and very quickly, most pilots were checked out, beginning with Flight Lieutenant Geoff Bradley on 25 May. One interested bystander, Pilot Officer ‘Bob’ Mitchell, who would also fly the Auster, recalled the whole affair:



The Squadron Auster over the camp.

Godfrey Collection

...at last I was offered the job of Squadron ‘Hack’ pilot and given a quick circuit by Flight Lieutenant Jeff Gillingham who told me to approach at 40 knots, full flap over the fence, cut throttle and full stick back for a three pointer (it worked).

The war ended, we shifted to Villa Orba and kept the Auster in the campsite and used a piece of taxi strip for a runway.



Warrant Officer Ray Knight's belly landing.
Basedow Collection

I mainly did trips to Venice taking a passenger and landing on a small oval on the northern end of the Lido which was being used by a group of Americans with a Blimp...

... The reason for [parking the Auster near] the campsite

was because it was a mile walk to the paddock used by the Baltimores.

Clearly the swapping of aircraft *ad hoc* like this would have been frowned upon by the authorities, so their very presence was kept quiet. In fact there were a couple of Austers that the Squadron used.

NJ923 and another, NJ793, is also recorded in several Squadron pilot's log books and the Squadron Authorisation Book⁴.



... and the rescue. *Basedow Collection*

Despite the end of the war, the accidents continued. On 17 May, Warrant Officer Ray Knight⁵ found after take-off on a training sortie that his undercarriage unlocked, but would not retract. Flying FW627:G, he found all methods of trying to lock the undercarriage failed, so a belly landing at the Villa Orba aerodrome was attempted. While the aircraft was a write-off, the crew got out safely, Cause: loss of hydraulic pressure.

A change of command was also in the wind, and so on 19 May 1945, Wing Commander 'Pete' Henderson handed over to Wing Commander John Rees⁶. Rees would be the last Commanding Officer and see the Unit out. From 20-28 May, 454 Squadron practiced formation flying for what was billed as the largest formation flypast of the war – over 50 DAF aircraft would take part. On the 28th, the flypast was on. Approximately 500 aircraft took part in the flypast over Campo Formido airfield near Udine. It was both a celebration of the war's

⁴ The Squadron Authorisation Book was a register of all 'authorised' flights that the squadron made. Squadron Authorisation Book – Vic Mitchell Estate, held by brother, Mr Keith Mitchell of Canberra.

⁵ WOFF Raymond Alex Knight, RAAF Pilot No 424269. b. 12 Oct 23, Gunnedah, NSW. 454 Sqn - 3 Apr 45 – 14 Aug 45.

⁶ FLTLT (temp WGCDR) John Gordon Rees, DFC, DFC(US), RAAF Pilot No 265327. b. 17 May 13, Hamilton, NSW. d. 10 Apr 01. 454 Sqn - 16 May 45 – 14 Aug 45. CO 454 Sqn – 19 May 45-14 Aug 45.



successful conclusion and a demonstration of the massive air power available to the Allies. Those present also saw it as recognition of the close relationship between DAF and the Eighth Army. Ten wings were represented with 239 Wing, lead by Group Captain Brian Eaton⁷, and including 450 (RAAF) Squadron, with 454 Squadron holding the honour of bringing up the rear. Taking the salute were Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod⁸, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces and Lieutenant-General Sir Richard McCreery, British Eighth Army Commander. The Eighth Army News reported⁹:



Practice for DAF formation flypast. Camdo Formido Airfield 28 May 1945.
Rimmer Collection

As the Air Marshal stood at the salute while squadron after squadron flew past in meticulous formation there were few present who did not realise that here was a worthy setting and worthy end to a story which may now pass into legend.



Warrant Officer 'Lofty' Naylor at the sports day.

Godfrey Collection

Stress was relieved through sports activities which flourished. Table-Tennis and volleyball were popular and the close proximity to a cool stream meant a swimming carnival could be held. On 2 June a sports carnival was organised by Flying Officer 'Pat' Gayer. Warrant Officer 'Lofty' Naylor of the armament section won the squadron championship.

In June an extensive leave program was instituted with personnel travelling to Lake Como, the Lido in Venice and day trips into the mountains. But a new

⁷ GPCAPT (later AVM) Brian Alexander Eaton, CB, CBE, DSO*, DFC, RAAF Pilot No O344. b. 15 Dec 16, Launceston, Tas. d. 17 Oct 92, Canberra, ACT.

⁸ AM Sir Alfred Guy Roland Garrod, KCB, OBE, MC, DFC, RAF Deputy C-in-C, MAAF.

⁹ Cyril James, 'D.A.F. Flypast in Great Salute to the "Old Firm"', *Eighth Army News*, May 1945.



training program was ordered. Cross country navexs, fighter affiliation, bombing and gunnery all put paid to rumours of returning home soon.

July and August saw the playing of a major DAF cricket competition. The 454 Squadron team made the semi-finals out of 64 starters – admirable performance with the competition eventually won by fellow countrymen, 450 Squadron the ‘Desert Harassers’.

On 31 July, news came through of the plans for the disbandment of the Squadron, but not after higher Headquarters had considered the options. In a message to the Commanding Officer, the HQ signalled on 23 July that¹⁰:

HQ MAAF have been informed that the disposal of the RAAF personnel in these squadrons (3, 450 and 454) will be arranged between this HQ (RAAF LO ME) and the Air Ministry. Some personnel required for VLR Squadrons. Aircrew. Post to ME for repatriation except NavBs and straight Air Gunners who are required in UK for VLR Squadrons. Ground Staff (Airmen). Of the 438 (three Squadrons), 310 to UK, 128 for repatriation. Ground Staff (Officers). Individual case by case.

The unconditional surrender of Germany on 7 May 1945 presented an immense problem to RAAF staff in London who were managing all RAAF EATS Article XV Squadrons of which 454 was one: How to repatriate 13,500 RAAF members who were widely dispersed across Europe¹¹? To complicate matters, the RAF had their own agenda. Already plans were in place to incorporate Australian crew members into their VLR – Very Long Range – bomber squadrons that would go to the Far East to fight the Japanese. Known as *Tiger Force*, the likely location was Burma.

Nevertheless, according to the cipher message from HQ, disbandment would occur on the 24 Aug with all flying to cease from the 17th. There would be some revision of dates, but those aircrew who had done no operational flying and ground staff who had only been overseas for six months or less were to be placed on standby for the Far East. Two extensive lists of Squadron personnel were drawn up with List ‘A’ to go to UK and List ‘B’ for repatriation¹². Some on the ‘A’ List would be fortunate enough to get a Liberator flight straight to UK while others had to wait their turn on the transport ships. Emplaning commenced on 19 August, the remainder leaving over the next few days. But even the *Tiger Force* plan was not to be, with the war in the Pacific ending before training could be completed.

¹⁰ AA A2217 Series 22/37/ORG, folio 44A dated 23 Jul 45.

¹¹ John Herrington, *Air Power Over Europe*, p 447.

¹² AA 1969/100, folio 9A. 1 Aug.



Bob Mitchell does a final 'beat up'.

Basedow Collection

Meanwhile plans for the wind-up of the Squadron soon became clear. On the 7th, the first seven Baltimores were ferried to No. 380 Maintenance Unit at Campo Formido, a depot airfield only a few miles away. The remaining seven were delivered on the 10th. It was the final flypast of the Baltimores – pilots dipping their wings as they flew over the campsite – and the end of an era. It would be the last time that any saw the aircraft as sadly all were later cut up for scrap and there are none in air museums today.

In the end, on 20 August 1945, the Squadron was officially disbanded¹³. Personnel had already begun to be posted out and with all the Baltimores now gone there remained one last task to complete. The honour went to Pilot Officer 'Bob' Mitchell, the Auster pilot who after doing a beat up of the Villa Orba strip delivered the aircraft to 253 Wing with his navigator, Pilot Officer Max Knight as passenger. Bob Mitchell recalled he simply flew the 15 minute trip, landed back at the airfield and walked away. What happened to the Auster remains a mystery.

Those heading to Australia were posted to 54 Personnel Transit Centre (PTC) thence Taranto, embarked on *HMT Mataroa* for Alexandria (22 PTC at Almaza) and thence on *HMT Stirling Castle* bound for Australia. Again they joined their old Desert Air Force mates, Nos 3 and 450 Squadron for their final journey home. Here the 454 story ends.



Stirling Castle prepares to sail for home.

Basedow Collection

Perhaps it is fitting to give the last words to last Unit Historian, Pilot Officer Max Knight¹⁴ who together with LAC Ken Rimmer in their summary

¹³ AA Series A2217 Item No 22/37/ORG Folio 51A.

¹⁴ PLTOFF Max Knight in collaboration with LAC Ken Rimmer (RAF), A Summary of the History of 454 Squadron. (R.A.A.F.), 14 August 1945. RHS.



history of 454 Squadron wrote quite simply:

454 Squadron during its life had done noble work in three spheres of air warfare and with the 8th Army, had fulfilled the promise “From Alamein to the Alps”.



Welcome to Fremantle - October 1945, The men then entrained to Adelaide and the Eastern States.

Basedow Collection



A flight over Trieste at the end of the war. Sunken Italian vessels can be seen in the harbour, including the liner ‘Rex’.

Godfrey Collection



CHAPTER 15

COMMEMORATION



The end of the war was not to be the last time Squadron members got together. Upon return to normal life, a few joined with veterans of sister Squadron 459 and formed the 454-459 Squadrons Association. Despite the vast geographic dispersion of its members, the Association was to flourish with upwards of 500 members at its peak. Many to this day still attend the dawn service and proudly march on Anzac Day under their banner, although with the passing of time, their numbers are dwindling.

In an effort to preserve the memory of what might otherwise have become just a faded part of RAAF history, the Association also over the years has dedicated a number of memorials, the first being laid in the RAAF Base Richmond chapel grounds in 1965. Two plaques, one for each Squadron, were set in the rose garden and remain there today, still cared for by the RAAF personnel at the base. These plaques were rededicated in April 1992 when the members also celebrated the 50th Anniversary of their formation, the Very Reverend Fred McKay doing the honours. The next day at the Royal Automobile Club of Australia in Sydney, set to coincide with Anzac Day, George Gray welcomed 82 members including three ex-Commanding Officers and many from overseas to the Anniversary festivities.

Then, as part of the *Australia Remembers* Year in 1995, the Association commissioned two paintings – one of a Baltimore representing 454 and one of a Hudson representing 459. Both painted by renowned Australian aviation artist Don Stephens were presented to the Australian War Memorial in June 1996 in a short but symbolic service.

As a final and lasting tribute to 454 and 459 Squadrons, in October 2002, the Association commissioned two brass plaques which have now been laid in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial. At a special ceremony, Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Angus Houston addressed the gathering before Principal Air Chaplain Peter O’Keefe dedicated the plaques as a lasting reminder of the sacrifices made by members of both Squadrons. Visitors who walk up from the main car park cannot fail to notice them.

The members continue to be active in supporting widows, families and their mates and even though the numbers are fading, the Squadron spirit lives on in the families who now support those who remain.



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APPENDIX 1

COMMANDING OFFICERS



WGCDR Ian Lindsay Campbell, RAAF

16 Oct 42 - 22 Mar 43

3 Apr 43 - 4 Oct 43



WGCDR John Arthur Gordon Coates, CBE*, DFC, MID,
RAF

4 Oct 43 - 28 Nov 43



WGCDR Milton 'Mike' Jeffrey Moore, DFC, RAAF

1 Apr 44 - 25 Nov 44



WGCDR Andrew Dill 'Pete' Henderson, OBE, MID, RAAF

25 Nov 44 - 19 May 45



WGCDR John Gordon Rees, DFC, DFC(US), RAAF

19 May 45 - 14 Aug 45



APPENDIX 2

454 SQUADRON BATTLE HONOURS



SOUTH-EAST EUROPE 1942-1945

MEDITERRANEAN 1942-1944

ITALY 1944-1945

GUSTAV LINE 1944

GOTHIC LINE 1944-1945



APPENDIX 3

HONOUR ROLL



NAME	BURIED/MEMORIAL	CAT	DATE OF DEATH	SERVICE
Warrant Officer Gordon Ross ADAM, 411435	Bologna, Italy Col V, C, 10	WAG	13 Apr 45	RAAF
Flying Officer Kenneth Ebenezer ADAMSON, 409785	Alamein, Egypt Col 272	PLT	29 Nov 43	RAAF
Sergeant James Benedict AITKN, 656651	Alamein, Egypt Col 270	WAG	20 Jul 43	RAFVR
Pilot Officer Royston Charles Keith ANDERSON, 400956	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	NAV	13 Dec 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Derek Norman ARMITAGE, 142427	Alamein, Egypt Col 267	NAV	30 Dec 43	RAFVR
Flight Sergeant George BAINBRIDGE, 656334	Forli, Italy Col IV, C, 15	WAG	22 Nov 44	RAF
Flight Sergeant Edgar Francis BAKER, 403249	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	AG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flight Lieutenant Eric George BAMKIN, 406387	Tobruk, Libya Col 2, A, 8	PLT	8 Jun 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer Gordon Ross BARKER, 413941	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	AG	22 Feb 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Francis Paul BAYLY, 407402	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, D, 19	PLT	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Gerald William BEBBINGTON, 1065474	Forli, Italy Col VIII, C, 10	WAG	22 Nov 44	RAFVR
Flying Officer Arthur Frederick BETTERIDGE, 400772	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, E, 1	NAV	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Pilot Officer Lionel Douglas BLOMLEY, 141732	Alamein, Egypt Col 269	PLT	23 Jul 43	RAFVR
Flight Sergeant John Bentley BROCKSOPP, 407489	Tobruk, Libya Col 2, A, 1	WAG	8 Jun 43	RAAF
Pilot Officer Charles Henry BROOMHALL, 406137	Tobruk, Libya Col 2, A, 6	WAG	8 Jun 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Robert John BROWNING, 420533	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	NAV	2 Apr 44	RAAF
Sergeant Desmond BUMFREY, 1128115	Alamein, Egypt Col 270	WAG	19 Nov 43	RAFVR
Sergeant James Leonard BUXTON, 1387989	Padua, Italy Col V, C, 3-6	AG	19 Apr 45	RAFVR
Sergeant Frank Alan CHEETHAM, 1437917	Alamein, Egypt Col 270	NAV	19 Nov 43	RAFVR
Flying Officer William M CLARKSON, 133764	Alamein, Egypt Col 267	PLT	8 Nov 43	RAFVR
Flying Officer Christopher Frederick COX, 407493	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	WAG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Sergeant Walter Percy CULLEN, 657499	Alamein, Egypt Col 280	WAG	3 Mar 44	RAF
Flying Officer Arnold William DAWE, 416940	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	PLT	27 Feb 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Robert Roy DONALDSON, 407146	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	WAG	13 Dec 43	RAAF
Flying Officer James William Alexander DUFFY ¹ , 428431	Malta Panel 19, Col 1	PLT	13 Apr 45	RAAF
Pilot Officer Colin Ware EVANS, 421797	Argenta Gap, Italy Col I, F, 14	PLT	12 Apr 45	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Noel FISHER, 409679	Rhodes, Greece Col 4, A, 9	AG	21 Sep 43	RAAF
Pilot Officer John FLETCHER, 401188	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	NAV	23 Jul 43 ²	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Clifford FROST, 1433361	Alamein, Egypt Col 269	PLT	19 Nov 43	RAFVR
Warrant Officer John GARTSIDE, NZ404599	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	WAG	3 Dec 43	RNZAF
Sergeant Thomas Norman GIBSON, 1385020	Alamein, Egypt Col 270	WAG	8 Nov 43	RAFVR
Warrant Officer Donald Bruce GILES, 407498	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, D, 18	WAG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Joseph GILVARRY, 414222	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	NAV	10 Nov 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer John Endacott GODDARD, 406692	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, D, 17	AG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Lemuel William GRAY, J21425	Florence, Italy Col VIII, G, 16	PLT	23 Aug 44	RCA
Leading Aircraftman Harold HADFIELD, 1010080	Mosul, Iraq Col I, A, 4	C&B	10 Jan 43	RAFVR
Warrant Officer Andrew HAMILTON, 412433	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	2 Apr 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Geoffrey William HARNETT, 400987	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	PLT	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer Ronald Oswald HARRIS, 401624	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	AG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Philip Hardy HEMSLEY, 162125	Bologna, Italy Col V, C, 9	NAV	13 Apr 45	RAFVR
Sergeant Ian James HENDRY, 1804795	Padua, Italy Col V, C, 3-6	NAV	19 Apr 45	RAFVR
Flying Officer John Charles 'Jack' HOBBY, 159407	Coriano, Italy Col XVI, E, 2	PLT	10 Feb 45	RAFVR
Sergeant Leslie James Stewart 'Les' JAQUES 1534425	Alamein, Egypt Col 270	NAV	20 Jul 43	RAFVR

¹ Note DVA has William James DUFFY



NAME	BURIED/MEMORIAL	CAT	DATE OF DEATH	SERVICE
Flying Officer Harold Edward JARVIS, 417083	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	PLT	2 Apr 44	RAAF
Flying Officer Errol JOHNSTON, 412316	Argenta Gap, Italy Col I, F, 16	WAG	12 Apr 45	RAAF
Flight Sergeant John Henry JOINER, 409204	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	PLT	10 Nov 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Allan Wilfred Joseph KEMPNIICH, 413608	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	PLT	3 Mar 44	RAAF
Sergeant Alan James KING, 1237225	Alamein, Egypt Col 271	PLT	20 Jul 43	RAFVR
Flight Sergeant Thomas KING, 420798	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	22 Feb 44	RAAF
Sergeant Gordon William LAUDER, 1865921	Padua, Italy Col V, C, 3-6	WAG	19 Apr 45	RAFVR
Sergeant Charles Edwin Roy LANE, 1314918	Alamein, Egypt Col 271	WAG	8 Nov 43	RAFVR
Flying Officer Arthur LEWIS, 144611	Alamein, Egypt Col 279	NAV	3 Mar 44	RAFVR
Warrant Officer George William LIELS, 420215	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	PLT	1 Jun 44	RAAF
Sergeant Frank Gilmore LISTER, 1673359	Padua, Italy Col V, C, 3-6	PLT	19 Apr 45	RAFVR
Flight Lieutenant Richard William LITCHFIELD, 401239	Florence, Italy Col I, B, 2	AG	23 Aug 44	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Claude Edward McEVOY, 415540	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	AG	30 Dec 43	RAAF
Leading Aircraftman James McEWAN, 972996	Alexandria (Hadra), Egypt Col 5, D, 5	ACH	20 Aug 43	RAFVR
Leading Aircraftman Malcolm McKenzie, 992779	Alexandria (Hadra), Egypt Col 6, A, 14	Elec II	3 Mar 44	RAFVR
Flying Officer Douglas Victor MANSELL, 135913	Alamein, Egypt Col 268	NAV	8 Nov 43	RAFVR
Flying Officer Edward Vincent MAGEE, 16162	Alamein, Egypt Col 279	WAG	3 Mar 44	RAFVR
Flight Sergeant Gordon Edward MARLAND, 415544	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	WAG	29 Nov 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant John Alexander Henry MAY, 420230	Rhodes, Greece Col 1, B, 5	WAG	10 Nov 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Arthur Peter Spencer MILLIGAN, 141561	Alamein, Egypt Col 268	NAV	29 Nov 43	RAFVR
Warrant Officer Louis Willis MOON, 401011	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, D, 20	NAV	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer Edwin George MURPHY, 425721	Argenta Gap, Italy Col I, F, 15	WAG	12 Apr 45	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Dennis Sidney NEST, 420248	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	WAG	10 Nov 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Laurence Keith NICHOLL, 415383	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	30 Dec 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer Kenneth Brennan NUNN-PATRICK, 424556	Bologna, Italy Col V, C, 8	WAG	13 Apr 45	RAAF
Warrant Officer John Harris O'KEFFE, 427723	Argenta Gap, Italy Col I, F, 18	NAV	12 Apr 45	RAAF
Warrant Officer Douglas Henry PADMAN, 415218	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	NAV	22 Feb 44	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Angus PATERSON, 411180	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	PLT	30 Dec 43	RAAF
Sergeant Harry Rawlinson PEEL, 1129991	Alamein, Egypt Col 271	WAG	19 Nov 43	RAFVR
Sergeant Robert William PLUCK, 1332330	Alamein, Egypt Col 271	WAG	20 Jul 43	RAFVR
Flight Sergeant Fred Leonard William PRITCHARD, 416995	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	WAG	29 Nov 43	RAAF
Flying Officer Edward Ernest QUINLAN, 425216 ²	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	NAV	1 Jun 44	RAAF
Pilot Officer Colin James RANDLE, 407275	Tobruk, Libya Col 2, A, 7	NAV	8 Jun 43	RAAF
Flight Sergeant Brian Edwin RAWLINGS, 413504	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	PLT	22 Feb 44	RAAF
Pilot Officer Beresford Stanley REILLY, 401583	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	WAG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flying Officer John Frederick RICH, 400998	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	NAV	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Flight Lieutenant Leslie Norman ROW, 117013	Alamein, Egypt Col 267	NAV	3 Dec 43	RAFVR
Warrant Officer John ROWE, 415359	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	NAV	27 Feb 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Maxwell John George SCHULTZ, 410818	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	1 Jun 44	RAAF
Flying Officer Frank Neville SCOTT, 143288	Alamein, Egypt Col 279	PLT	3 Mar 44	RAFVR
Aircraftsman 2 nd Class Kenneth Hubert SHOTTER, 1456942	Alexandria (Hadra), Egypt. Col 4, G, 10	GNR	28 Jan 43	RAFVR
Flying Officer Max Cameron SHORT, 417242	Alamein, Egypt Col 281	WAG	1 Jun 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer John Augustine SIEBERT, 416897	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	AG	27 Feb 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Ralph Mervyn SIMPSON, 406684	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	WAG	4 Dec 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer John Edward STAPLETON, 416889	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	3 Mar 44	RAAF
Warrant Officer Bernard George STOKES, 413447	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	2 Apr 44	RAAF
Flying Officer Kenneth Robert THOMPSON, 137416	Padua, Italy Col III, F, 15	PLT	22 Nov 44	RAFVR
Flying Officer Douglas TODHUNTER, 403230	Alamein, Egypt Col 277	PLT	13 Dec 43	RAAF
Pilot Officer Colin William WALKER, 403291	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	3 Dec 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer William Garth WARD, 407979	Alamein, Egypt Col 278	WAG	13 Dec 43	RAAF
Warrant Officer Keith Stewart WEDGEWOOD, 401260	Suda Bay, Greece Col 5, B, 4	AG	23 Jul 43	RAAF
Leading Aircraftman James Stephen WILKEY, 1011628	Mosul, Iraq Col I, A, 3	C&B	10 Jan 43	RAFV
Warrant Officer Robert Devon WILLIAMS, 415370	Alamein, Egypt Col 282	WAG	27 Feb 44	RAAF

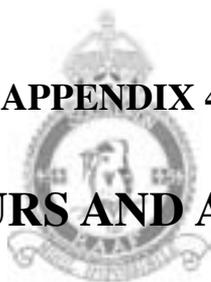
² AWM and DVA Database has this incorrectly as 23 Jan 43

³ AWM Database has him as Pilot Officer



APPENDIX 4

HONOURS AND AWARDS



Order of the British Empire

Wing Commander Andrew Dill 'Pete' Henderson, 217 RAAF

Bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross

Flying Officer James Bryan Scott, 144614 RAFVR

Distinguished Flying Cross

Squadron Leader Victor Cashmore, 407165 RAAF
Flying Officer Raymond Crouch, 136516 RAFVR
Captain Alexander Thomas Dryden, 102099V SAAF
Flight Lieutenant John Robert 'Jack' Ennis, 420339 RAAF
Squadron Leader George Andrew Gray, 402346 RAAF
Warrant Officer Sydney William Holmes, 422562 RAAF
Flight Lieutenant David William Lewis, 403645 RAAF
Warrant Officer Henry Hugh. Lloyd, 758163 RAFVR
Wing Commander Milton Jeffrey Moore, 402804 RAAF
Warrant Officer David Valentine Paul, 403215 RAAF
Flying Officer William George Railton, 112491 RAFVR
Flying Officer James Bryan Scott, 144614 RAFVR
Squadron Leader Colin Bassett Stinson, 402414 RAAF
Flight Lieutenant Joseph Charles Wright, 400948 RAAF

Distinguished Flying Medal

Flight Sergeant Raymond Gordon Akhurst, 149940 RAFVR

British Empire Medal

Flight Sergeant Jack McGreggor Stacey, 5738 RAAF

Mentioned in Dispatches

Flight Lieutenant George Leon Barnard, 263132 RAAF
Corporal William George Collinson, 14438 RAAF
Flying Officer Herbert M Humphreys, 48634 RAFVR
Warrant Officer Cyril Horace Manning, 157578 RAFVR
Corporal (as LAC) Colin Thomas McPherson, 6165 RAAF
Corporal Rodney Fergus Parkhill, 21232 RAAF
Flight Lieutenant William Shankland, J4431 RCAF
Flying Officer Walter Geoffrey Hall 6120 RAAF
Flight Sergeant Alan William Kempnich 413608 RAAF



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Bob Andrews (NSW)	Alan Godfrey (SA)	Bruce Henderson (NSW)	Bob Mitchell (SA)
Jack Coates (UK)	George Gray (NSW)	Bill Hull (NSW)	Ken Rimmer (UK)
Bob Davies (Tas)	Jim Grant (NSW)	Doug Hutchinson (NSW)	Bill Shankland (Canada)
Allan Davies (Vic)	Gerry Grimwade (NSW)	Alan MacIntyre (Tas)	Jack Stacey (SA)



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Jim Baber (UK) via Breihan & via Gray	Nigel Donaldson (SA)	Pat Humphreys (Ireland)	Mrs Mavis Sodern (Qld)
Max Bryant (NSW) via Gray	Alex Dryden (S Africa) via Breihan	Alex Leal (NSW)	Ron Spreadborough (Qld)
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Allan Davies (Vic)	George Gray (NSW)	Bill Noyce (SA)	
Rev Bob Davies (Tas)	Gerry Grimwade (NSW)	John Pirie (UK)	

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| | ‡ | POW | | |
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