



HERITAGE SERIES

LOST WITHOUT TRACE

SQUADRON LEADER WILBUR WACKETT, RAAF

A STORY OF BRAVERY AND TRAGEDY
IN THE PACIFIC WAR

LEON KANE-MAGUIRE

WINNER OF THE 2010 RAAF HERITAGE AWARD

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*In memory of all Australian aircrew who have no known grave
and to those who waited in vain for their return.*

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AFC	Air Force Cross
AFC	Australian Flying Corps
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANA	Australian National Airways
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
CAC	Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation
CO	Commanding Officer
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
EATS	Empire Air Training Scheme
HQ	Headquarters
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
OC	Officer Commanding
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
SRD	Services Reconnaissance Department
UK	United Kingdom
USAAF	United States Army Air Forces

IMPERIAL/METRIC CONVERSION TABLE

1 inch (in)	25.4 millimetres (mm)
1 foot (ft)	30.48 centimetres (cm)
1 yard (yd)	0.914 metres (m)
1 nautical mile (nm)	1852 metres (m)
1 pound (lb)	.454 kilograms (kg)
1 ton	1.02 tonne (t)
1 mile per hour (mph)	1.61 kilometres per hour (km/h)
1 knot (kt)	1.852 kilometres per hour (km/h)

CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations and Acronyms</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Imperial/Metric Conversion Table</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Editor's Note</i>	<i>ix</i>
Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
Chapter 2	
Born to Fly	5
Chapter 3	
Moths and Demons	17
Chapter 4	
Protecting Our Sea Lanes	29
Chapter 5	
Return to Townsville	49
Chapter 6	
Enter the Kittyhawk	65
Chapter 7	
To New Guinea in Kittyhawks	79
Chapter 8	
An Epic Journey	93
Chapter 9	
Vale Port Moresby	103
Chapter 10	
Return to Australia	113

Chapter 11	
A New Warhorse – The Bristol Beaufighter	125
Chapter 12	
No 31 Squadron – Coomalie Creek	137
Chapter 13	
Back on Operations	151
Chapter 14	
Lost Without Trace	171
Chapter 15	
The Search for Survivors	187
Chapter 16	
An Enduring Mystery	205
Chapter 17	
Epilogue	217
Appendices	227
Bibliography	229

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For me personally, the writing of this book has been an absorbing and rewarding journey of discovery. I hope that readers will also find it so—a tribute to the memory of the many brave Australian aircrew who have no known grave.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Given the period setting of this book, imperial rather than metric standards have been used to retain the historic sequence.

Every effort has been made to ensure the correct spelling of people's names and placenames; however, given the time period since these events took place, it has not been possible to double-check every name mentioned herein. Further compounding the problem is the fact that some names are misspelt in official records of the period, such as Unit History Sheets. In addition, there are often several spelling variants for placenames, particularly those in Papua New Guinea.

In citing reference material, the author has used the terms airstrip, airfield, aerodrome and airport interchangeably, which was common usage prior to and during World War II.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of Wilbur Wackett, one of the tens of thousands of young Australians who volunteered for aircrew service with the RAAF during World War II. He was the son of Sir Lawrence Wackett, a much decorated pilot from World War I and a leading pioneer in the development of the Australian aviation industry. Not surprisingly, at a young age Wilbur became fascinated with aircraft and aviation. As war clouds were gathering over Europe and the Pacific, Wilbur had applied in March 1939 for a cadetship with the Royal Australian Air Force. He was called up on 4 September 1939, the day after Britain and Australia declared war on Nazi Germany. Five years later, he would tragically become one of the over 9000 Australian aircrew who paid the supreme sacrifice in the defence of their country.¹

Following pilot training on antiquated Gipsy Moths and Hawker Demons, Wilbur was posted in March 1940 to No 2 Squadron at Laverton, Victoria. He would spend the first 10 months of his operational service flying twin-engined Avro Anson and later Lockheed Hudson bombers on long oversea patrols protecting coastal shipping and troop convoys as well as searching for elusive German surface raiders. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Wilbur left Victoria for tropical Queensland with a posting to No 24 Squadron in Townsville. There he became familiar with the Wirraway aircraft, produced by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation headed by his father, and now pressed into service as a stopgap fighter. However, his time with them would be short. The squadron was decimated in January 1942 in the heroic but doomed defence of Rabaul, New Britain.

In the meantime, romance had blossomed for Wilbur when he became engaged to Peggie Stephenson. Within a few weeks he was further overjoyed to be posted, as a foundation member, to No 75 Squadron which was formed

¹ John Herington, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945 – Series 3 (Air) – Volume IV – Air Power Over Europe, 1944–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p. 510.

at Townsville in the grim days of early March 1942. It was the first RAAF unit in Australia to be equipped with a modern fighter, the Curtiss Kittyhawk. After only a week's training with their new warhorse, the young pilots flew to Port Moresby, New Guinea² to provide the embattled garrison with much needed air support against repeated Japanese air raids and threatened invasion.

Few pilots had a more dramatic introduction to aerial combat when within one hour of the arrival of the squadron's first four Kittyhawks in Port Moresby on 21 March, Wilbur became the first Allied pilot to shoot down a Japanese aircraft in the New Guinea campaign. His victory against an enemy bomber, shared by another young untested pilot, Barry Cox, occurred in full view of the hard-pressed garrison who broke out into delirious celebrations.

Within another 24 hours, Wilbur was to be himself shot down by an enemy Zero when his squadron mounted an attack on the strategic Japanese airfield at Lae. Given little chance of survival when his Kittyhawk ditched some 10 miles off the east coast of New Guinea, he remarkably made it to shore. Narrowly avoiding capture and almost certain execution at the hands of the Japanese, in an epic journey of endurance over the next month he made his way over the towering Owen Stanley Range and back through 250 miles of jungle and swamps to his unit in Port Moresby.

Following the recall of the battle weary remnants of No 75 Squadron to Australia in May 1942, Wilbur was debilitated by malaria and, to his great disappointment, would not be with the squadron when it returned to New Guinea in July to play its critical role in the battle for Milne Bay. Instead, he would spend 18 months test flying and ferrying aircraft around Australia. However, he gained invaluable flying experience, logging over one thousand flying hours piloting an extraordinary range of aircraft. In June 1943, Wilbur and Peggie were married and were able to share time together for short periods during breaks from ferrying duties.

However, he yearned to return to combat operations and was delighted when his requests for active service were finally answered with a posting in March

² While collectively referred to as the 'New Guinea' campaign, Port Moresby is in Papua. Papua and New Guinea became united as an independent sovereign state in 1975.

Introduction

1944 for operational training on twin-engined Beaufighters. These powerfully armed fighter-bombers had since mid-1943 been causing havoc and destruction to enemy troops and shipping in the South-West Pacific Area. Wilbur completed his conversion on the Beaufighter at No 5 Operational Training Unit, Tocumwal, where he linked up with an observer, Keith Noble. During their training Wilbur became the proud father of a baby daughter, Rahna, who he was fortunate to see on leave prior to joining No 31 Squadron RAAF at Coomalie Creek, Northern Territory, in August 1944.

Carrying out low-level strikes and armed reconnaissance sorties against targets over Timor and adjacent waters, Wilbur and Keith would serve less than two months with the squadron before they perished in mysterious circumstances when returning to base from a night-time operation over the Arafura Sea. Although their aircraft had been tracked by radar following its crossing of the Australian coast, no radio contact was received before they finally vanished from the screens. Despite extensive air and land searches of possible crash sites, no trace was found of the young airmen or their aircraft.

Their families joined the many to receive heart-wrenching telegrams from RAAF Headquarters in Melbourne notifying them that their sons were 'missing in action, believed killed'. Their grief was compounded by the mystery surrounding the disappearance and the fact their sons had no known resting place. It was not until over a year later that the crash site was discovered when a prospector stumbled across the wrecked Beaufighter in rugged country that now forms part of the Kakadu National Park. As no bodies were found in the wreckage, it appeared that the crew had parachuted clear prior to the crash.

This would be the beginning of another period of anguish for the families. Could their sons have survived, as had Wilbur Wackett three years previously after being shot down in New Guinea? Remarkable further discoveries, not made known to the families at the time, provided tantalising new clues. However, it would be almost four decades later before the Wackett family, by chance, became aware of this additional evidence, and with subsequent visits to the remote crash site have finally achieved a measure of closure.

Lost Without Trace

CHAPTER 2

BORN TO FLY

Wilbur Lawrence Wackett was born in Townsville, Queensland, on 19 February 1921, the first child of Lawrence and Letitia ('Letty') Wackett (née Wood). His parents had met as youngsters attending the same primary school in Townsville, but had lost contact when Letty's family moved to New South Wales. There seemed little prospect that their paths would cross again. However, Lawrence fortuitously encountered Letty while on his last leave before departing for overseas service in 1916. He later recalled: 'From friends exchanging letters we became sweethearts and when I was due to embark she came to Melbourne with my sister Iris to bid me farewell'.¹

Wilbur was born into a family that would have few parallels in the annals of Australian military aviation. His father had been decorated for bravery as a pilot in the Australian Flying Corps in World War I and would later become a leading pioneer in the development of the Australian aviation industry. He has been aptly described as 'one of the towering figures of Australian aviation covering, as he did, virtually all aspects of activities: pilot, designer of airframes and engines, entrepreneur and manager'.²

Wilbur's uncle, Ellis Wackett,³ was one of the first officers to join the Royal Australian Air Force. At Richmond air base in 1926, he had the distinction of performing the first parachute descent from an aircraft in Australia, and subsequently pioneered the training of Australian aircrew in this survival skill. He was the chief engineering officer of the RAAF from 1935 to 1959, and

¹ Lawrence James Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer: An Autobiography*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p. 41.

² *Technology in Australia 1788–1988*, Online Edition, Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, 2000, p. 498, <http://www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/tia/498.html>, accessed 1 September 2011.

³ Air Commodore (postwar Air Vice-Marshal) Ellis Charles Wackett, Service No. 35, b. Townsville, Qld – 13 August 1901, d. 1984.

following promotion to air commodore in 1942 (and subsequently to air vice-marshal) served on the Air Board for a record 17 years.

With this family pedigree, it seemed that Wilbur was born to fly.

SIR LAWRENCE WACKETT

In 1913 Lawrence Wackett had entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, as a member of its third intake. However, the Army would not be his life. Stories of the pioneers of flight had long fascinated him and soon after graduation he became the first Duntroon graduate to join the nascent Australian Flying Corps (AFC) as a lieutenant in No 1 Squadron when it formed at Point Cook in January 1916.

Departing soon after for Egypt, No 1 Squadron would provide aerial support for the Sinai and Palestine campaign. Lawrence was in good company. Among his fellow officers were several who, like himself, would later be knighted for their services to aviation. These included Richard 'Dickie' Williams who would become 'the father of the Royal Australian Air Force', Ross Smith who (with his brother Keith) would make the first flight from London to Australia in 1919, and Hudson Fysh who would be a founder of Qantas airline. But first they had to survive the war.

This seemed problematical since the slow B.E.2c aircraft that they flew were no match for the German high-performance scouts. Lawrence Wackett first came to the notice of higher authorities by designing a mounting for a Lewis machine gun on the upper wing of the B.E.2c, giving it vastly improved fire power. Transferred to France in 1917 where he joined No 3 Squadron, AFC, he would again impress with his technical skills in the lead-up to the decisive Battle of Hamel. By designing carriers to hold ammunition boxes and modifying the bomb racks of his squadron's R.E.8 aircraft, he solved the problem of air supply to advancing Australian machine-gunners. For this significant contribution to the success of the Battle of Hamel he would receive an Air Force Cross. Later, in September 1918, he was awarded an immediate Distinguished Flying Cross for his outstanding courage during the preparations for the assault on the Hindenburg Line when he and his observer survived a hazardous sortie to take

detailed photographs of the German support line some 10 miles behind the Hindenburg fortifications.



Letty and Lawrence Wackett on their wedding day

(Australian National Library)

Throughout his time overseas, Lawrence and Letty Wood had kept in constant contact and he had mailed her an engagement ring. At war's end, she sailed from Australia to join him in London. They were married in September 1919, with Lieutenant Colonel 'Dickie' Williams giving her away and Lawrence's brother Ellis serving as best man.

Returning to Australia, Lawrence joined the permanent Australian Air Corps that was in the process of forming under the leadership of Dickie Williams, and two years later was one of the inaugural 21 officers upon formation of the Royal Australian Air Force. In 1924, he convinced the RAAF to establish an experimental station at Randwick in Sydney. Over the next seven years, the station would carry out much useful research on Australian aircraft materials and gave him the opportunity to pursue his by now consuming ambition to design and construct Australian aircraft.

A notable aircraft to appear from the Randwick stable was the Widgeon II amphibian. He demonstrated its impressive range in an epic tour in 1928, piloting it on a 9000-mile flight around Australia—the first Australian-built aircraft to do so. Upon closure of the experimental station in 1930, Lawrence Wackett resigned from the Air Force and re-established a number of his skilled staff at the Cockatoo Island Naval Dockyard. During this period he formed a friendship with Charles Kingsford Smith, making extensive repairs on his legendary *Southern Cross* and building for him a twin-engined, six-passenger Codock airliner for a projected trans-Tasman air service. Unfortunately, the unreliable Napier Javelin engines restricted its usefulness. However, after moving his team to the Mascot-based Tugan Aircraft Company, Wackett produced the successful six-passenger Gannet transport, several of which were operated by small NSW airlines.

By the mid-1930s, as the threat of war with Japan loomed and it became apparent that Australia could no longer depend on the UK for its defence, the Australian Government belatedly recognised the critical need to establish an Australian aircraft industry. With the support of the Minister for Defence, a group of leading Australian industrialists headed by Essington Lewis, the General Manager of the Broken Hill Proprietary Company, formed a syndicate to investigate the local production of aircraft. With his unmatched experience in Australia and a ringing recommendation from the Chief of the Air Staff, (the now promoted) Group Captain Dickie Williams,⁴ Lawrence Wackett was

⁴ Williams wrote: 'Here was a man who could take a clean sheet of paper, design an aircraft, supervise its construction and test it in the air. I suggested that the number of people in the world

picked to manage the proposed venture. In early 1936 he led an exploratory mission overseas which, upon its return, recommended the production under licence of the North American NA-16 trainer. After initial opposition, fuelled by British protests, the proposal was accepted and the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC) was established in October 1936, with Wackett as manager and chief designer.

After substantial redesign,⁵ the trainer emerged from the CAC's new plant at Fisherman's Bend (Melbourne) as the Wirraway. It proved to be an excellent advanced trainer for the RAAF, with over 750 eventually produced. However, it earned undeserved notoriety when hurriedly pressed into service as a makeshift 'fighter' in the early months of the Pacific War. Wackett's team subsequently designed and produced some 200 Wackett Trainers, which served as intermediate trainers with the RAAF from early 1941. In order to provide an urgently needed stopgap fighter, the CAC next developed the Boomerang. Provided with a 1200 hp engine, it was still no match for a Japanese Zero. However, the 250 Boomerangs that were hastened into service from late 1942 came into their own in the close support role for Allied troops in the New Guinea campaign.

Among the thousands of Australian pilots who would fly these wartime aircraft produced by CAC under the leadership of Lawrence Wackett was his young son, Wilbur.

who could do that could probably be counted on one's fingers,' Sir Richard Williams, *These are Facts: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO*, Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977, p. 227.

⁵ In early 1938, the CAC's contract was modified to allow production of an improved version, the NA-33, which now incorporated a retractable undercarriage.

WILBUR WACKETT – GROWING UP IN MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY

In February 1921, Wilbur Wackett was born in Townsville where Letty Wackett had returned to be with her mother during her confinement. It was three months before mother and child returned to Melbourne and Lawrence saw his son Wilbur for the first time. He would spend the first three years of his life in their comfortable family home in the well-to-do suburb of Caulfield.

With the appointment of Lawrence Wackett as the head of the RAAF Experimental Station in 1924, young Wilbur moved interstate with his family to a new home in Randwick, Sydney. Situated on the site of the experimental station, it was very convenient for his father's work. The birth of his sister, Arlette, in March 1925 would bring further changes and a source of much fascination to the four-year-old Wilbur. The next year he began his primary school education. He enjoyed school, especially sport, proving to be highly athletic and well coordinated at an early age.

However, a serious illness when six years old was to cause his parents great concern. What had begun as influenza, turned after several days into a long, nightmarish experience for the young boy. Alarmed by his complaints of intense headaches, a specialist was called in who quickly diagnosed an infection of the mastoid bone at the back of the ear. This potentially dangerous condition can lead to loss of hearing and balance, meningitis or brain abscesses. A mastoid operation to clear the infection was urgently required. Without modern antibiotics, there was also the risk of post-operative infection. Lawrence Wackett later recalled:

We hurried him to hospital where the operation took place immediately. For hours we sat waiting the verdict, and then there was the awful after-treatment of dressing the wound which took six months to heal. The lad displayed great fortitude and when the wound finally cleared it left no other permanent effect than a depression and a scar behind the ear.⁶

Upon his departure from the RAAF in 1930, Lawrence Wackett bought a more commodious house for his family in the eastern Sydney suburb of

⁶ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 110.

Vaucluse. Although placing a considerable strain on the family budget, the move brought with it the advantage of close proximity to the harbour and ocean beaches. Wilbur would now continue his primary education at the nearby Rose Bay Public School.

Not surprisingly, he developed a strong interest in aircraft at an early age. Aeroplanes and the adventures of the pioneer aviators were common topics of conversation around the family dinner table. He particularly enjoyed listening to stories about his childhood hero, Charles Kingsford Smith. An exciting visitor to their family home in Sydney was also Charles Ulm, Kingsford Smith's copilot on the historic first flight across the Pacific in 1928 and later co-founder of the original Australian National Airways. As a young seven-year-old, with his mother and young sister, Wilbur had also proudly greeted his father at Mascot airfield when he returned from his epic 9000-mile flight around Australia in 1928 in the Widgeon II amphibian. Arlette recently recalled:

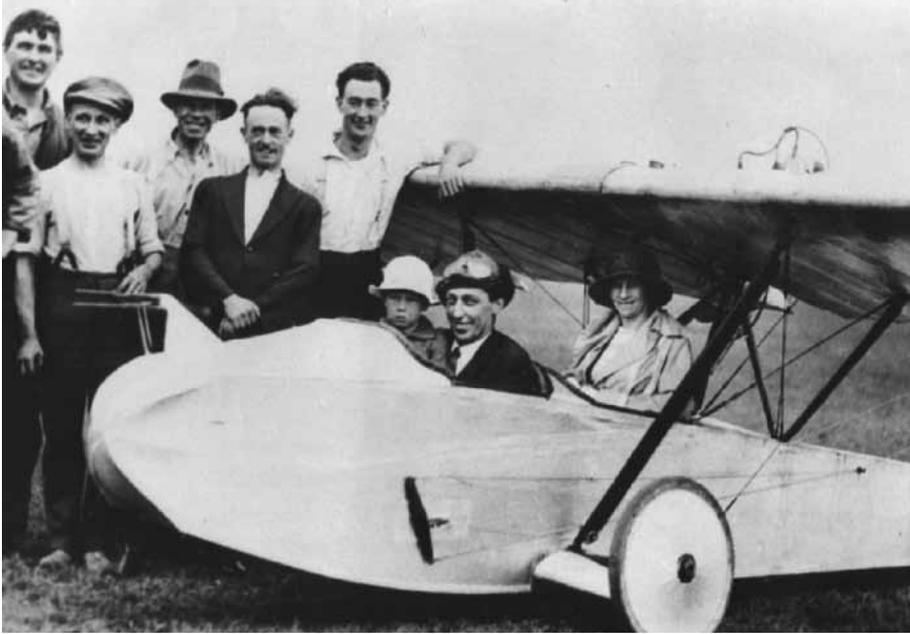
Being only three years old at the time, I cannot recall the event itself. However, I remember we had a big map of Australia carved out of wood mounted on a wall at home that had photos of all the places where my father had landed.⁷

The family enjoyed life in prewar Sydney over the next decade, despite difficulties arising from the Depression. A particularly testing time was when his father's unit at the Cockatoo Island Dockyard was closed down and he was for a time without a salary. Weekends were a special time, when the family would enjoy visiting the beach or drives into the countryside. Lawrence Wackett also received a week's leave each year, during which the family would rent a cottage at a seaside resort on Port Hacking, where Wilbur learnt to fish and sail. His father recalled his son as a teenager:

My boy did not bear a close resemblance to his father, neither physically nor in his inclinations. He inherited physical characteristics from his mother's side, and a cheerful nature which was considerably more marked than either of his parents possessed. He had a personality very distinctly

⁷ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

his own, but I like to think he acquired some of his intense enthusiasm from his father. He always displayed keen interest and great enthusiasm for anything in the nature of adventure.⁸



**Three-year-old Wilbur with his father and mother in the Warbler,
an ultralight aircraft designed and built by Lawrence Wackett in 1924**

(Arlette Perkins (née Wackett))

Wilbur was given a sailing dinghy and became an active member of the Vaucluse Amateur Sailing Club. There, he was introduced to the lively Vaucluse Junior (VJ) boats, which were a popular class in the 1930s. They retained their popularity as a racing class with the club until the 1970s and are still sailed to this day, being described by the America's Cup skipper John Bertrand as 'a speed machine that can travel as fast as a Flying Dutchman. This is a high performance

⁸ From original manuscript of Lawrence Wackett's autobiography, *Aircraft Pioneer*; held in the National Library of Australia, Canberra (MS 4858).

training boat ... One way or other they are hair raising boats, and you need the nerve of a fighter pilot to sail them.' A good training vessel indeed for Wilbur's future role in the RAAF.

SYDNEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL DAYS

Wilbur began his secondary schooling at Sydney Grammar School in 1933. A day pupil, he would catch a tram from Vaucluse to central Sydney, passing on the way the busy flying boat base at Rose Bay. Like many a schoolboy, he would admire the aircraft that sat at anchor and watch fascinated as they took off across the harbour.

He greatly enjoyed all forms of sport and, in particular, he excelled at athletics. In his second year he won the 100 yards sprint, the 220 yards sprint and the high jump. He repeated this performance in the sprint events the following year, as well as winning the broad jump, becoming the Junior School Champion Athlete in 1935. Wilbur was also an accomplished swimmer, becoming a member of the school swimming team and receiving a badge for a mile swim. On weekends and holidays he would frequently walk with Arlette from their family home to swim in the picturesque harbourside inlet of Parsley Bay, giving her the occasional brotherly flick with his towel along the way. His swimming strength would later save his life when shot down over the Huon Gulf in New Guinea.

However, it was not all play. He was an active member of the School Cadet Corps for three years and was also kept busy studying English, History, Geography, Business Principles, Mathematics and Physics for his Intermediate Certificate.

The year 1937 would be a testing test year for Wilbur and his sister. Lawrence and Letty Wackett had departed in April for a six-month visit overseas where their father was examining aircraft and engine production techniques for his CAC factory now under construction in Melbourne. Wilbur and Arlette became boarders at Sydney Grammar School and Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School, respectively, and would not see their parents again until their return to Sydney in September. However, there were compensations.

Lost Without Trace

It was during this period at Sydney Grammar that Wilbur was introduced to a pretty young brunette, Peggie Stephenson, with whom he would form a growing romantic attachment. When their parents had to relocate to Melbourne as the CAC factory neared completion, Wilbur and Arlette remained in Sydney for several more months in order to complete their school year without disturbance, during which Wilbur successfully completed his Intermediate Certificate.



Wilbur and Arlette out from school, with their mother in Sydney

(Arlette Perkins)

RETURN TO MELBOURNE

Arlette still remembers the excitement when in early December they left Sydney to rejoin their parents: ‘We went down to Melbourne by ship. I was only twelve and Wilbur sixteen and it was a big adventure for us.’⁹ They were overjoyed to be with their parents again for Christmas in their new family home in Brighton, only a few minutes walk from the beach on Port Phillip Bay. Wilbur’s VJ sailing boat had also been transported to Melbourne. However, Arlette recalls that ‘it did not get much use, as it was unsuitable for Port Phillip Bay which could be quite rough compared to Sydney Harbour’.

The next two years would be happy times for Wilbur with his family, living at home while attending secondary school at Melbourne Grammar. He also enjoyed the outdoor life, as his father recalled:

I sent him to the scenes of my boyhood in Townsville. He climbed the same hills, fished the same seas, and showed the same love for the things I had revelled in as a boy. Together we went on camping trips and engaged in trout fishing ... the whole family would spend two weeks at Christmas, a week at Easter, and several week-ends during the warmer months.¹⁰

Arlette also fondly remembers these family camping trips from Melbourne:

We used to go camping each year on a property owned by friends near Khancoban in the Snowy Mountains of NSW. It was by the Swampy Plains River where my father would go trout fishing with Wilbur. We had a very complicated camp tent that Dad had designed, it was put together with aluminium rods and the floor used to come up and around the sides, so we were waterproof and bug proof.¹¹

At Melbourne Grammar School Wilbur made a number of good friends, including Harry Trigg who would five years later become the best man at his wedding. Arlette recalls that the two young men had very similar personalities:

⁹ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

¹⁰ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, pp. 206–207.

¹¹ Arlette Perkins to the author, 2009.

Lost Without Trace

Wilbur was very outward going and readily drew people to him. Harry was just the same and the two just hit it off. I remember Harry visiting us at Brighton frequently with Wilbur and we had a lot of laughs. He maintained his friendship with the family after Wilbur was killed and, although living in England after the war, would always come to see us each time he was back on a visit.¹²

Wilbur continued to excel in athletic pursuits at Melbourne Grammar, including rowing in the First Eight for his house in his first year. He progressed satisfactorily towards his matriculation, having passed English, Physics and Mathematics at the appropriate standard by early 1939. However, as his father would later note:

He was not as brilliant a scholar as I would have wished, but he passed his examinations and I knew well that scholarship was merely something that had to be taken into consideration when choosing a career. He was adventurous and I imagined that he would have liked to go on an Antarctic expedition or to climb difficult mountains. My stories of experiences in World War I greatly interested him, and I was resigned to the inevitability that he would eagerly enter into World War II as it approached.¹³

The Air Force was indeed beckoning for Wilbur, and soon after beginning his second year at Melbourne Grammar, in March 1939 as war clouds gathered over Europe and the Pacific, he applied for an air cadetship with the Royal Australian Air Force. He had just turned eighteen.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 206.

CHAPTER 3

MOTHS AND DEMONS

JOINING THE RAAF

Wilbur was one of many hundreds of young Australian men who had applied for an air cadetship in early 1939 and he nervously pondered his chances of success. Some time after submitting his application he was called to an interview by an RAAF selection panel. These interviews were a daunting prospect for the aspiring cadets, answering as best they could a series of searching questions from three uniformed officers. The latter would assess the candidates on a range of educational, technical and physical/sporting criteria, as well as personal attributes such as ‘appearance and manners, intelligence, general alertness, quickness of observation, and personality’. Wilbur was also subjected to a detailed medical examination which he passed without problems. An anxious wait then followed until a letter arrived with the good news that he had been accepted and would be called up in due course.

Eventually the notification came to report for training at Point Cook, the birthplace of Australian military aviation. The Point Cook base was only about 15 miles south-west of Melbourne on the shores of Port Phillip Bay, and less than an hour from his parents’ home in Brighton. Like parents all around Australia, his father and mother had mixed emotions:

When the notification to report for duty came to hand he was overjoyed ...
My wife and I concealed our fears. All his life he had been close to aviation,
and now his chance had come for him to fly a plane.¹⁴

By remarkable coincidence, Wilbur commenced his cadetship on 4 September 1939, the day after Britain and Australia declared war on Nazi Germany. The previous evening, as he was packing his bags, Wilbur and his family had listened to the solemn voice of the Prime Minister on the radio

¹⁴ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 207.

announcing that 'Australia was at war'. Not surprisingly, there was a high level of excitement among the 50 inductees into Course 26 at the Flying Training School. A fellow young cadet from Melbourne, Clarence 'Spud' Spurgeon,¹⁵ recalled the day:

I hadn't counted on that at all [the declaration of war], but, okay it provided another sort of stimulus anyway. So off we went to Point Cook on the morning of the 3rd of September and clattered over the [entrance] rail in the back of the old Bedford truck at 9 o'clock in the morning.¹⁶

They settled into their Mess which had been the Officers Mess prior to the construction of the splendid new facility in 1937. There they slept and had their meals and 'we were knocked about by the senior course, we were told to wear bloody dinner jacket at night and things like that.'¹⁷ To their great disappointment they learnt that it would be some time before they would get to fly an aeroplane. With the country now at war, the RAAF undertook urgent measures to rapidly expand pilot training. While negotiations at government level were laying the framework for the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS),¹⁸ a group of direct entry cadets, who already had considerable flying experience, were hurriedly called up and would replace Course 26 at Point Cook. Another of Wilbur's fellow cadets, Herbert Plenty,¹⁹ ruefully remembers the consequence:

We did not fly at Point Cook. Instead, they kept us on the drill square for four or five weeks. They bashed us around the square day after day after day. We were issued with blue flying overalls, but the only flying we got was a few flights with an instructor in a Gipsy Moth where we were not

¹⁵ Air Commodore (postwar) Clarence Haddon Spurgeon, DFC, Service No. 569, b. Hawthorn, Vic. – 18 April 1920, Nos 21, 2 and 8 Squadrons.

¹⁶ Clarence Spurgeon, interview in Department of Veterans' Affairs, The Australians at War Film Archive, Archive No. 0937, Canberra, 2004, <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/565.aspx>, accessed 1 September 2011.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ The Empire Air Training Scheme was a program implemented during World War II to train aircrew from the nations of the Commonwealth for service with Britain's Royal Air Force.

¹⁹ Group Captain (postwar) Herbert Clarence Plenty, DFC and Bar, Service No. 582 (O3103). b. Port Pirie, SA – 2 February 1921, Nos 21, 2, 8, 14 and 100 Squadrons.

permitted to touch the controls. We were given no leave and kept on the base the whole time, with an allowance of one bottle of beer a day!²⁰

When not enjoying the pleasures of square-bashing around the historic parade ground, classes on topics such as airmanship and discipline began. It was probably just as well, as the weather was particularly blustery in early September, with winds of up to 70 mph during one particular storm on the 8th. On several other occasions, aircraft had to be manhandled to prevent damage. It was also exceptionally cold, the new trainees waking up one morning to the sight of snow on the surrounding hills. Colin Lindeman²¹—who like Wilbur would later join No 75 Squadron—described the conditions: ‘The accommodation was pretty sparse. For heating we had to use brown coal brickettes.’²²

Their time at Point Cook came to an abrupt end after five weeks when Wilbur’s Course 26 was assigned to various civilian flight training centres around the country to carry out their primary flying training. Half of the course, including Wilbur, were detached to training centres based at Essendon aerodrome, six miles north of Melbourne.²³ Although initially dismayed, the cadets soon came to enjoy their new environment. ‘Spud’ Spurgeon, who was billeted in the same boarding house as Wilbur in Moonee Ponds, again recalled:

There were 12 of us at the ANA [Australian National Airways]²⁴ school, another dozen at the Royal Victorian Aero Club, and we lived in boarding houses ... the house that we lived in [at Moonee Ponds] ... was an old retreat for old ladies and they looked after us like mothers. We had a

²⁰ Herbert Plenty to the author, 2009. The ‘one bottle of beer a day’ was at a cost of 11 pence (9 cents) for a bottle of Abbots.

²¹ Wing Commander Colin William Lindeman, DFC, Service No. 260810. b. Strathfield, NSW – 19 September 1915.

²² Colin Wellesley Lindeman (Wing Commander), interviewed by Edward Stokes for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, 19 May 1989, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00548, http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00548_tran.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011.

²³ In early January 1940, Essendon aerodrome would become the location for No 3 Elementary Flying Training School (3EFTS) for RAAF pilot trainees.

²⁴ Note: This was the ‘second’ Australian National Airways, formed in 1936 (some years after the demise of the original ANA founded by Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm).

great time at Essendon, we were pretty free and easy, there was [sic] no administrative restrictions, there was [an] air force sergeant there to make sure we behaved ourselves but, apart from that, it was great learning to fly there because it was much more relaxed and less formalised.²⁵

The Australian National Airways had three civilian instructors and four de Havilland DH-60 Gipsy Moth trainers at Essendon. Less powerful than its imminent Tiger Moth replacement,²⁶ this docile biplane was extremely popular with private flying schools in the UK and Australia during the 1930s and had been employed as a primary trainer by the RAAF since 1928. Boasting a top speed of only 98 mph, the 'Gipsy' was easy to fly, highly manoeuvrable and generally forgiving of the many indignities inflicted upon it by 'sprog' pilots.

On his first half-hour flight, Wilbur was only a fascinated spectator as his instructor, seated in the front cockpit, demonstrated the effect of various controls, straight and level flight, climbing, gliding and stalling. These lessons were repeated in his next flight when, with instructions shouted to him down the Gosport tube by his instructor, Wilbur was allowed to take the controls in his rear cockpit for the first time. Subsequent dual lessons introduced the perils and pleasures of take-off into the wind, medium turns without engine, spinning and approach and landing. After 10 hours dual instruction came the excitement of his first solo flight. Fortunately, all went well and Wilbur survived to celebrate with his dozen compatriots.

²⁵ Spurgeon, interview in Department of Veterans' Affairs, The Australians at War Film Archive, Archive No. 0937.

²⁶ The ubiquitous de Havilland DH-82 Tiger Moth, so beloved of thousands of aspiring EATS pilots, would not be delivered in numbers to Australia's flying training schools until May 1940.



**Course 26A pilot trainees on the flight line at Essendon airfield
prior to flying Gipsy Moths, October 1939**

L to R: Richard Ridgway, 'Spud' Spurgeon, M. Norris, Ron Widmer, Jim Sutherland,
Russell Rayson, Wilbur Wackett, Jim Marshall and John Ramshaw

(Australian War Memorial: P00135.004)

When not flying, the trainees attended lessons in meteorology, reconnaissance, armaments, signals, morse code and air navigation, carried out in lecture rooms leased from Australian National Airlines. In order to graduate, the pupil pilots were required, in addition to demonstrating flying skills, to pass written exams in each of the ground-based subjects and to achieve an average grade of at least 60 per cent.²⁷ With their shared experiences, friendships—often lifelong—formed among the trainee cadets. They received the then not inconsiderable pay of five pounds per week and life was generally very agreeable.

²⁷ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A12372, Item O3100: Rayson, Russell Charles Walter O3100 – Service Record.



**Course 26A trainee pilots at the ANA School of Aeronautics,
Essendon, October 1939**

Seated L to R: Jim Sutherland, Russell Rayson, 'Spud' Spurgeon, Wilbur Wackett, Richard Ridgway, unknown. Captain A. Morris (ANA Instructor) is standing second from right.

(Australian War Memorial: P00135.003)

Fortunately, they avoided serious accidents or injuries during their eight weeks of elementary flying training. After 50 hours flying the Gipsy Moth (of which 22 hours were solo), Wilbur and his fellow cadets were ready to progress to intermediate flying training on Hawker Demons. Prior to their posting to No 21 Squadron (City of Melbourne) at RAAF Base Laverton for this next stage, the happy group of graduates departed at the end of November 1939 on nine days leave, their first long break since the commencement of training. Wilbur was able to visit his parents and sister at the family home in Brighton as well as seeing old schoolmates who had stayed on at Melbourne Grammar, regaling them on his early adventures in the RAAF. Arlette recalls him driving happily around with his mates in his 'little green car with a "dicky-seat" at the back'.



Flying solo in a DH60 Gipsy Moth – Port Phillip Bay to starboard
(RAAF Museum)

THE HAWKER DEMON AND GRADUATION

Wilbur was among the half of Course 26 (identified as Course 26A) who were assigned to No 21 Squadron at Laverton for their intermediate flying training.²⁸ Since the start of hostilities, this unit had operated a mixture of Avro Anson and Wirraway aircraft on anti-submarine patrols, convoy escorts and general duties. In early December 1939, the squadron was assigned the additional role of intermediate flying training of air cadets from Point Cook. For this purpose, two flights were re-equipped with a total of nine Hawker Demons, four of which were fitted with dual controls for instructional purposes. Flight

²⁸ The other two dozen cadets (Course 26B) were sent to No 23 (City of Sydney) Squadron at Richmond, NSW, for this training.

Lieutenant Frederick 'Jock' Wittscheibe,²⁹ the erstwhile Squadron Adjutant, was appointed as the Chief Flying Instructor.

Wilbur's group was the first to receive its intermediate training in this manner, arriving at Laverton on 11 December 1939. They would also be one of the last to train on Demons. From May 1940, intermediate training under the newly established EATS would employ the far superior Wirraways that were now flowing smoothly off the CAC assembly line in Melbourne.

The Hawker Demon, a fine looking but otherwise unimpressive biplane, had been operated by the RAAF since 1935. Although considered a fighter-bomber at the time of its introduction, rapid advances in aircraft technology had soon rendered it obsolete. Its Rolls-Royce 600 hp Kestrel V engine gave it a top speed of around 180 mph. It possessed two fuselage-mounted forward firing 0.303-inch Vickers machine guns operated by the pilot, while the rear cockpit could house a gunner with a Lewis machine gun mounted on a Scarf ring which allowed it to swivel. However, the Demon was not a success as a fighter.

The aircraft had also attracted some notoriety in the late 1930s due to a number of accidents suffered in training. Nevertheless, Wilbur and his fellow trainee pilots found the Demon enjoyable and exciting to fly after the placid Gipsy Moth, but on the ground they had to be careful on the brakes to avoid tipping it on its nose. Herbert Plenty recalls 'several of our chaps on Course 26 ending up with their nose on the tarmac. The wheels should have been a little further forward, I believe.'³⁰

²⁹ Flight Lieutenant (later Wing Commander) Frederick Attwood 'Jock' Wittscheibe, Service No. 89, b. Melbourne, Vic. – 7 August 1913.

³⁰ Herbert Plenty to the author, 2009.

Moths and Demons



A Hawker Demon showing its paces over the hangars at Laverton airfield
(RAAF Museum)



Enjoying a breezy jaunt over Melbourne
(RAAF Museum)

Wilbur's first air experience in a Demon was as a passenger during a 45-minute familiarisation flight with an instructor in the rear cockpit. Subsequent dual flying lessons followed the pattern familiar from earlier training in the Gipsy Moth, progressing to his first solo flight within a few hours. Instrument flying, formation flying and aerobatics would follow, together with several cross-country navigation tests. Within six weeks he would fly his first night solo, always a daunting task. Finally, after logging over 50 hours on the Demon (half of which were solo) and successfully completing their ground courses, Wilbur and 20 other cadets were delighted to be informed that they had survived the course.

In a ceremony held at Laverton on 1 March 1940, they received their coveted pilots badges (or 'wings') from Air Commodore Henry Wrigley,³¹ the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Southern Area. Wrigley was an old friend of Wilbur's father, having flown with him in France in No 3 Squadron during World War I. Proudly watching as the young pilots marched around the parade ground and stepped up individually to receive their badges, were many of their parents and families including Lawrence and 'Letty' Wackett.

Freshly commissioned as pilot officers, the young pilots were granted 10 days leave and eagerly awaited their postings to operational squadrons. They were all destined to serve in the South-West Pacific campaign rather than proceeding to the European or Middle Eastern theatres. Sadly, the war would exact a terrible price on the prewar volunteers. Of the 21 graduates from Wilbur's Course 26A, ten would perish during the course of the conflict while a further two ('Spud' Spurgeon and Jim Sutherland) would become prisoners of war (POWs).

In the meantime, there were 10 days of well-earned leave to enjoy.

³¹ Air Commodore (later Air Vice-Marshal) Henry Neilson Wrigley, CBE, DFC, AFC, b. Melbourne, Vic. – 21 April 1892, d. 1987. From 1942 he would perform the vital role of AOC Overseas Headquarters in England.



Wilbur Wackett receiving his pilot's 'wings' from Air Commodore Wrigley at RAAF Laverton, 1 March 1940. To Wrigley's left is Group Captain Lukis, Commanding Officer of Laverton

(National Library of Australia)



Graduates from No 26A Pilots Course at No 21 Squadron Laverton, taken on 3 March 1940. Wilbur Wackett is fifth from the left, front row

(Australian War Memorial: P00135.005)



**Wilbur on leave at the family Brighton home in Melbourne,
soon after graduating as a Pilot Officer**

(Arlette Perkins (née Wackett))

CHAPTER 4

PROTECTING OUR SEA LANES

At the commencement of World War II, the RAAF possessed only a dozen operational squadrons, distributed at six bases around the vast coastline. Its aircraft complement was woefully inadequate both in number and quality, consisting of, apart from trainers, 82 Avro Anson bombers, 54 Hawker Demons, 21 Seagull flying boats and seven Wirraways. The obsolescent Avro Anson Mk I, first introduced into the RAAF in 1935, equipped six squadrons. These included No 2 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron which was engaged in seaward patrols for enemy raiders and for convoy protection off the southern Australian coast. It was to this squadron, based at Laverton, that Wilbur and five others³² of his graduating class would be initially posted.

LEARNING THE ROPES

His posting as a raw pilot officer to the squadron on 18 March 1940 led to a welcome improvement in accommodation, including membership of Laverton's splendid *art deco* Officers Mess. Over the following year, it would be the scene of many memorable nights, as recalled by one of Wilbur's fellow pilots on No 2 Squadron:

Guest nights in the Laverton officers' mess became hectic affairs and I did not envy the stewards who had to clean up broken glass, wrecked furniture, emptied fire extinguishers, and torn carpets. The cost of the damage was added to our mess bills.³³

In the meantime there was a war to be won. Ahead lay the task of mastering the complexities of flying a two-engined aircraft. Service Flying Training

³² John Lockwood, Herbert 'Herb' Plenty, John Ramshaw, Jim Sutherland and Clarence 'Spud' Spurgeon.

³³ Kym Bonython, *Ladies' Legs & Lemonade*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1979, p. 44.

Schools for this purpose were not yet established, so Wilbur's conversion was undertaken on the squadron in dual-control Ansons. Fortunately, apart from a number of annoying characteristics, trainees found the 'Faithful Annie' relatively straightforward to fly.

Nevertheless, it was a major step-up from the single-engined, open cockpit aircraft with which Wilbur and his course mates were familiar. A trainee pilot has left a colourful description of what it was like to first meet the venerable Anson:

But most awesome of all was the Anson's massive array of dials and switches, spread across the instrument panel. Forty-eight instruments were counted. How in hell could anyone ever keep track of all that? Needle, ball and airspeed indicator was hard enough to master in the Moth. In truth, with wooden propellers and fabric covering, the Anson was almost as much a relic of the past as the Tiger Moth.³⁴

Herbert Plenty recalls: 'We were all initially put on as second pilots. This was not too exciting—watching the fuel consumption, changing the fuel tanks and carrying out various navigational duties.'³⁵ They also had their first introduction to the Anson's least attractive feature; its primitive hand-crank method for raising and lowering the undercarriage. This required up to 150 turns of the handle, eliciting the following comment from an RAAF trainee:

[My log book] doesn't mention anything about the seemingly thousands of handle turns required to get the undercarriage up, or the non-existent ability to climb with one engine out ...

First and foremost, 'Annie' was faithful and forgiving ... Flying the aeroplane was so uneventful memories are few, but no-one who flew Ansons will ever forget manually winding up the undercarriage – it was

³⁴ Les Morrison, *Of Luck and War: From Squeegie Kid to Bomber Pilot in World War II*, General Store Publishing House, Burnstown, Ontario, Canada, 1999, pp. 42–43.

³⁵ Herbert Plenty to the author, 2009.

hard work. If one's intended flight was short – say about 20 minutes, one simply left the wheels down.³⁶

In early 1940, the RAAF did not as yet have a separate navigator category, the navigational role being also carried out by pilots. Therefore, Wilbur and his four fellow classmates were put through a navigational-reconnaissance course, entailing ground and air training in dead reckoning, reconnaissance, meteorology, search and patrol, photography, signalling and coding, and ship recognition. By late April, Wilbur and his four companions were ready to join as second pilots in the squadron's patrols protecting Australia's coastal shipping.



**Wilbur Wackett kitted up beside a No 2 Squadron Avro Anson
prior to a training flight**

(Julie Parsons)

³⁶ Stewart Wilson, *Anson, Hudson and Sunderland in Australian Service*, Aerospace Publications, Weston Creek, ACT, 1992, p. 54.

INTO ACTION – PROTECTING TROOP CONVOYS

One of the most important roles for No 2 Squadron during 1940 was providing protection for troop convoys departing from Australia for the Middle East. These vital convoys had commenced in January with the sailing from Sydney of 10 large transports, mostly ex-luxury liners, carrying some 13 000 Australian and New Zealand troops. By the end of 1940, eight such convoys would transport almost 90 000 antipodean volunteers without loss to the Middle East (and in one case, the UK)—see Appendix 1.

These convoys were extremely tempting targets for the Germans who were well aware of their sailings. In order to protect them from the danger of attack by enemy surface raiders or submarines, a strong naval escort was typically provided while the RAAF's Anson-equipped squadrons were tasked with aerial support as the convoys tracked around the southern Australian coastline to Fremantle. For a typical convoy commencing from Sydney, No 6 Squadron based at Richmond would fly protective patrols to the Victorian border where Nos 1 and 2 Squadrons, based at Laverton, would take over responsibility and shepherd the transports during their passage through Bass Strait to Kangaroo Island and beyond. On the final stages to Fremantle, aircraft based at Pearce (near Perth) would carry out patrols.

To enable the Anson to carry out these long sea patrols, often involving flying over 300 miles out to sea and back, it was fitted with an auxiliary fuel tank in the cabin. The extensive windows afforded crews an excellent view in their search for enemy vessels or mines. However, in the winter months over southern waters it was not always cosy, as ruefully recalled by one pilot:

Awesome fenestration, consisting of a continuous row of ill-fitting plastic windows along each side of the fuselage, was intended to give the imagined bomber crew an unobstructed view of the sky in all directions but, in reality, they mainly provided gaps and cracks for cold winter winds to pour in. The outer appearance was that of a flying greenhouse but, inside, the frigid winter winds belied that impression.³⁷

³⁷ Morrison, *Of Luck and War*, p. 43.



Avro Ansons in formation, showing their 'awesome fenestration'

(RAAF Museum)

While Wilbur was completing his work-up in mid-April, No 2 Squadron had provided protection for a second troop convoy that departed Melbourne on 15 April carrying elements of the 6th Division AIF to the Middle East. During the afternoon of the 15th, eleven Anson crews that had deployed to Currie airfield on King Island (off the north coast of Tasmania) flew proactive patrols to 42 degrees south latitude and as far west as Kangaroo Island in search of enemy vessels and mines. One aircraft was airborne for six and a half hours; a remarkable feat for an Anson. No enemy was sighted. As the Anson typically only carried two 112 lb bombs on these patrols, what damage they may have caused to an enemy vessel, had they found one, is debatable.

Wilbur and his crew would not have long to wait before they joined these tiring overwater operations. On the morning of 5 May, the liners *Queen Mary* and the *Mauretania* left Sydney Harbour again carrying more elements of the Australian 6th Division and rendezvoused with four fast transports bearing

troops from New Zealand. A day later, escorted by the cruisers HMAS *Australia* and HMAS *Canberra*, the combined convoy reached the eastern approach to Bass Strait. Off Port Phillip Heads it was joined by the *Empress of Canada* that had embarked troops in Melbourne. Wilbur and other No 2 Squadron crews were kept busy over the next few days providing protection for the more than 18 000 troops now aboard the convoy. Flying from Currie airfield, three squadron Ansons executed parallel searches on 6 May for possible enemy vessels and mines as far as the South Australian border before landing at Mount Gambier. The following day, eight crews from Mount Gambier performed a diverging search to a range of 250 miles commencing at the Cape Northumberland Lighthouse. No enemy was sighted and all aircraft returned to Laverton that evening. However, some were rewarded with an unforgettable view of the mighty ships of the convoy. Herbert Plenty recalled:

On my second operational sortie as second pilot we sighted the Queen Mary about twenty miles south of Bairnsdale steaming west. We reported it as a 10 000-ton transport. Imagine our surprise when we got back and were told it was the 83 000-ton Queen Mary. So much for our ship recognition training!³⁸

A NEW WARHORSE

After two months with No 2 Squadron, the pleasures of flying as second pilot in the venerable Anson were beginning to wear thin for Wilbur and his ex-Course 26 graduates. Most had eventually been checked out as first pilots by mid-May when several including Herb Plenty and ‘Spud’ Spurgeon were transferred to No 8 Squadron which was in the process of forming in Canberra. Spurgeon, for one, was happy:

I was posted to a squadron [8 Squadron] before I’d even had a chance to be skipper in the Anson. I’m very glad I didn’t, but I had enough hours as a second pilot in an Anson to realise that it wasn’t a safe airplane to fly

³⁸ Herbert Plenty to the author, 2009.



**Troop convoy US3 photographed off Wilsons Promontory, Victoria,
by a patrolling Anson aircraft, 6 May 1940**

(From Highest Traditions by John Bennett)

over water ... I was very glad to get out of it for that reason, because those old airplanes ... were absolutely clapped out and you could hear them groaning when they were flying along.

... it [the Anson] was cold and miserable and wet, the damn thing leaked like a sieve.³⁹

Fortunately, the much anticipated replacement of the squadron's ageing Ansons commenced in June with the arrival of four Lockheed Hudson Mk I patrol bombers. Crews eagerly awaited their turn for conversion which was carried out on the squadron in a dual-control aircraft. While these conversions were underway, the squadron continued to provide protective patrols for shipping along the southern coast, including a fruitless three-day search for a

³⁹ Spurgeon, interview in Department of Veterans' Affairs, The Australians at War Film Archive, Archive No. 0937.

suspected minelaying raider. In fact, no German surface raiders would operate in Australian waters until August 1940. Nevertheless, these long and tiring sorties gave the crews valuable, albeit uneventful, flying experience.

The Lockheed Hudson was quite attractive and spacious compared with the Anson, being capable of carrying up to a dozen passengers in addition to the four-man crew. Its two 1050 hp Pratt & Whitney Wasp engines gave it a top speed of 245 mph at 15 000 feet. As seen in the photograph on the following page, these early Hudsons were received and employed without the two-gun dorsal turret later installed. Perhaps the most valuable attributes of the Hudson in its maritime patrol role were an impressive range for a twin-engined aircraft (1350 miles at a cruising speed of 205 mph), its reliability and the good view afforded to the front and sides. It could also carry 750 pounds of bombs.

Although causing some problems for inexperienced pilots during their conversion from the more docile Anson, once they had become familiar with its idiosyncrasies, pilots were generally pleased with the Hudson's handling characteristics. Difficulties mainly arose from its tendency to swing on take-off and landing. Once in the air it was considered well behaved and stable. It was important to make a three-point landing. That is, touch down simultaneously with the main and tail wheels, by pulling right back on the control column during the final 'flare out' as the Hudson tended to bounce badly if landed on the main wheels and there was an increased tendency to swing.

Fortunately, Wilbur and the other pilots completed their conversions within a month without undue incident. Crews would enjoy the enhanced performance and comfort of their new aircraft. An excellent feature was the Hudson's advanced Fowler flaps extending along the wing trailing edge from the ailerons to the fuselage. Another attractive feature was its Sperry auto-pilot known universally as 'George'. This proved invaluable in providing rest for pilots during long maritime missions. The cockpit was luxurious compared to most bomber/reconnaissance aircraft of the time, being heated and even featuring upholstered pilot seats complete with arm rests which was evidence of its derivation from the Lockheed 14 Super Electra commercial airliner. And no one complained about the hydraulically operated undercarriage instead of the laborious manual winding with the Anson!

Protecting Our Sea Lanes



Early RAAF Hudson bombers in formation, showing their clean lines
(RAAF Museum)



No 2 Squadron Officers pose with a Hudson, Laverton, August 1940
Wilbur Wackett is second from the right in the back row
(Arlette Perkins (née Wackett))

A TRAGIC ACCIDENT

A further five Hudsons arrived during July, bringing the squadron to its full temporary establishment of nine aircraft. By the end of the month six pilots, including Wilbur Wackett, were fully operational on the type. Soon after, a tragic event occurred that stunned the nation and had a traumatic effect on squadron personnel. On 13 August 1940, Flight Lieutenant Bob Hitchcock⁴⁰ and his crew in Hudson A16-97 were flying the Minister of State for Air, James Fairbairn, the Minister of State for the Army, Geoffrey Street, the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Brudenell White, and the Vice-President of the Executive Council, Sir Henry Gullett, to Canberra when the aircraft stalled and crashed when approaching the airport. All on board perished in the resultant conflagration. It was a salutary warning, as highlighted by the subsequent Court of Inquiry, of the necessity to maintain 'an ample safety factor of speed to avoid the danger of stalling' when landing the Hudson.⁴¹

Happier news in early September was the announcement of Wilbur's promotion to flying officer. With other squadron pilots, he had been busy hunting an elusive adversary.

HUNTING THE ORION

Suspensions of the arrival of the first enemy surface raider in Australasian waters had been aroused on 19 June 1940, with the sinking of the 13 000-ton liner *Niagara* by a mine some 60 miles north-east of Auckland, New Zealand. Among precautions immediately instigated were air searches over Bass Strait by No 2 Squadron to support the passage of the liner *Strathmore* carrying troops for the UK. Over several days from 23 June, eight aircraft (including one Hudson) operating from Mount Gambier and Bairnsdale carried out clearing parallel

⁴⁰ Flight Lieutenant Robert Edward 'Bob' Hitchcock, Service No. 115. b. Fremantle, WA – 19 June 1912, Nos 1 and 2 Squadrons, killed in aircraft accident 13 August 1940.

⁴¹ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 32/10/2729, Air Force Court of Inquiry under Air Force Courts of Inquiry Regulations into accident to Air Force Hudson Aircraft at Canberra on 13/8/1940, 'Findings of Air Force Court of Inquiry', 5 September 1940, p. 12.

searches in front of the *Strathmore* as well as a diverging search extending 150 miles seaward for a possible enemy minelayer. Exceptional visibility on 25 June made it possible to sight vessels up to 40 miles away but all proved to be friendly.

Definite confirmation of the presence of an enemy surface raider would not come until 20 August when the 8700-ton merchant ship *Turakina*, en route from Sydney to Wellington, reported that it was under gunfire attack. She gave her position as approximately 850 miles south-east of Sydney. No more was heard from the vessel. The *Turakina* had sunk after an heroic defence with its single 4.7-inch gun against the German armed merchant cruiser HSK *Orion*. The 7800-ton *Orion*, which had sailed from Germany in April, was strongly armed with six 6-inch guns, one 3-inch gun, as well as multiple torpedo tubes and over 200 mines.



The German surface raider HSK *Orion*

The appearance of this formidable raider occurred at an inauspicious time. The liners *Mauretania*, *Orcades* and *Empress of Japan* were in Wellington to embark troops before sailing to Sydney to join troop convoy US-4. A search for the raider was immediately begun by Australian and New Zealand naval and air units. As part of this response, No 2 Squadron dispatched Hudson aircraft on 21 August to RAAF Base Richmond in Sydney and Moruya on the NSW coast. From there, searches were made some 300 miles to the east over the Tasman Sea for the next three days. No enemy sightings were made as the *Orion* had avoided

Lost Without Trace

detection by sailing well south of Tasmania before tracking north-west along the Great Australian Bight.

Sailings between Australia and New Zealand were resumed. The first three ships of troop convoy US-4 departed Wellington on 28 August, joining the *Aquitania* off Sydney two days later before proceeding south. The convoy's subsequent passage through Bass Strait was again shepherded by No 2 Squadron aircraft. No suspicious sightings were made, as the *Orion* was by then south-west of Tasmania. The raider proceeded to cross the Great Australian Bight only a few days ahead of US-4. On the morning of 3 September, soon after laying dummy mines off Albany, it was detected by a No 14 Squadron Hudson patrolling from Albany. The *Orion* hastily departed the scene and left Australian waters without further success. It eventually returned safely to France a year later, having sunk or captured 17 Allied merchant ships totalling some 86 000 tons during its long voyage.



**A venerable No 2 Squadron Anson at Laverton
with replacement Hudson bombers to the rear, 1940**

(From Highest Traditions by John Bennett)



No 2 Squadron aircrew and Hudson aircraft at their Laverton flight line, 1940

(From *Highest Traditions* by John Bennett)

A SECOND COMMERCE RAIDER ENTERS THE SCENE

Patrols off the southern coastline by No 2 Squadron crews continued throughout October and November 1940 in support of troop convoys US-5, US-6 and US-7. These were enlivened by the arrival of a second enemy surface raider, the *Penguin*, into Australian waters in October. On the 7th, she met and captured the 9000-ton Norwegian tanker *Storstad* off North West Cape, Western Australia. She transferred a German crew and some of her mines to her captive, now renamed the *Passat*, and the two vessels traversed north of Australia before turning south down the eastern coastline. The *Penguin* proceeded to lay mines between Newcastle and Sydney⁴² and others off Hobart, before making her way in early November to the South Australian coast where she mined the entrance to Spencer Gulf. Meanwhile, the *Passat* had laid her mines in Bass Strait in late October. The German raiders then made off westward into the Indian Ocean where the *Penguin* sank several ships in late November.

⁴² Within a month, this minefield would claim its only victim—the small coastal steamer *Nimbin*, sunk on 29 November 1940.

In the meantime, their mines had claimed their first victims. On the night of 7 November, the merchant vessel *Cambridge* (10 900 tons) was sunk off the Victorian coast by a mine six miles east of Wilsons Promontory. Aircraft from No 2 Squadron at Laverton searched for the minelayer throughout the next day without success. When on the following evening the American ship *City of Rayville* struck a mine south of Cape Otway and sank,⁴³ Bass Strait was closed to shipping for a week. Air searches again failed to detect either the minelayer or her mines.

As a precaution, the departure of troop convoy US-7 from Sydney carrying further elements of the 2nd AIF was delayed until 14 November while searches continued. Two days later, with protection by No 2 Squadron aircraft patrolling as far west as Mount Gambier, the convoy passed safely through Bass Strait without incident. For Wilbur and the nine other Hudson crews involved, the night-time landing at the primitive Mount Gambier landing ground—never a welcome finale to a tiring patrol—was a nightmare. Kym Bonython recalled:

As darkness fell, so did the rain. It felt as though we were flying through the ocean instead of above it but we groped our way to the little country airport.

Eight or nine other aircraft were trying to land and for a while we all milled around in the same patch of cloud. The airstrip was under inches of water and chaos reigned supreme. Someone fired off red Very lights from one end of the strip while another hopeful flashed a green Aldis lamp from the other end.

Mick lined up the strip and began his approach, and soon ordered me to 'Lower fifteen degrees flap.' I depressed the lever and the flaps began to run out, just as I glimpsed a tall radio mast looming directly ahead through the rain and murk.

Frantically I shouted at Mick to make a quick turn. He did so, but in the excitement I forgot the flaps. By that time they were fully extended and we were dangerously close to the ground. To retract them at that instant

⁴³ The *City of Rayville*, of 5900 tons, was the first American ship sunk during the war.

would have caused a sudden and fatal loss of altitude and so all Mick could do was pour on the power.

The aircraft wallowed ahead just above stalling speed, and we went in over the fence at a most peculiar attitude: nose down and tail up. We literally 'splashed down' into the mud and water of the airstrip. We could hardly believe we were safely down ...⁴⁴

The convoy had also been fortunate. Mines still lay in waiting along the southern coast. On 7 December, the British steamer *Hertford* was damaged by a mine 40 miles south-west of Cape Catastrophe, off the South Australian coast. Suspecting an enemy submarine, No 2 Squadron Hudsons performed fruitless searches for several days between Port Fairy (near Warrnambool) and Adelaide. The crews understandably found these long sea patrols, with their repeated 'Nil sightings', frustrating and 'pretty boring'. However, as recalled by Ray Garrett, the sorties were on occasions enlivened by the bombing of innocent whales, mistaken for a submarine: 'A whale from the air looks very much like a submarine ... I don't know how many whales I sank!'⁴⁵

December would be a busy month. From the 14th to the 17th, Laverton Hudsons joined aircraft from all around the Australian coast vainly searching a sea area of over one million square miles for a suspected German raider. However, the elusive enemy had already evaded them. The *Penguin* continued its commerce raiding for another five months before being sunk by the Royal Navy cruiser HMS *Cornwall* near the Seychelles in May 1941. The most successful of the German commerce raiders, she had sunk or captured 32 Allied ships totalling 156 000 tons during her 10-month cruise. The year closed with the shepherding through Bass Strait of yet another troop convoy (US-8), including the giant liners *Queen Mary* and *Mauretania*. These patrols included a diverging search by five Hudsons to a depth of 300 miles and an anti-submarine patrol without incident for the *Mauretania*. In fact, Australian fears at this time of

⁴⁴ Bonython, *Ladies' Legs & Lemonade*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Tapes of recollections, Raymond Garrett – No 2 Squadron Association, Melbourne. Quoted in John Bennett, *Highest Traditions: The History of No 2 Squadron*, RAAF, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1995, p. 106.

German submarine activity off our coast were premature. It would be September 1944 before Admiral Dönitz would dispatch any of his U-boats to these distant waters.

Wilbur completed his tour with No 2 Squadron in mid-January 1941. It had been an enjoyable and highly instructive 10 months, although tinged with disappointment at not yet encountering the enemy on operations. He would have to wait another year for that. In the meantime, it was time for a rest.

BETWEEN OPERATIONAL TOURS

Before leaving on eight day's leave, Wilbur learned of his next posting to No 1 Armament Training School, based at Cressy, some 70 miles west of Melbourne. Its role was to provide air firing and bombing facilities to enable squadrons to carry out an independent assessment of the armament efficiency of their unit. One of the major roles of staff pilots at Cressy was towing drogues to be used as targets for gunnery training by aircrew in 'attacking' aircraft which was generally regarded as the least enjoyable task in the RAAF. Not surprisingly, tour-expired pilots did not fancy the thought of being shot down by a 'sprog' gunner. It was therefore with some relief that Wilbur received advice on 20 January that, rather than proceed to Cressy, he was to remain at Laverton on detachment to No 1 Aircraft Depot as a ferry and test pilot.⁴⁶

Since the start of the war, No 1 Aircraft Depot had played a vital role in the servicing and repair of RAAF aircraft, including armament installation and the overhaul of engines. It was also one of the principal sites for the assembly of aircraft shipped to Australia in crates, including in 1941 the arrival of almost 400 Airspeed Oxfords and nearly 300 Avro Ansons from Britain. The CAC facility at Fisherman's Bend, Melbourne, was also running at maximum capacity in 1941,

⁴⁶ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A10605, Volume 1/1/ATS, Daily Routine Orders 1/1939; Station Routine Orders 2/1939–3/1941; Personnel Occurrence Report 1/1941–15/1942 for Armament Training Station, Cressy.

with almost 300 Wirraways rolling off the production line during the year as well as 100 of the new Wackett Trainers.⁴⁷

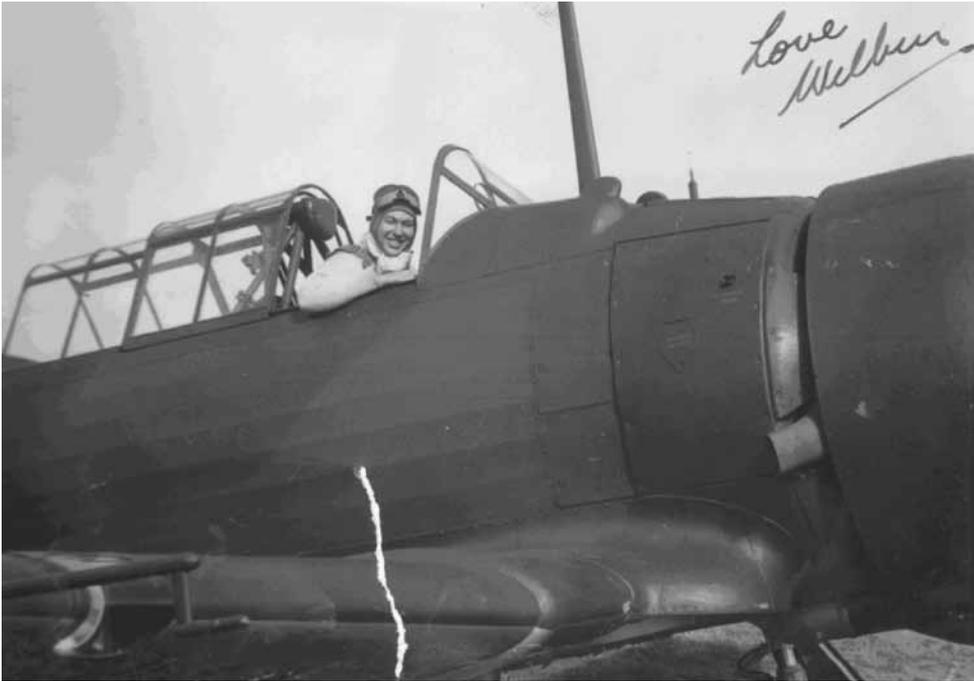
Wilbur and the other No 1 Aircraft Depot ferry pilots were consequently kept very busy throughout 1941. In an interesting family link, Wilbur would frequently take delivery of Wirraway and Wackett Trainers from his father's CAC factory and ferry them to No 1 Aircraft Depot where they were prepared for assignment to RAAF squadrons and training units. Delivery of these urgently needed aircraft to the seven Service Flying Training Schools⁴⁸ established in states across Australia as part of the EATS was also carried out by the No 1 Aircraft Depot pilots, a task shared at times with EATS trainees.

Romance had also blossomed for Wilbur at this time. Since their first meeting in his Sydney Grammar School days, Wilbur had kept in regular contact with Peggie Stephenson. Now a very attractive 19-year-old, she lived with her parents, Joseph⁴⁹ and Thelma Stephenson, in Bellevue Hill, not far from his old Sydney home in Vaucluse. Over the year, like other young couples in wartime Australia, they would make the most of brief times they could spend together while Wilbur was on leave.

⁴⁷ D.P. Mellor, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945 – Series 4 (Civil) – Volume V – The Role of Science and Industry*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1958, p. 410.

⁴⁸ No 1 Service Flying Training School (1SFTS) Point Cook (Vic.), 2SFTS Forrest Hill (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 3SFTS Amberley (Qld), 4SFTS Geraldton (WA), 5SFTS Uranquinty (NSW), 6SFTS Mallala (SA), and 7SFTS Deniliquin (NSW).

⁴⁹ A veteran of World War I and a lieutenant colonel in the Reserves, Joseph Stephenson re-enlisted in 1940 and served in the Middle East and New Guinea. He was awarded the OBE in July 1945.



Photograph given by Wilbur to his sweetheart, Peggie Stephenson, while a ferry pilot at No 1 Aircraft Depot Laverton. Rugged up in a sweater, he is about to ferry a Wirraway

(Julie Parsons)

WAR WITH JAPAN

Meanwhile, Japan and the West edged closer to war in the Pacific. Trade sanctions by the western powers had not deterred Japan from her goal of conquest in China. When her attempts to negotiate security of oil supplies from the Dutch East Indies broke down in June 1941, Japan moved a month later to complete her military control over all of French Indo-China. This further isolated China and threatened Thailand as well as British and US possessions in Malaya and the Philippines. Western governments responded by freezing Japanese assets and imposing a complete oil embargo.

War now appeared inevitable. Last-minute negotiations began in Washington during November but by early December Japan concluded that these would be fruitless. On the morning of 7 December 1941—without breaking off the talks—Japan boldly decided the issue with a massive air attack

by her carrier forces on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. Caught completely by surprise, most of America's Pacific Battle Fleet was left in ruins.

At the same time, the Japanese assault on Hong Kong began.⁵⁰ It would fall by Christmas. The Japanese seaborne invasion of Malaya also began in the early hours of 8 December (some 30 minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbor), with landings at Kota Bharu near the north-eastern border with Thailand. The invasion fleet had been detected as it approached on 6 December by a Hudson crew from No 1 Squadron RAAF captained by Flight Lieutenant John Ramshaw,⁵¹ one of Wilbur Wackett's fellow graduates from Course 26A at Laverton and later his companion from No 2 Squadron days. Further sightings had been made on 7 December but no offensive action was permitted as war had not yet been declared. Following reports of the enemy landings at Kota Bharu on the morning of the 8th, the shackles were off. RAAF Hudson crews made a series of determined low-level attacks on the transports off the beach, resulting in the sinking of a large enemy vessel. The pilot responsible was another fellow graduate of Wilbur's from Point Cook, Flight Lieutenant John Lockwood.⁵² Regrettably, Flight Lieutenant John Jones,⁵³ another Course 26A graduate, was killed when piloting another Hudson in the attack, while John Ramshaw would also perish later in the day. With the death of John Lockwood the following February, Wilbur had lost three good friends to the Japanese in the first few weeks of the Pacific War.

The British defence of Malaya, fatally compromised by the hopelessly inadequate air defences, was also ultimately doomed. Sallying forth from Singapore in an attempt to intercept Japanese reinforcements and bombard the invasion beaches, the Royal Navy capital ships HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS

⁵⁰ Actually at 8 am on 8 December, local Hong Kong time, because of its position west of the International Date Line.

⁵¹ Flight Lieutenant John Christopher Ramshaw, Service No. 552, b. Bangalore, India – 18 October 1914, Nos 21, 2 and 1 Squadrons RAAF, killed in action 8 December 1941.

⁵² Flight Lieutenant John McAlister Hardman Lockwood, Service No. 554, b. Geelong, Vic. – 23 December 1919, Nos 21, 2 and 1 Squadrons RAAF, killed in action 14 February 1942.

⁵³ Flight Lieutenant John Graham Leighton Jones, Service No. 570, b. Essendon, Vic. – 15 June 1919, Nos 21 and 1 Squadrons RAAF, killed in action 8 December 1941.

Repulse were quickly sunk by enemy aircraft off the east coast of Malaya on 10 December. On the same day, Japan launched its invasion of the Philippines. By Christmas, General MacArthur was forced to order a general withdrawal to the Bataan Peninsula on Luzon and the capital Manila was occupied by the Japanese early in the New Year.

It seemed that the Japanese juggernaut was unstoppable. By the New Year, with its three most experienced AIF divisions in the Middle East and the 8th Division fighting for its life in Malaya, Australia faced the grim prospect of possible invasion. The only RAAF aircraft available north of Brisbane to counter the Japanese thrust were 36 Wirraways, 21 Hudsons and 21 flying boats which provided a pitifully inadequate shield.

It was to one of the home defence Wirraway units, No 24 Squadron based at Townsville, that Wilbur received his eagerly awaited recall to active service in early January 1942. With keen anticipation he left Melbourne for tropical Queensland.

CHAPTER 5

RETURN TO TOWNSVILLE

TESTING DAYS – A SQUADRON IN PERIL

No 24 Squadron had been formed in June 1940 at Amberley, Queensland, where it was initially equipped with Wirraways. A flight of Lockheed Hudson patrol bombers was added to its establishment before the squadron moved in October 1940 to the recently established Garbutt airfield in Townsville, North Queensland. For the next year, as well as working up to operational readiness, its crews performed regular seaward reconnaissance patrols along the Queensland coast.

The launch of Japan's Pacific campaign would have devastating consequences for No 24 Squadron. Within two days, the squadron's four Hudson bombers, led by the Commanding Officer (CO), Wing Commander John Lerew,⁵⁴ had been deployed to the vital strategic base of Rabaul in New Britain. The unit's dozen Wirraways followed a few days later. They were to act as an advanced striking force and to provide aerial support for the battalion of troops (*Lark Force*)⁵⁵ tasked with Rabaul's defence against an anticipated overwhelming Japanese invasion force. It was a forlorn hope,⁵⁶ as recognised cold-bloodedly by the Australian Chiefs of Staff at the time:

We do not consider [further] reinforcement is possible in view of the hazard of transporting forces from the mainland and maintaining them (the Chiefs of Staff reported) but we consider it necessary to maintain

⁵⁴ Wing Commander (later Group Captain) John Margrave Lerew, DFC, Service No. 73, b. Hamilton, Vic. – 20 August 1912, Nos 32, 7 and 24 Squadrons RAAF, and RAAF Overseas Headquarters, London, 1944.

⁵⁵ The 2/22nd Battalion of the ill-fated 8th Division AIF.

⁵⁶ An appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff in early December 1941 had estimated that a garrison of at least brigade strength (5000 troops) and a minimum of five RAAF squadrons would be required to defend Rabaul against Japanese assault.

Lost Without Trace

an advanced observation line to obtain indications of enemy movement south. We must therefore rule out any question of withdrawal.⁵⁷

Lark Force and No 24 Squadron were to be sacrificed to support the questionable argument that 'the enemy must be made to fight for this forward observation line instead of gaining it at the first threat'.⁵⁸

The Rabaul garrison would have a respite of several weeks while Japanese forces were preoccupied with pressing their advances down the Malayan Peninsula and expanding their hold on the Philippines. During this time No 24 Squadron's Hudson crews carried out reconnaissance patrols and clearing searches for Allied shipping, as well as bombing attacks on enemy targets. These included an attack on 15 December by three Hudsons on a 5000-ton enemy vessel located near the Japanese-held island of Kapingamarangi, some 300 miles north of Rabaul.

However, time was running out for No 24 Squadron and *Lark Force*. On 4 January, enemy Mitsubishi Nell bombers flying from the Japanese fleet base at Truk almost 700 miles to the north, appeared over Rabaul and pattern bombed the Lakunai airfield. Later that evening, the Vunakanau airfield was similarly visited by enemy Kawanishi Mavis flying boats but fortunately all their bombs landed harmlessly in the sea. Two days later, Vunakanau airfield would not be so fortunate. Mavis flying boats rained 80 bombs on the airfield, destroying a Wirraway and damaging a Hudson. Four Wirraways had taken off upon the approach of the enemy formation and Acting Flight Lieutenant Bruce Anderson,⁵⁹ after climbing to 12 000 feet, engaged one of the flying boats in an attack from 300 yards. Unfortunately, he expended all his ammunition (only 200 rounds!) without visible effect before the Mavis disappeared into cloud.

⁵⁷ Douglas Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945 – Series 3 (Air) – Volume I – Royal Australian Air Force, 1939–1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 239.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁹ Flying Officer (Acting Flight Lieutenant) Bruce Horace Anderson, Service No. 260770, b. Sydney, NSW – 24 October 1916. Listed killed in action 22 March 1942, as recorded by Department of Veterans' Affairs, but now believed to have been captured and murdered soon after by the Japanese.

The following day (7 January), none of the 20 Japanese Nell bombers that attacked Rabaul could be reached by the Wirraways that rose to intercept. On the ground, the squadron lost two more Wirraways and a Hudson destroyed, while another Hudson was severely damaged. Frustration at the manifest inadequacy of the Wirraway for the role to which it had been assigned is evident in a report by Flight Lieutenant Wilfred Brookes:⁶⁰

From present experience it would appear that the fire power of the Wirraway aircraft is inadequate to do serious damage to enemy flying-boats which, so far, are the only type of enemy aircraft encountered that can be overtaken by a Wirraway.⁶¹

A remarkable reconnaissance flight by a Hudson over Truk on 8/9 January had revealed a strong Japanese naval force and transports in Toll Harbour, and aircraft arrayed wingtip to wingtip in adjacent airfields.⁶² This left the defenders in Rabaul in little doubt that an invasion force was assembling.

JOINING NO 24 SQUADRON

It was at this critical juncture that Wilbur Wackett joined No 24 Squadron in Townsville on 13 January 1942. His posting had brought him back to the city of his birth, a return he had hoped to make under happier circumstances.

He had departed Melbourne by train five days earlier, managing to briefly meet up with his now firm sweetheart, Peggie Stephenson, between trains in Sydney. A letter to his mother and father soon after his arrival at Garbutt airfield captures the excitement of the move and the pleasure of revisiting (from the air) some of the happy scenes of his youth:

⁶⁰ Flight Lieutenant (later Group Captain) Wilfred Deakin Brookes, DSO, Service No. 250299, b. Melbourne, Vic. – 17 April 1906, Nos 21, 24 and 22 Squadrons. Knighted postwar for services to industry

⁶¹ Quoted in Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 319.

⁶² *ibid.*, pp. 314–318. This No 6 Squadron Hudson, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Yeowart, had staged from Rabaul to Kavieng on the northern tip of New Ireland, before making its epic flight to Truk, which was the first Allied reconnaissance of this major Japanese base.

Lost Without Trace

Well here I am back in the old home town and boy oh boy is it hot, but I like the heat and can say with reasonable accuracy that tomorrow will be a fine day (Melbourne please note!).

[En route] I arrived in Sydney alright and Peg met me at the station. I went and visited Gran before leaving and caught the 7.40 for Brisbane, where I arrived the following day at 3.15. On making enquiries, I found that the train for Townsville left at 8 pm from the Roma Street Station, so I hopped in a taxi and for the cost of 2/6 [two shillings and sixpence] was transported with bag, kitbag and helmet to the said station where I clocked in my luggage and fixed up my ticket.

I arranged to meet a chap at Lennons Hotel for a drink. The lounge was full of Yanks, either US army or air corps. We got talking to them and got quite a lot of information. The town is absolutely full of Yanks ... They run around the place in funny little armoured cars called 'jeeps' as well as great big army trucks.

After a very tiresome journey I finally arrived here in Townsville at 6.15 and found a tender waiting to take me to the aerodrome ... I have had two flights since I have been here and both were today. This morning I did some low dive bombing practice and amazed myself with my results, after all it is over twelve months since I have dropped a bomb. This afternoon I had to do a reconnaissance flight over Rattlesnake Island which is north of Magnetic Island ... On the way back I came into the coast at Argea where the fish are. Remember my tales of Argea. Boy what fishing! It looked just the same and the house is exactly the same. Little did I know then, that I would fly over the same very spot in a Wirraway six years hence.

Dad: Plenty of 'Fortresses' up here, and boy what an aeroplane, got all the oil but can't very well tell you in a letter. On the station are B-17s and B-18s,⁶³ while at Brisbane they have B-17s, B-18s and P-40s (Kittys), so we are praying that we will soon get a share. The Yanks are funny in the Mess, talking of their super duper pursuit ships and super special bombardment aeroplanes, but they are for all that jolly good chaps.

⁶³ The twin-engined Douglas B-18, strangely christened the 'Bolo', was based on the DC-2 commercial airliner. Ordered by the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) in 1935, it was obsolete by the start of the war and was never employed in its intended bomber role.

Return to Townsville

Well Mother, I must say adios, the mossies are coming over like the Luftwaffe. Give my love to Arlette, and Dad for goodness sake give us a real good aircraft, and quick, the boys up north are having a pretty tough go. You should see how they stagger in here, full of holes, absolutely riddled and held together with fencing wire.

Well All my love, Write Soon.

Wilbur⁶⁴

The 'boys up north' were indeed doing it tough. The badly damaged aircraft to which Wilbur referred was No 24 Squadron's Hudson A16-47. Piloted by Flight Lieutenant Paul Paterson,⁶⁵ it had staggered back to Townsville from Rabaul on the day of Wilbur's arrival, following 'rough repairs' after being seriously damaged during the Japanese raid of 7 January. Its repair and hazardous return flight to Australia, recently described by author Lex McAulay, attest to the remarkable spirit and resourcefulness of No 24 Squadron in its baptism of fire:

[After the raid] both wheels and tyres were damaged beyond repair; all the windows except one were broken; the fuselage 'looked like a colander'; the port wing had a hole through it about one metre wide; the flaps were damaged; most instruments were smashed; petrol and oil tanks were leaking and the propellers were holed ...

The wreck was moved under some trees and [repair] work began. Corrugated iron from a hut was cut away, trampled flat and made to form wing surfaces by bolting it over the original damaged parts. The flaps were tied up with fencing wire; the windows covered with wood and iron. Only one front pane was clear ...

... petrol and oil tanks were patched with fabric, instruments hung by wires or were wired to others, and the port wing had large bulges on upper and lower surfaces, the propeller blades had holes through them, but new engine cylinders and tyres had been fitted.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Wackett family files.

⁶⁵ Flight Lieutenant Paul Pryde Paterson, Service No. 260515, b. Perth, WA – 8 February 1915, Nos 6 and 24 Squadrons, killed in action 19 January 1942

⁶⁶ Quote by John Lerew from Lex McAulay, *We Who Are About to Die: The Story of John Lerew – A Hero of Rabaul, 1942*, Banner Books, Maryborough, Qld, 2007, p. 95.

Paul Paterson performed the remarkable feat of flying the battered wreck back to Townsville. No official recognition followed, his only reward presumably coming in the Mess that night from squadron admirers staggered by his courage and skill. Sadly, he and his crew would perish six days later when flying a replacement Hudson to Rabaul.

The days were numbered for the squadron's detachment in Rabaul. They suffered two more damaging raids on 16 January. Two Wirraways that struggled into the air were unable to reach the bombers. By this stage the squadron air and ground crews were exhausted. Lerew urgently requested North-Eastern Area Headquarters for reinforcement with 'modern' fighters. However, although significant numbers of Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk fighter were beginning to arrive in Australia by this time, they had been earmarked by the Americans for the last desperate defence of the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. Sixteen of these P-40Es had in fact landed at Garbutt airfield on 16 January en route to the front, generating much interest and not a little envy among the 24 Squadron personnel. Little did Wilbur realise that within six weeks he would himself be flying one of these coveted machines. In the meantime his squadron detachment in Rabaul, left unsupported and with little apparent gratitude for its efforts, was now beyond saving.

It would be virtually destroyed in a massive attack by nearly 110 enemy aircraft on 20 January. Hopelessly outnumbered, seven Wirraways rose gallantly to engage the force of bombers and fighters. Five of them were lost within minutes, falling victims to the escorting Zeros. Another Wirraway, piloted by Bruce Anderson suffered engine failure on take-off and the aircraft was destroyed in the subsequent crashlanding. Anderson and his observer were fortunate to walk away relatively unscathed. The other aircrew were not so fortunate with six killed and five wounded in the action which had lasted less than 10 minutes. Only one Japanese aircraft was downed by anti-aircraft fire during the raid, which left No 24 Squadron with only two undamaged Wirraways and one Hudson bomber. Vunakanau and Lakunai airstrips were left in ruins.

Lerew notified North-Eastern Area Headquarters in Townsville of the devastating attack, indicating his intention to send the remaining serviceable Hudson to Port Moresby with casualties, adding: 'Two Wirraways useless

defence. Will you now please send some fighters?' The reply came as no surprise: 'Regret inability to supply fighters.' However, in the first sign of any appreciation, Headquarters added: 'If we had them you would get them.'⁶⁷

Early the following morning (21 January), part of the Japanese invasion fleet was detected approaching Rabaul by coastwatchers and the two remaining Wirraways were sent off in search. They were very fortunate to be unsuccessful, as the fleet included the aircraft carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, as well as several cruisers and destroyers covering the troop transports. Japanese naval dive-bombers and fighters pounded Rabaul again in the morning, while Lerew's long-suffering ground crews laboured to keep Vunakanau airstrip open. They were aware of the American Kittyhawk fighters that had been recently transiting through Garbutt and rumours abounded that they may arrive as reinforcements.

No saviours appeared. In the afternoon, Lerew received the remarkable order to attack the invasion fleet 'with all available aircraft.' This amounted to one Hudson, which was duly sent in search but, again fortunately for the crew, made no contact with the enemy. After discussions with Colonel John Scanlon, the head of the *Lark Force* garrison, Lerew wisely determined that evacuation was now imperative. He notified North-Eastern Area Headquarters Townsville, for repetition to the Air Board and Port Moresby, that he planned to dispatch the two remaining Wirraways to Lae in eastern New Guinea and to evacuate his remaining 120 men from Rabaul. However, thousands of miles distant, higher authority thought otherwise, cabling:

From AOC to Wing Commander Lerew. Begins. Rabaul not yet fallen.
Assist Army in keeping aerodrome open. Maintain communications as
long as possible.⁶⁸

This was the last straw for Lerew, who signalled to both Townsville and Melbourne the now famous words: '*Maurituri vox salutamus*' (his version of the gladiator's salute: 'We who are about to die, salute you').⁶⁹ Headquarters

⁶⁷ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 356.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 358.

⁶⁹ Various records show this quote as 'Nos morituri te salutamis' and 'Morituri vos salutamus', but John Lerew himself stated in a letter to *Wings* in December 1985 that his version was

were clearly not amused, as a few hours later Lerew received a message ordering him to immediately fly the last serviceable Hudson with wounded personnel to Port Moresby where he would take command of a composite Hudson squadron, while command of his squadron detachment in Rabaul would be assumed by Flight Lieutenant Brookes. Lerew was appalled: 'My reaction was one of sheer outrage, I couldn't possibly take off and leave my men behind, so I decided to disobey these orders completely.'⁷⁰

Before daylight the following day (22 January), the last squadron Hudson took off from Vunakanau for Port Moresby loaded with wounded. After overseeing the demolition of the airfield, Lerew began the withdrawal of his remaining men. He was just in time. Japanese troops began landing early the following morning and, despite the heroic efforts of the small force of defenders, the harbour and airfields were quickly overrun. In a remarkable achievement over the next few days, Lerew succeeded in extricating all except four of his remaining personnel from New Britain, largely via rendezvous with RAAF Catalinas at points along the north-east coast. The exhausted survivors were flown in stages back to Townsville where they were welcomed at Garbutt by Wilbur and other recent squadron arrivals.

The men of *Lark Force* were not so fortunate. Only about 400 managed to escape. Over one thousand were taken prisoner, of whom 160 were soon brutally murdered by the Japanese. The remainder tragically all perished when the ship *Montevideo Maru*, in which they were being transported from Rabaul to Japan, was torpedoed and sunk by an American submarine in July 1942.

'Maurituri vox salutamus' (with the possible spelling mistake of 'Maurituri' instead of 'Morituri'). See R. George Holden, *We Who Are About to Die Salute You! The Wartime Diary of 24 Squadron R.A.A.F. 1940–1946*, self-published, Bentleigh, Vic., 2007, pp. 33 and 50–53.

⁷⁰ John Lerew, in Holden, *We Who Are About to Die Salute You!*, p. 27.

AFTERMATH

The squadron's losses in Rabaul had been grievous: ten personnel killed, six wounded and four prisoners of war (POWs);⁷¹ with ten Wirraways and four Hudsons destroyed. The decimation weighed heavily on all, emphatically confirming what Wilbur and his fellow pilots already knew that the Wirraway had no place as a front-line fighter. While its top speed of 220 mph made it a very effective advanced trainer for its time, it was clearly outclassed by modern Japanese fighters which were well over 100 mph faster and considerably more manoeuvrable. Its only armaments were two Vickers 0.303-inch machine guns above the engine and a machine gun for use by the observer/gunner in the rear cockpit. However, nothing better was available. As replacement Wirraway aircraft began arriving at Garbutt, the aircrew pondered what lay ahead for them. Their prospects appeared poor.



CAC Wirraways in flight. The Lewis machine gun in the rear cockpit was of little use against an attacking Zero fighter

(RAAF Museum)

⁷¹ Regrettably, all but one of these four POWs perished in captivity.

The capture of Rabaul immensely strengthened the Japanese position in the South-West Pacific. With its strategic location and excellent deepwater harbour and airfields, it provided an ideal point from which to protect their vital base at Truk as well as to threaten New Guinea and the island chains of Bougainville and the Solomons to the south-east. The Coral Sea now also came within range of Japanese land-based bombers, further complicating Allied naval operations in the area. Eventually garrisoned with up to 100 000 troops, Rabaul and the island of New Britain would become a linchpin of the Japanese offensive/defensive perimeter in the Pacific.

The news for the Allies grew progressively worse. By the close of January, North Borneo and Ambon in the Dutch East Indies had fallen to the Japanese and the battered British forces in Malaya had withdrawn across the Strait of Johore to Singapore Island. Their fate was now sealed.

Wilbur described the stark situation faced by Australia and its fighting men in a letter to his parents:

Well I suppose by now you know the worst. Rabaul is taken by the Japs and although I know a dickens of a lot, we have been instructed to say absolutely nothing on paper as to the position. It looks as if we may be getting some action soon though, up here.

I am very fit, never better in my life in fact. I think the heat agrees 100% with me. I always said that Melbourne was a hole as far as the weather, the less said the better. I never get a cold now and really feel fit.

I'm afraid that my letters are going to be terribly short in future as I can't possibly say anything about what is going on, but I suppose as long as you hear I am alright, that's enough. We are living on army rations and have been for the past few days now. Not so good, but they keep you alive I suppose. Congratulate Arlette for me on her Intermediate Certificate pass and say I'm very proud of her. So glad Dad fixed up the car alright. When I come back that's one thing I will want, by Joe!

Everything is fine now as far as my clothes go, but I would like a 'GOOD' aeroplane and plenty of ammunition more than anything right now. Well,

Return to Townsville

Mother and Dad, look after yourselves and Arlette too. I will be looking forward to seeing you all again.

Love

Wilbur

PS. Have spent the last two days digging trenches and my hands are very sore, but boy am I getting tough! Wait till you see me.⁷²

There would be no let-up in the Japanese advance. On 2 February, Port Moresby suffered the first of many Japanese air attacks aimed at softening it up before a planned seaborne assault. On 8 February, Japanese forces crossed the Strait of Johore to Singapore Island and within a week the British bastion had fallen. The debacle was a devastating blow to Allied and Australian morale, with over 100 000 British Empire troops becoming prisoners of war, including some 15 000 soldiers of the Australian 8th Division.

Meanwhile, No 24 Squadron was busy rebuilding. New aircrew were arriving and the arrival of another 10 Wirraway aircraft on 5 February and two Hudsons on the 7th brought the squadron back up to strength. The Hudsons together with their 'old-hand' crews were detached to the composite Hudson squadron now based at Port Moresby under the command of Wing Commander Lerew. They would be formally transferred by the end of the month, leaving the squadron equipped only with Wirraways.

It was a busy time for Wilbur and his new companions. As well as bombing and gunnery training, they witnessed the increasingly frenetic activity at Garbutt airfield. Aircraft from other RAAF and American units were constantly staging through. These included a dozen USAAF B-17 Flying Fortresses that employed Garbutt as their base for six weeks from 18 February. On 23 February, six of these Flying Fortresses launched the first American attack on Rabaul Harbour from Northern Australia.⁷³ Although causing little damage to enemy shipping,

⁷² Wackett family files.

⁷³ By the end of March 1942, these B-17s had launched a further five raids on Rabaul as well as several on Lae, mainly against enemy shipping. Although relatively ineffective, the raids were a considerable boost to Australian morale.

they showed their defensive mettle when intercepted by Zeros over the target, claiming to shoot down four of their attackers.

Wilbur was delighted to receive a new responsibility during the month. As part of the squadron's dispersal against possible Japanese raids, he was tasked to command a squadron detachment at Bowen, some 110 miles south of Townsville. On 18 February, he led his group of five Wirraways on their flight south. A few days later, he wrote to his family about life at his new base:

Well, here I am at last away from Townsville ... We flew down after quite a bit of organising and mucking about, and after flying through the overcast arrived safely. The ground crews came down on the train the night before and were on the drome waiting to refuel the kites when we landed. Incidentally, loaded up as we were, I put down a real baby kisser. The barracks officer from Townsville came down some time ago and organised everything. All we had to do was walk in. We have taken over the local school as our headquarters and we are very comfortable. At present we are sleeping on palliasses but I am getting bunks made at the local wood shop pretty cheap. We have nets and believe me we need them – the insects here are whoppers.

I have about 40 ground crew and ten air crew with me and your little son is the 'big boss'. I am kept pretty busy, because being CO means they come to me with all their little problems, and when some of them are telling a pathetic tale it's hard to keep a straight face. You can tell when they are trying to put one over. However, on the whole they are a pretty good crowd and shouldn't give much trouble.

When we arrived we did the place over properly. We dived over in a tightly packed formation and according to the locals it looked most spectacular. Although the boys would have liked to have gone to town properly with a few hair raising stunts I kept them in check and saw them all land safely. We were laden to capacity with gear and couldn't take the risk of it shifting around in the crate when you fling them about.

This is undoubtedly the loveliest town I have ever seen. It is situated right on the water's edge and the beach is fringed with coconut palms and looks most tropical. The mossies, frogs and other wogs grow twice as big and are twice as vicious. It is frightfully hot and sticky but I revel in the heat and

Return to Townsville

love the life up here. I suppose you are in woollies down there. I bet Dad is anyway – ain't you Dad?

Thanks for the telegram, family. I received it today wishing me the best [for birthday]. The boys gave me a party and we had a real good time ... I received a lovely coloured photo from Peg for my wallet. It was taken especially for me. It's really nice.

Your loving Son

Wilbur⁷⁴

BOMBING OF DARWIN

Celebrations of Wilbur's birthday on 19 February had been cut short upon hearing Prime Minister Curtin's shocking announcement of the Japanese air attack on Darwin. Two waves of enemy naval and land-based aircraft had sunk three Allied warships and five merchant vessels in the harbour and caused devastation to Darwin's wharf and administrative area.⁷⁵ At the nearby air base, more than a dozen aircraft were destroyed, including eight USAAF Kittyhawks that were in the process of landing after a sortie towards Timor. Over 240 persons were killed in the two raids and almost 400 injured. The Australian Chiefs of Staff warned a worried Government that Japanese landings on the northern coastline could be expected within weeks.

ENGAGEMENT TO PEGGIE STEPHENSON

In the midst of these anxieties, Wilbur's new commitments in Bowen kept him thankfully busy. He also had another, unwarlike matter on his mind. He had now been separated from Peggie for over six weeks, although they kept in touch as much as possible under the difficult circumstances. She was still living with

⁷⁴ Wackett family files.

⁷⁵ The 180 Japanese naval aircraft had flown from the aircraft carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, positioned 200 miles north-west of Darwin in the Timor Sea. These ships had earlier spearheaded the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

her parents in Sydney where she had recently begun a new war-related job in a government department. At last, one evening during one of their long-distance phone calls, he 'popped the question' to Peggie and, to his delight, she accepted. Approval was soon forthcoming from her parents and Wilbur happily wrote to his mother and father on 26 February:

Well I suppose you are all anxious to hear of my engagement to Peg. I suppose it was a bit of a surprise, but life's full of surprises, isn't it? I think you, Mother, expected it sooner or later didn't you. Well I didn't see any use in waiting, I am stuck up here, Peg in Sydney and the war will last a long time yet, so I asked her and her family and there you are. It will certainly make me careful but I was always careful when flying and I can truthfully say I have never taken a foolhardy risk in the air. As for the ring, I rang Peg and asked her to select one with her mother's aid, find it in the firm's catalogue and mark it in some way and to post the page up here so I can have a look see what I'm buying. If it's OK I will wire Peg to go ahead and then send a cheque.

I received quite a number of telegrams on my birthday and appreciated them very much ... I am kept pretty busy organising things; for running a Flight as large as this is no easy job. Every chap has his own little worry and they all come to me for advice. We have all come to love this little town, the people are so good to us and we really do appreciate it, I can assure you.

It was very heartening to hear that Dad is getting some good orders. I always knew his time would come and it won't be long before Wackett aircraft will be shooting down Jap Zeros like mother shells peas. Well I must end now, for it is getting late and I have still to write to Peg. Thanks for the congratulations; I have the sweetest girl in the world. Just wait till you meet her!

Your loving Son,
Wilbur⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Wackett family files.

Return to Townsville

The ring was duly purchased and several weeks later, on Peggie's twentieth birthday on 7 April, Wilbur rang her in Sydney and asked her to slip on the ring and with that they were now officially engaged.



The happy couple

(Julie Parsons)

CHAPTER 6

ENTER THE KITTYHAWK

From early February 1942, with their unchallenged air supremacy, the Japanese had been mounting constant aerial attacks on Port Moresby and its airfield. By the end of February, the situation for the Australian garrison in the vital Allied base was looking increasingly tenuous. With continued enemy air raids and increasing naval activity at Rabaul, a Japanese assault was expected within weeks. The ground defences comprised only a brigade of troops and a limited number of anti-aircraft guns, while Allied air strength was grossly inadequate. Two reduced RAAF squadrons of Catalina flying boats (six aircraft in total) and seven Hudson bombers of No 32 Squadron provided a small reconnaissance and strike force. There was no fighter protection as all Wirraway aircraft had been withdrawn to Australia.

By mid-March, the long-suffering defenders in Port Moresby had endured 16 air raids. Flight Lieutenant Albert Church,⁷⁷ who would later become No 75 Squadron's Equipment Officer, recalled the helpless frustration of the troops on the ground:

We on the ground could only gaze at them savagely, swear and dive for a slit trench as they sailed overhead.

The only anti aircraft battery in Moresby on Tuagubu Hill did their best, but with a ceiling of 20,000 ft. the bombers at 25,000 ft. could laugh at the bursts of flak 5,000 ft. below.

... Our inability to hit back or to prevent the continual raids developed an inferiority complex that gave the enemy superhuman powers.⁷⁸

The Australian Chiefs of Staff estimated that 13 squadrons would be required at Port Moresby for the effective defence of New Guinea: four fighter, two

⁷⁷ Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) Albert Edward Church, Service No. 261678, b. 29 May 1900.

⁷⁸ A.E. Church, *They Flew Alone*, Frank Johnson Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1946, p. 44.

flying boat, two heavy bomber, two dive-bomber, one torpedo bomber and two transport units.⁷⁹ With no prospect of reinforcements from Britain and with US forces fighting for survival in the Philippines, little succour could be provided for the embattled Port Moresby garrison. However, in late March, a small but vital RAAF reinforcement would arrive in the form of a squadron of Curtiss Kittyhawks.

ARRIVAL OF KITTYHAWKS IN AUSTRALIA

The Kittyhawk P-40E was the first modern fighter to arrive in Australia during the war. Shipments from the US, initially intended for the Philippines, had begun arriving in Australian ports from late December 1941. By the start of March 1942, over 300 crated Kittyhawks had been unloaded at Brisbane and Melbourne docks and transported to the nearby RAAF aircraft depots at Amberley (No 3 Aircraft Depot) and Laverton (No 1 Aircraft Depot) for assembly. A number had been rushed to Java where, flown by USAAF pilots evacuated from the Philippines, they had acquitted themselves well against the Japanese before themselves being overwhelmed. Others were ferried to Fairbairn (Canberra), Williamtown (NSW) and Archerfield (Queensland) air bases where by mid-February three squadrons of the newly arrived US 49th Pursuit Group had begun training on the Kittyhawk. A number of Australian pilots based at these stations were also given brief opportunities to fly the new machines.

Finally in early March, the RAAF received its first consignment of these modern fighters from American stocks, and 25 were immediately allotted to No 75 Squadron that was forming at Townsville.⁸⁰ While with his No 24 Squadron detachment at Bowen, Wilbur Wackett received an early indication of this most welcome development. A letter to his parents on 26 February reveals his excitement and anticipation of better things to come:

⁷⁹ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 447.

⁸⁰ Two further Australian Kittyhawk units would also be hurriedly formed during March, namely, No 76 Squadron stationed at Archerfield, Queensland, and No 77 Squadron at Pearce, Western Australia.

Enter the Kittyhawk

I have some news that will make dad sit up and take notice. Today I went solo in a Curtiss Kittyhawk or as the Yanks call her a P-40E pursuit ship. A signal came down from Northern Area ordering Peter Wright who has his Flight at Cairns and myself to report to Squadron Leader Lansell at Townsville at ten o'clock this morning. I took off and flew to Townsville and reported.

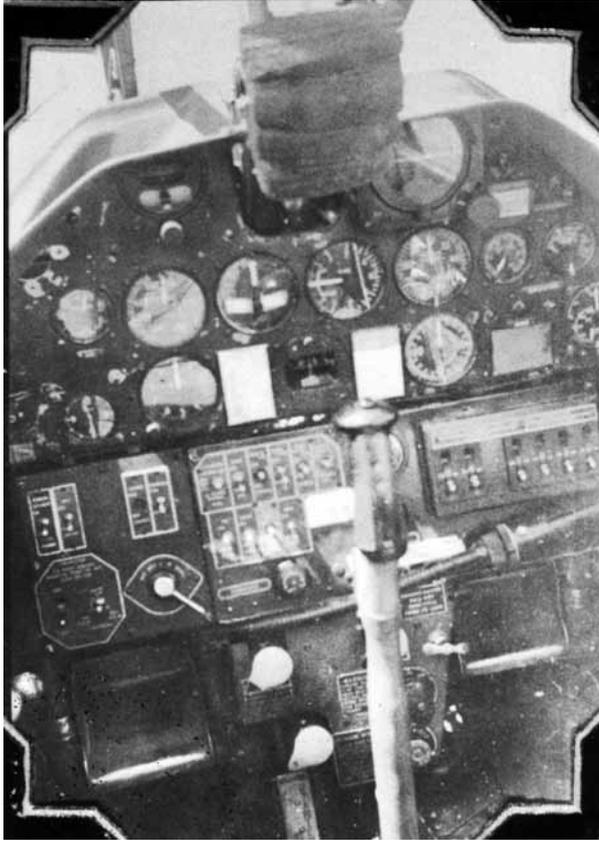
I was told that Peter and myself were to become proficient in the flying of a Kittyhawk and were to start up right away. You can imagine my surprise when he said this, for I have always wanted to have a crack at a high performance aircraft job. Squadron Leader Lansell took me up in a Wirraway and asked me to do my stuff, which I did very well. After giving me the good oil on the procedure of the Kitty, off I went and spent an hour flying about and altogether doing about four landings, the first of which was a real daisy kisser. Tomorrow I have to fly up to the 'Ville' again and get some more practice. Goodness knows what it is all about; perhaps we are going to be re-equipped or maybe they are forming an Australian Kitty fighter squadron and want me in on it. Who knows?

For dad: she is very nice to fly. Not as sensitive as a Wirraway but has tons of power. Boy do they give you a push in the back! They take, as you said in your letter, a hell of a long run but they make up for that in other qualities. My opinion is that you can build a far superior fighter Dad, than the Kittyhawk is, I also know you will do it. Anyway it was a bit of a thrill writing her up in the Log book, I felt like putting it in red ink!⁸¹

A search of No 24 Squadron records suggests that the Kittyhawk flown by Wilbur was one of a dozen US 49th Pursuit Group aircraft that arrived at Garbutt airfield from Archerfield at that time, before returning south a few days later.⁸² Within two weeks, Wilbur was delighted to learn that he would be saying farewell to the Wirraway with a posting to the nascent No 75 Squadron.

⁸¹ Wackett family files.

⁸² National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A9186, Item 51: RAAF Unit History Sheets (Form A.50) [Operations Record Book – Forms A.50 and A.51], Number 24 Squadron, Jun 40 – Dec 60, Operations Record Book entry for 27 February 1942.



Cockpit of a P-40E Kittyhawk

(RAAF)

THE CURTISS KITTYHAWK

The Australian fighter ace, Group Captain Clive Caldwell,⁸³ who claimed over 20 victories in Kittyhawks in the Middle East, similarly spoke highly of the P-40 series aircraft—the earlier Tomahawk and later Kittyhawk:

⁸³ Group Captain Clive Robertson Caldwell, DSO, DFC and Bar, Service No. 402107, b. Sydney, NSW – 28 July 1911.

Enter the Kittyhawk

I was glad to be flying them ...

... the Allison engine was honest, hard working and reliable. The fuel injection which kept it running smoothly in all attitudes was a very good feature. The aeroplane handled and turned well, gave a fair warning of the stall, recovered from a spin without fuss and in general had little vice.

In service they proved strong and rugged and would stand up to a lot of punishment from opposing fire as well as violent aerobatics. They picked up speed quickly in a dive but at steep angles of dive at high speed, considerable strength of arm and leg and/or a lot of activity with the trim gear was needed to keep control. While inferior in performance, particularly at altitude, to the Bf109 ... the Tomahawk seemed to hang on to them well in a steep or vertical dive and operating within its own altitude limitations, performed credibly in a dogfight.⁸⁴

In the hands of a competent pilot, the Kittyhawk would acquit itself well against first-class Japanese fighters such as the Mitsubishi Zero. Its six wing-mounted 0.50 inch machine guns made an excellent gun platform, delivering an impressive punch compared with the Wirraway. However, the P-40E flown by RAAF squadrons in 1942 was no match for the Zero in the climb, taking up to 12 minutes to climb to 20 000 feet. It was also less manoeuvrable and did not shine at high altitude. However, it could out-dive a Zero and outrun it at lower altitude, having a maximum speed of over 360 mph at 15 000 feet. The favoured tactic by Allied pilots in an engagement was therefore to seek a height advantage and to make a diving attack on the enemy fighter before breaking away. No 75 Squadron veteran of the New Guinea campaign, John Piper,⁸⁵ later commented:

There was little point in us trying to stay and dogfight a Zero because all that was going to happen was we would be shot down ... we had to get in and make our attack and then keep speed up and make another attack.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Clive Caldwell, quoted in Stewart Wilson, *The Spitfire, Mustang and Kittyhawk in Australian Service*, Aerospace Publications, Weston Creek, ACT, 1988, p. 130.

⁸⁵ Flight Lieutenant John Walter Wedgwood Piper, DFC, Service No. 250828, b. Armadale, Vic. – 7 May 1917.

⁸⁶ John Walter Wedgwood Piper (Flight Lieutenant), interviewed by Dr Hank Nelson for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, 21 March 1989, Australian

Kittyhawk pilots under attack also had the benefit of armour plating forward of the instrument panel and aft of the pilot's seat and head, as well as self-sealing fuel tanks, which was a level of protection not afforded their opponents. Together with its bulletproof windscreen and general rugged construction, this meant that, unlike the Zero, the Kittyhawk could survive considerable combat damage.



The rugged lines of an early RAAF Kittyhawk P-40E fighter

(RAAF Museum)

War Memorial, ID No. S00577, http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00577_tran.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011.

FORMATION OF NO 75 SQUADRON

Australia's desperate need for modern fighters was tragically highlighted on 3 March by the Japanese raid against the port of Broome (Western Australia), which was crowded with flying boats packed with refugees fleeing the Japanese invasion of the Netherlands East Indies. Devoid of fighter protection, the flying boats were easy targets for the low flying Zeros that raked them with machine-gun fire. All 16 aircraft were soon a mass of flames and sinking. Switching their attention to the nearby aerodrome, the enemy destroyed the seven aircraft present, including two American B-17 Flying Fortresses. At least 70 people, among them many women and children, perished in the conflagration. A stunned nation pondered where the enemy would next strike.

The following day (4 March), No 75 Squadron began forming at Garbutt air base under the temporary command of Squadron Leader Peter Jeffrey.⁸⁷ An experienced Kittyhawk pilot who had commanded No 3 Squadron RAAF in the Middle East, he had been tasked with coordinating the formation and training of the squadron prior to its movement to New Guinea. On 19 March he would hand over command to Squadron Leader John Jackson,⁸⁸ another experienced Kittyhawk pilot with six victories against enemy aircraft in the North African campaign.

Only two other pilots of the 25 posted to the squadron prior to its departure to Port Moresby had combat experience. Flight Lieutenant Peter Turnbull,⁸⁹ like Jackson and Jeffrey, had served with No 3 Squadron in the Middle East where he achieved 'ace' status by shooting down 10 enemy aircraft. A colourful personality, his experience had also proved invaluable to No 24 Squadron during

⁸⁷ Squadron Leader (later Group Captain) Peter Jeffrey, DSO, DFC, Service No. O35436 (145). b. Tenterfield, NSW – 6 July 1913, No 3 Squadron RAAF (CO), No 234 Wing RAAF, OC RAAF Station Bankstown, Nos 75 and 76 Squadrons RAAF, No 2 Operational Training Unit, No 1 (Fighter) Wing.

⁸⁸ Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) John Francis Jackson, DFC, Service No. 493 (270493), b. Brisbane, Qld – 23 Feb 1908, Nos 3 and 4 Squadrons RAAF, No 75 Squadron (CO), killed in action 28 April 1942.

⁸⁹ Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) Peter St George Bruce Turnbull, DFC, Service No. 481, b. Armidale, NSW – 9 February 1917, Nos 3, 75 and 76 Squadrons, killed in action 27 August 1942 when CO of No 76 Squadron in Milne Bay.

its recent trial in Rabaul. Flying Officer Bruce Anderson was another of the Wirraway pilots to survive the Rabaul debacle.

Within days of No 75 Squadron's formation, Japanese forces from Rabaul landed at Lae on the east coast of New Guinea, quickly brushing aside the small Australian garrison. Its capture provided defensive depth for Rabaul and control of the Huon Gulf. It also gave the enemy a valuable forward base from which to launch air attacks on Port Moresby or even North Queensland. Two days later, on 10 March, the Japanese landed on Bougainville and on Buka Island in the Solomons, thereby threatening Australia's lifeline from the USA.

Such was the gravity of the situation to Australia's near north, that No 75 Squadron would be thrown into action in New Guinea within the remarkable short period of two weeks from its formation. This gave the pilots little time to gain experience with their new Kittyhawk fighters nor to develop tactics and teamwork. Most, like Wilbur Wackett, had only about 10 hours flying on Kittyhawks before leaving for Port Moresby.⁹⁰ Sadly, twelve of these young men, so eager for action, would be killed during No 75 Squadron's hectic six weeks of operations in Port Moresby, while six more would not survive the war. Overall, almost two-thirds would be killed in action—an appalling statistic, perhaps unmatched in the RAAF's operations in the South-West Pacific.

The first of the new pilots arrived at RAAF Station Garbutt on 8 March when, led by Peter Jeffrey, they ferried eight Kittyhawks from Bankstown, NSW. Eleven aircraft had actually departed for the journey on 7 March, but two pilots were tragically killed when three of the Kittyhawks crashed in bad weather en route. Pilot Officer James Norton⁹¹ perished when his aircraft crashed in forested farmland near Wauchope in northern NSW and burst into flames. Pilot Officer Lloyd Holliday,⁹² who had circled the fiercely burning aircraft for a time

⁹⁰ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A1196, Item 60/501/100: Operations – 75 Squadron, Report by Flight Lieutenant Peter Turnbull to Senior Administrative Staff Office North-Eastern Area, Townsville, 30 April 1942.

⁹¹ Pilot Officer James William Norton, Service No. 411173, b. Sydney, NSW – 2 April 1915, killed in aircraft accident 7 March 1942.

⁹² Pilot Officer Lloyd Henry Holliday, Service No. 411786, b. Sydney, NSW – 7 June 1918, killed in aircraft accident 7 March 1942.

Enter the Kittyhawk

before continuing north, was killed soon after near Kempsey. One of the pilots on the ferry flight, Pilot Officer Arthur Tucker,⁹³ has recalled the problems they confronted and his good fortune in escaping the tragedy that ensued:

... we'd only flown the aeroplane four times, never in formation, and of course we hadn't done any instrument flying in it ... at that stage, we didn't have any radios ... so we couldn't communicate with one another ...

... I was flying in the starboard flight led by Norton, with O'Connor on his starboard, I was on his port ... and then, on the far left, Johnny Piper⁹⁴ had Holliday and someone else with him ... We didn't get far beyond the Hawkesbury and we started getting into the lower bits of the cloud ... And suddenly we were in cloud ... I climbed up ... and [eventually] found myself above the cloud at about 12,000 feet, and I could see a little aeroplane way ahead of me, so I thought 'company would be nice!' and I chased off after him. And after a period of probably half an hour ... I was nearly up to him and suddenly he dived down. When I got there, there was a lovely big [hole in the clouds] ... and I could see the sea underneath and him just at the bottom, so I shot down after him ... there was heavy rain ... [and] when I was within perhaps a quarter of a mile of him, I saw him put his wheels down and his flaps, turn left, and then head off into heavy rain. So I thought he looked like somebody who knew what he was doing, I might as well follow him. I came in with flaps down over the edge of an aerodrome, and the rain was so heavy, I saw the end of the runway, and I was about halfway through my landing run and suddenly hangars shot past ... we were at Evans Head and it was Johnny Piper I'd followed there.⁹⁵

It had not been an auspicious start for the nascent squadron.

⁹³ Pilot Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) Arthur Douglas Tucker, Service No. 405432. b. Brisbane, Qld – 5 Mar 1920.

⁹⁴ Flying Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) John Walter Wedgwood Piper, DFC, Service No. 250828, b. Armadale, Vic. – 7 May 1917.

⁹⁵ Arthur Douglas Tucker (Flight Lieutenant), interviewed by Edward Stokes for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, 1 June 1989, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00701, http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00701_tran.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011.

A number of pilots who had been serving with No 23 Squadron at Archerfield, including John Pettett,⁹⁶ proceeded more safely to Townsville by train: there were four of us who were posted to the squadron being formed at Townsville—Les Jackson, Jeff ‘Pop’ Woods, a fellow called ‘Bink’ Davies and myself. I had flown a Kittyhawk twice, because they were being assembled at Amberley.⁹⁷

Flying training at Garbutt on the surviving Kittyhawks began on 11 March under the supervision of Squadron Leader Jeffrey. Wilbur Wackett was formally posted to No 75 Squadron the following day. John Pettett has described the limited nature of the training that was possible in the short time available:

It wasn't really training, it was getting used to the aeroplane and ... meeting the other people – flying around as a squadron; flying around chasing somebody or having him chase you and trying to get away from him ... we fired the guns out on the beaches out of Townsville somewhere. Shadow firing ... [where] one aeroplane would fly to cast a shadow on the beach and the other aeroplane would attack the shadow with guns – with half-inch guns. But I know that I had never fired all the [six] guns. I had fired four guns at one time, only once on this shadow firing ... the first time I used the whole six guns was against a Zero.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Pilot Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) John Henry Stephen Pettett, RAAF No. 0211029 (403372), b. Sydney, NSW – 31 October 1917.

⁹⁷ John Henry Stephen Pettett (Flight Lieutenant), interviewed by Edward Stokes for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, 20 January 1989, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00515, http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00515_tran.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

Enter the Kittyhawk



Kittyhawk training at Townsville in 1942

(Australian War Memorial: 012736)



Kittyhawks practise ground strafing near Townsville, 1942

(Australian War Memorial: 012737)

Not surprisingly, there were a number of accidents during this hectic training. Wing Commander Dick Cresswell⁹⁹ who trained many RAAF pilots on the early Kittyhawks recalled: 'Overshooting, undershooting, ground loops and heavy landings were commonplace.'¹⁰⁰ Fortunately, no-one was injured at Garbutt, although three aircraft were extensively damaged.

On 16 March, Wilbur wrote to his family with the news of his transfer and of his imminent posting for combat overseas:

Well, here I am back in Townsville after nearly a month at Bowen. The signal came down ordering the whole outfit back and we arrived back in a shower of rain, so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of you ... The Station here is a hive of industry. It was the hardest job in the world to get a bed and I ended up by getting one on the verandah.

I have some news that you will probably not like very much. I have been posted from No 24 to No 75 Squadron: the first Australian 'Kitty' squadron and we are going north into the thick of it within a week. I am very lucky we have such a good aeroplane and they have proved their match for the Jap Zero.

Just before I left Bowen I received a telegram from Peg to say her Dad had arrived back in Australia and was in Adelaide. I have just finished writing to her and telling her the news. Goodness knows how she will take it. Peg has her ring on now. It cost 42 pounds ten shillings and she seems thrilled by it.

I am writing this letter under most uncomfortable conditions by the light of a shaded torch, for everything is blacked out. I cannot say where I am going, I am not too sure ... Well adios, all the best and pray I can shoot straight and have tons of luck. Too bad I couldn't have a 'Wackett Special' but a Kitty will do for a start, I guess. Look after yourself Mother and Arlette, remember I will be thinking of you all every time I go up and

⁹⁹ Wing Commander Richard 'Dick' Cresswell DFC, Service No. O383, b. Launceston, Tas. – 27 July 1920, Nos 3 and 77 Squadrons (Commanding Officer), No 1 (Fighter) Wing (Wing Leader), and No 81 Wing (Wing Leader).

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in George Odgers, *Mr Double Seven*, Air Power Development Centre, Canberra, 2008, p. 18

Enter the Kittyhawk

always while on the ground. So have the car serviceable – when ‘75’ come into the picture the war will be over in a month.¹⁰¹

The Squadron Medical Officer, Flight Lieutenant William Deane-Butcher,¹⁰² who arrived at Garbutt the following day, vividly recalled the chaotic scene as the squadron hurriedly prepared for war:

Ten or fifteen recently erected tents stood alone in a paddock a couple of miles out of town. This was it! Boxes were being unpacked. A single table and chair in the open provided an office. Lists were being checked. There were a couple of water taps at the end of a long surface pipeline. Pots simmered on an open wood stove.

Men had come from all over. Some had escaped the terrible days of 24 Squadron in Rabaul. Some were back from 3 Squadron in the Middle East. Some had been selected from training groups round Australia ...

Everyone was talking, smiling and shaking hands ... The big smiling face belonged to ‘old’ John Jackson. On arrival in Port Moresby he was to be our commanding officer. His deep friendly voice held a lot in reserve. He was older than most of us. He was 34 and it seemed natural that he should command.

‘Great to have you with us Doc.’¹⁰³

That evening, Wilbur joined an expectant group of squadron officer pilots and senior ground staff gathered with John Jackson in a corner of the lounge of the beachfront Strand Hotel. Bill Deane-Butcher has again painted the scene:

John bought us a round of drinks, leaned forward, and outlined his plan. Secrecy was essential. Only a few days could be allowed for training. Planes and weapons had to be serviced, stores checked and medical fitness confirmed. Many ground staff were already on the way to New Guinea by

¹⁰¹ Wackett family files

¹⁰² Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) William Deane-Butcher, RAAF Medical Officer, Service No. 0211379 (261286), b. 24 December 1913.

¹⁰³ W. Deane-Butcher, *Fighter Squadron Doctor: 75 Squadron RAAF, New Guinea, 1942*, revised edition, self-published, Killara, NSW, 1990, pp. 19–21.

Lost Without Trace

Flying Boat. They would set up camp near the narrow airstrip seven miles from Port Moresby.¹⁰⁴

The die was cast—they would soon be on their way to an uncertain future.



Map 6.1: Map of Papua and New Guinea and New Britain (Rabaul)

(From Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 450)

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p. 21.

CHAPTER 7

TO NEW GUINEA IN KITTYHAWKS

On 17 March 1942, an advance party of 33 ground staff from No 75 Squadron flew from Townsville to Seven Mile airfield, Port Moresby. Reporting to Flight Lieutenant Church, they commenced the task of setting up a kitchen and erecting tentage. They would soon receive a welcome from the Japanese, as recalled by Leading Aircraftman John Vella:

We had about half the tents up when a Zero came over the first one. He was only at about 1,000 feet up, and I could see the pilot clearly. I think he was trying to figure out if the tents were native huts or whatever. I decided to have a shot at him but one of the non-commissioned officers reprimanded me with 'You mad bastard, you're going to get us all killed,' so I didn't fire.¹⁰⁵

Back in Townsville, the air party began the move to Port Moresby on 19 March with the flight of two Kittyhawks to Cooktown. The following day, Wilbur Wackett was among the 16 pilots who departed Townsville to join them. The Squadron Medical Officer, William Deane-Butcher, recalled their departure: 'they were seen to buzz the control tower and all were gone. There was a strange quiet.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Leading Aircraftman (later Sergeant) John Vella, Service No. 25197, b. Malta – 24 June 1919. Quoted in David J. Wilson, *Seek and Strike: No 75 Squadron RAAF 1942–2002*, Banner Books, Maryborough, Qld, 2002, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Deane-Butcher, *Fighter Squadron Doctor*, p. 23.



The primitive Seven Mile airfield at Port Moresby in early 1942 (Rabaul)

(RAAF Museum)

The Kittyhawks were tasked to stay overnight at Cooktown before staging via Horn Island to Port Moresby. With Japanese fighters now active in the Torres Strait, they would have to be on the alert. On 14 March, 8 Nell bombers and 9 Zeros had mounted the first enemy raid on Horn Island, at the tip of Cape York Peninsula, and as recently as the 18th, up to 20 Zeros had been sighted near Horn and Thursday Islands. With keen anticipation, No 75 Squadron's complement of 18 Kittyhawks took off from Cooktown on the morning of 21 March, arriving safely at Horn Island where they refuelled for the final 400-mile leg to Port Moresby.

Wilbur and three other pilots, Peter Jeffrey, Peter Turnbull and Flying Officer Barry Cox,¹⁰⁷ would have the distinction of being the first Australian pilots to fly Kittyhawks fighters to Port Moresby. Taking off from Horn Island near midday,

¹⁰⁷ Flying Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) Barry Mortimer Cox, Service No. 260706, b. Summer Hill, NSW – 9 October 1915, Nos 4 and 75 Squadrons, killed in action 28 April 1942.

some two hours before the main party, the formation flew north-east across the Gulf of Papua, arriving at Port Moresby around 2 pm. As they came in low over the reef protecting the harbour, the Kittyhawks were spotted by delighted garrison troops and identified as they circled the Port Moresby beacon. However, due to communication problems and an unfortunate earlier incident, their reception at Seven Mile airfield would be far from welcoming.

Their arrival had been anticipated at the aerodrome on the previous day. Consequently, when a flight of four fighters was seen at the expected time approaching at low level, they were assumed to be the long awaited Kittyhawks and many airfield personnel ran out waving a welcome. However, the aircraft were Japanese Zeros who proceeded to strafe the airfield, fortunately causing no casualties. The army gunners defending Seven Mile airfield, having endured weeks of enemy aerial attacks, were therefore understandable edgy when Wilbur and his three companions appeared on 21 March.

One anti-aircraft post, soon followed by others, opened up on them as they approached the runway. The firing did not stop until the first aircraft, piloted by Turnbull, had actually landed and the mistake was realised. All aircraft were struck, Peter Jeffery having a narrow escape from death when a bullet came within an inch of his head as it passed through his headrest. No 75 Squadron's combat history had nearly begun with tragedy.

One of the Kittyhawks was written off. Fortunately two of the less damaged fighters were repaired when less than two hours later (at 3.50 pm) a report was received of the approach of a Japanese bomber on a regular reconnaissance flight. Unaware of the presence of Allied fighters at Port Moresby, the enemy crew were in for an unpleasant surprise.

FIRST BLOOD

The two serviceable Kittyhawks had been flown in by Wilbur Wackett and Barry Cox, so they were immediately ordered to intercept. They raced to their aircraft and took off. Unseen by the enemy aircrew who were accustomed to meeting no opposition, the pair climbed through cloud to 10 000 feet and closed on the Ki-21 Sally from astern. In an initial pass Cox fired a burst into

the bomber's port engine, putting it out of action. The bomber's fate was sealed when seconds later Wilbur fired a long burst into its starboard engine. Wilbur and Cox watched as it plunged earthwards and exploded at about 500 feet before falling into the sea near the entrance to Port Moresby Harbour. Both without previous combat experience, they had scored the squadron's first 'kill' and the first destruction of a Japanese aircraft in aerial combat by the RAAF over Australian territory.

The effect on the Port Moresby garrison troops who witnessed this aerial combat was electric. After suffering months of attacks by Japanese aircraft, the sight of the enemy bomber 'streaming straight down the sky with a ribbon of white smoke behind it' and crashing in flames in the harbour caused spontaneous celebrations. One of the eye witnesses has recorded the reaction of the troops on the ground:

We onlookers fell on one another's necks, howling hysterically with joy. For miles around, men found that they had business at the airfield. They came roaring up the road on lorries, cheering and laughing. They stopped, poured out of the vehicles, and stood staring with a mixture of awe and disbelief at the fighters on the ground.¹⁰⁸

Wilbur was less buoyant about his victory, as described in a letter written to his fiancée several weeks later telling her of his reaction to his aerial victory:

It was a terrible sight to see – an aircraft carrying I suppose a crew of six crash into the sea in flames, but such things have to be done. I felt a bit crook inside for it was the first time I had been in action and to have killed so many men did not make me feel too good. I had the honour of being the first pilot of the squadron to shoot down an enemy aircraft. Everyone was very excited and full of congratulations.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 548, from Osmar White, *Green Armour*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1945, p. 58.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Wilbur Wackett to his fiancée, Peggie Stephenson, 29 March 1942. Copied with kind permission from Julie Parsons.

HATCHING A SURPRISE FOR THE ENEMY

Seven Mile airfield was still abuzz with excitement when Squadron Leader John Jackson arrived an hour later from Horn Island with the remaining 13 Kittyhawks. Delighted with the news and buoyed by this emphatic start to his squadron's operations, Jackson determined to follow up the success with an attack the following morning on the Japanese airfield at Lae. It was from there that the enemy had been launching most of their regular raids on Port Moresby. Recent photo reconnaissance had revealed the presence of some 30 fighters and bombers lined up wingtip to wingtip on Lae airfield—a most tempting target. Jamming of radio transmissions from the ill-fated Sally bomber made it likely that the enemy was still unaware of the arrival of the RAAF Kittyhawks.

That evening, following a Catalina flight from Australia and a rough truck ride over the winding road from the harbour, the Squadron Medical Officer, William Deane-Butcher, arrived at the squadron's primitive camp at Seven Mile airfield:

Carrying our kitbags, we followed our guide in the darkness down a steep slope, stumbling over rocks in a creek bed and climbing again through shoulder high grass to a large tent containing benches and bare wooden tables. Flickering lamps provided our first glimpse of home. There was a cup of tea and an enormous smile from a sweating, bare chested cook who emerged from his pots and pans to bid us welcome.

The pilots had already dined on bully beef and beans and sat about talking quietly. I caught up with the news of the day. As the first four pilots (Jeffrey, Cox, Wackett and Turnbull) touched down on the runway, they had been met by machine gun fire. The aircraft were damaged but there were no injuries ...

Information announcing the Squadron's arrival had not reached the army gunners who had mistaken the Australian Kittyhawks for enemy aircraft ... Cox and Wackett had shot down an unsuspecting Japanese reconnaissance plane and the secrecy of the Squadron's arrival in New Guinea had been preserved.

Further up the slope a lamp glowed through the flap of a tent and John Jackson's deep voice could be heard bidding 'goodnight' to the Flight Commanders. The plan was set for an attack at dawn.

Directions were passed along to the other pilots who then dispersed along tracks to their tents. For a brief time lights glowed then all was dark.

... The dark in the bush is really dark. It was terribly quiet now.¹¹⁰

However, not everyone found the night so peaceful, as pilot John Pettett has recalled:

... so we arrived at Moresby ... and the first night we were there I know it poured down, it was a torrential tropical storm, and there were three other guys and myself in this tent and we spent most of the night digging trenches around it to side-track the water ... all our gear we had in kit bags ... when we got into these tents, well the cots were set up – no pillows, just straw palliasses on wire cots. We had blankets but no sheets of course. And we spent most of the night digging ditches to keep our gear fairly dry.¹¹¹

SHOT DOWN

All would be unceremoniously woken the next morning, as Deane-Butcher again relates:

On 22nd March just before dawn, a dreadful din shattered the darkness. I was on my feet, with eyes wide open, fighting to get free of the [mosquito] net, grasping for my torch and knife. It was the cook. A sheet of galvanised iron was slung from a nearby tree. The cook was bashing it with an iron bar, shouting at the top of his voice ‘Come and get it, bugger yers.’ Breakfast was served.

Figures began to emerge from tents scattered between stunted gum trees across the hillside. They converged in the half light down the trails through the kunai grass to the mess tents ... Takeoff must be at first light as we aimed to hit them hard before they found out about our presence in New Guinea ...

¹¹⁰ Deane-Butcher, *Fighter Squadron Doctor*, pp. 24–26.

¹¹¹ Pettett, interviewed by Edward Stokes for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00515.

To New Guinea in Kittyhawks

My immediate job was to drive some of the pilots down a rough dirt track to their dispersed Kitties. They scrambled into the back of my truck, clutching flying helmets, throat microphones, revolvers, maps, etc. Aircraft were dispersed along the side of the runway with ground crew standing by. One could sense their dedication. Work had been going on all night checking and rechecking ...

The dawn was shattered by the sound of engines. Several aircraft were ready for take off from the west. To my dismay I noted one lining up for take off from the east. This would place it on a collision course. The pilot must have been aware of the imminent crash as he swung to the right. His aircraft was further deflected by a mound of blue metal crashing through the low scrub and coming to rest with a buckled undercarriage and extensive wing damage. Ted Church, the equipment officer, was with me in the truck and we sped off to the rescue ...

We dragged 'Cocky' Brereton¹¹² unconscious from the wreck before it caught fire. He was small, wiry, intelligent and provocative. We became good friends ...

With a flurry of dust the remaining aircraft taxied for take-off, then a final roar and they were gone. Nine Kittyhawks took part in that first raid on Lae.¹¹³

The nine remaining aircraft, each carrying a belly tank of extra fuel, took off at 6.30 am. With Brereton's aircraft 'burning on the side of the aerodrome' it 'wasn't a very cheery sort of departure.'¹¹⁴ Climbing to 6000 feet over Port Moresby, the Kittyhawks divided into two sections for the 200-mile flight to Lae. One group of five aircraft led by John Jackson was tasked to carry out the ground strafing of Lae airfield. Wilbur Wackett, flying Kittyhawk 'F': A29-6, was in the section of four led by Peter Turnbull who would act as 'top cover' to prevent

¹¹² Flying Officer (later Squadron Leader) John Le Gay Brereton, Service No. 260697, b. Old Junee, NSW – 22 December 1919, Nos 75, 20, 11 and 38 Squadrons.

¹¹³ Deane-Butcher, *Fighter Squadron Doctor*, pp. 26–29.

¹¹⁴ Piper, interviewed by Dr Hank Nelson for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00577. Although Piper states that it was 'Cocky' Reardon who crashed before take-off, this is incorrect. The 75 Squadron Unit History Sheet entry for 22 March 1942 confirms that it was Flying Officer Brereton.

interception by enemy fighters. Also in this cover team were John Pettett and Flight Lieutenant Les Jackson,¹¹⁵ the younger brother of the CO.

The formation climbed to 14 000 feet and crossed over the imposing Owen Stanley Range as the sun began to rise, then descended to the coast south of Salamaua. As they approached Lae airfield across the Huon Gulf it was just 8 am. Diving through the broken cloud base at 1000 feet, the strafing pilots were delighted to see the airfield crammed with aircraft—they had caught the enemy napping.

The Kittyhawks swept along the length of the runway at low level, spraying the rows of parked aircraft with machine-gun fire. Enemy aircraft burst into flames below them. So low was their pass over the aerodrome that the Kittyhawk piloted by John Piper struck the propeller of a parked aircraft. One of his machine guns was torn out of a wing and the main spar severely damaged. He later remarked: ‘... that was where a P-40 was excellent because with that [the damage] it just didn’t show any trouble at all with it.’¹¹⁶

With the enemy clearly caught by surprise, John Jackson boldly led his section around for a second strafing run over the airfield that was now a scene of blazing aircraft and dense smoke. Completing their run, they estimated that nine enemy fighters and three enemy bombers had been destroyed, and five others damaged.¹¹⁷ Well pleased with their handiwork, the strafing pilots were turning for home when a number of Zeros that had apparently been on standing patrol suddenly made an unwelcome appearance.

Diving from 10 000 feet, they intercepted the ‘top cover’ Kittyhawks at about 6500 feet. On a signal from Turnbull, Wilbur and the other cover pilots jettisoned their belly tanks and engaged the enemy. The Zeros split up and

¹¹⁵ Squadron Leader (later Wing Commander) Leslie Douglas Jackson, DFC and Bar, Service No. 270520, b. Brisbane, Qld – 24 February 1917, Nos 453 and 23 Squadrons, No 75 Squadron (Commanding Officer), and No 78 (Fighter) Wing (Wing Leader).

¹¹⁶ Piper, interviewed by Dr Hank Nelson for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, Australian War Memorial, ID No. S00577.

¹¹⁷ Lae airfield also received attacks that day from two No 32 Squadron Hudsons (staging through Port Moresby from Horn Island) and American B-17s from Townsville, destroying further aircraft and exploding an ammunition dump.

broke away downwards. Turnbull was able to get on the tail of one and quickly sent it down in flames, bringing his tally of victories to ten. Another Zero was accounted for by John Pettett. However, two Kittyhawks were lost in the brief engagement: A29-6 flown by Wilbur Wackett and A29-16 piloted by Bruce Anderson. Their fate was uncertain, with John Jackson reporting soon after:

... F/O. W. WACKETT ... was not seen again by any of our aircraft and it is not yet known what part he played in the combat ... F/L. P.B. TURNBULL, who was leading the four aircraft acting as 'top cover' noticed one of the Zeros attack one of our ground strafing [sic] aircraft piloted by F/O. WOODS, who however was not hit and he also noticed one of our aircraft to be out of control and turn over on its side and dive downwards with smoke streaming from it towards a hill near Lae, but F/L. TURNBULL is unable to say whether this aircraft was hit by an enemy fighter or by anti aircraft fire.

... F/L. TURNBULL did not see anybody bale out of his aircraft nor can he identify the aircraft, but says that the aircraft appeared to be definitely out of control as if the Pilot were hit; the aircraft was at a very low height approx. 1,000 ft. when it appeared out of control and was lagging behind the other four aircraft that had done the ground strafing [sic] ... Position is on the coast about six miles South West of LAE ... The only reason for thinking this was F/L. ANDERSON's aircraft is that he occupied the position where F/L. ANDERSON should have been in the formation except that it was well behind and it is unlikely that F/O. WACKETT would have got into this position.¹¹⁸

Back at Seven Mile airfield in Port Moresby, squadron members anxiously awaited the return of the Kittyhawks. Flight Lieutenant Albert Church was one of them:

¹¹⁸ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A1196, Item 60/501/100: Operations – 75 Squadron, Report by Squadron Leader Jackson to RAAF Headquarters, Melbourne – 'Confirmatory Report – Casualty Signal A1. Dated 22nd March 1942 Vide A.B.O. A24/42; 30 March 1942.

It was an anxious time, those of us who were left at the strip couldn't settle to anything, but by 9 o'clock the drone of aircraft and swift moving black specks in the sky proclaimed the fighters' return.

Would they all come back? It was the unspoken question in all our minds. As the dots became visible aircraft, every pair of glasses was turned on them in an endeavour to pick out the large white letter that was painted on the fuselage of each plane.

As the planes circled the drome we could only count seven—two of our aircraft had not returned.

'Who were they?' The letter A, the C.O.'s machine, was first recognised, then B, E & Y; T & X came low over the strip and we knew that Piper, Cox, Woods, Turnbull and Les Jackson were all right—N was the last to land, and we crowded around Sergeant Pettit [sic] for news of Anderson and Wackett.

He had little to report, he had seen Wackett break formation and attack a Zero and then lost him in clouds, but there was no news of Anderson.

By this time we knew definitely that neither could get back as, even with the extra fuel tank that the Kittyhawk carried slung like a bomb under their fuselage, their petrol would have given out half an hour ago ...

The loss of Wackett and Anderson was keenly felt, and with Brereton in hospital the squadron's ranks had been thinned by three in the first day.¹¹⁹

Four days later the squadron received the joyful news that Wilbur Wackett had survived. After being shot down over Lae, he had managed to avoid the Japanese and made his way through the jungle-clad mountains to the mining township of Wau. Albert Church recalled the excitement this revelation engendered: 'Everyone was highly elated at the news and it considerably bucked up the pilots by showing them that even if shot down there was a good chance of escape.'¹²⁰

Regrettably, no more was heard of Bruce Anderson and he was assumed killed in action. However, postwar investigations suggest that he survived the

¹¹⁹ Church, *They Flew Alone*, p. 54.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p. 57.

crash of his Kittyhawk. Unfortunately, unlike Wilbur, he was soon captured by the Japanese and taken to Rabaul where he was later brutally murdered by his captors.¹²¹ It was a tragic end for a brave young Australian pilot. His CO from recent Rabaul days with No 24 Squadron, Wing Commander Lerew, described him as 'an outstanding example of a Flight Commander in charge of a fighter flight' and 'one of the most charming young blokes I've ever known; so full of enthusiasm and so keen to have a go at the Japs; nothing would stop him.'¹²²

Details of what had befallen Wilbur in the air battle over Lae would not become known until four weeks later when he reported back to No 75 Squadron in Port Moresby after a remarkable story of survival:

When we arrived over the target we could see our strafing aircraft go in to attack the aerodrome. No enemy aircraft could be seen in the air. We were in tight fighter formation at 6,000 feet when the order to drop belly tanks was given and Flight Lieutenant Turnbull, DFC, leading the top cover formation, wagged his wings and dropped his belly tank.

Straight ahead and 2,000 feet below us, I could see six Japanese Zero fighters peeling off from formation and diving on our strafing aircraft. We all dropped our belly tanks and dived to attack the enemy aircraft. While in the dive I tested my guns and switched my reflector sight on and all seemed satisfactory. However, the gun sight failed a second or so later, probably due to a fuse blowing.¹²³

I picked out a Zero and made a beam attack, giving him a long burst from one gun. The others had evidently failed. I could see my tracer enter his port wing, about five feet in from the wing tip and near his national marking. At approximately two hundred yards I broke away and

¹²¹ McAulay, *We Who Are About to Die*, p. 88; and 'The Warbird's Forum – Japan at War, 1931–1945 – The Prisoners of Rabaul', <http://www.warbirdforum.com/prisoner.htm>, accessed 1 September 2011.

¹²² John Lerew in McAulay, *We Who Are About to Die*, pp. 189 and 191

¹²³ This fault with the electric reflector gun sight was not uncommon with No 75 Squadron's early Kittyhawks, as reported by Peter Turnbull to the Senior Administrative Staff Officer, North-Eastern Area, Townsville, on 30 April 1942, see National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A1196, Item 60/501/100: Operations – 75 Squadron, 30 April 1942. Wilbur would have had to employ a back-up ring and bead sight fitted in front of the windscreen.

commenced a steep climbing turn to the right, and the next thing I knew was that I was being fired upon, for bullets were entering the cockpit and wings. One bullet struck my wristwatch and I was covered in horse-hair, which was probably the padding of the head rest. I could hear bullets hitting the back of my armour plate [seat].

I pushed the throttle open and dived down steeply. My engine was then hit by a burst of fire and started to smoke badly from the exhaust. I looked behind me and I could not see the enemy, so I pulled out of my dive and half-rolled. While on my back I saw a large cloud below and dived steeply into it. While flying on instruments I attempted to keep the engine revolutions up by use of the electric propeller control and by switching to another tank and turning on the emergency fuel pump.

However, the motor completely stopped and I emerged from the cloud at 1,000–1,500 feet, just in time to see two Japanese Zeros crash into the sea in flames, near the mouth of the Bwang River.¹²⁴ They continued to burn after they hit the water. Natives subsequently told me that both pilots of these Zeros were killed.

By this time I was over eight miles from land and approximately half way between Lae and Salamaua. When I saw I was so far from land, I did a steep turn and headed for the nearest point. I did not glide very far as the P-40 has rather a steep gliding angle. I opened my sliding hood and crash-landed the aircraft on the water with wheels and flaps up. Just before striking the water, I covered my face with my hands and braced my legs against the rudder pedals. The aircraft struck the water at 100 mph indicated airspeed and sank almost immediately.¹²⁵

A brief account of his last hectic minutes in Kittyhawk A29-6 was also related by Wilbur to Peggie in a letter written two weeks after the event:

¹²⁴ The more common spelling is Buang River. In his report in the 75 Squadron Operations Record Book, March 1942 (see footnote 21), Wackett spells it as the Bwong River.

¹²⁵ National Archives of Australia: A9186, Item 95: Operations Record Book (Forms A.50 and A.51), 75 Squadron [Unit History Sheets], 1942–1961, Operations Record Book entry March 1942, Appendix 1. Further detail added from a report written by Wilbur after his return to Australia—original copy held by Arlette Perkins (née Wackett).

To New Guinea in Kittyhawks

I put some good bursts into a chap but he would not go down. We were outnumbered and soon one of ours crashed in flames. Two got on my tail and after I tried to shake them off, my engine was hit and I knew the game was up. I was well out to sea and tried to get the engine going again, but in vain. Black smoke poured from it and finally after losing a lot of height I crashed into the sea about ten miles from shore.

I braced myself as I hit the water. I went under about ten feet with the aircraft. I undid my safety belt and came up to the surface just in time to see two enemy aircraft crash in flames. According to the old wristwatch it was ten to eight. I took off my boots, helmet and parachute and ... blew up my Mae West life jacket and proceeded to swim with a steady breaststroke. I was worried as to whether I would be taken prisoner or taken by sharks, or if seen by an enemy aircraft shot at while swimming.¹²⁶

With a cut forehead as well as numerous cuts and scratches, Wilbur stopped to unroll his sleeves and pull up his socks in the hope that this would make him less noticeable to sharks. His 'heart skipped a beat' when he looked up to see a large shark break the surface about 50 yards away. Fortunately, it came no closer and Wilbur continued swimming for the nearest point of land:

I wondered whether or not to discard my revolver and water bottle as they were weighing me down. However, I decided to leave them on as I was swimming right into Japanese held territory, half way between Lae and Salamaua. If I did make the distance I felt sure that I would be taken prisoner. I saw several more sharks, one came very close, so I took out my revolver and just lay still on my back and watched him cruising around me ... then he disappeared and I continued swimming.

The sun was very hot ... my mouth was sore from the salt and my eyes were stinging. Every now and then I would turn over on my back and have a rest, only to find I had drifted far off my course. So I found that resting was useless as the energy used to regain my former position was more than that gained from the rest. Later on I could see a native village on the shore, so I changed course a little and headed towards it ... I was swimming for

¹²⁶ Letter from Wilbur Wackett to his fiancée, Peggie Stephenson, 29 March 1942. Copied with kind permission from Julie Parsons.

Lost Without Trace

about eight or nine hours, and after this my strokes were very weak. When about two hundred yards from the shore I could see two natives standing beside a canoe and pointing towards me. However, they walked back in the direction of the village. Not until I was ten yards from the shore could I touch bottom and I staggered over the rocky sea bottom and sat on the sand ...¹²⁷

Against the odds, he had survived. But Wilbur was now faced with the peril of capture by Japanese troops who frequented the area and the daunting prospect of somehow making his way 300 miles back to Port Moresby through jungle, swamps and over the 10 000-foot barrier of the rugged Buang Mountains, part of the Owen Stanley Range.

¹²⁷ From report written by Wilbur after his return to Australia. Original held by Arlette Perkins, and copy in files of Hawker de Havilland Historic Project Group.

CHAPTER 8

AN EPIC JOURNEY

Exhausted from his swim to shore and still dazed by the events of the last few hours, Wilbur rested for a time on the beach and pondered the challenging task ahead of him:

The sun was very hot and after a drink from my water bottle I got up and commenced to walk northwards along the beach to Busamo village ... I walked into the outskirts of the village, still with my Mae West on, and several women screamed when they saw me and rushed into their houses.¹²⁸

A few men appeared, one of whom spoke English, who led Wilbur into the village. He was met by the chief of the tribe to whom he indicated in sign language and fractured English that he wished to be taken to the nearest white man and not to be seen by Japanese soldiers. There followed an argument between the tribesmen, the nature of which he was unaware at the time. It concluded with two natives leading him back to the beach. They would be Wilbur's constant companions over the next four days during which they guided and assisted him over the Owen Stanley Range at the start of an epic crossing of Papua from the Huon Gulf to the Gulf of Papua (see Map 8.1):

One carried two army biscuits which he handed me saying: 'He altogether plenty good fella Kai-Kai.' By which he meant it was good food. I munched these as we walked northwards along the beach. It was terribly hot and my cuts were getting stiff and sore. My socks were worn out and I was forced to walk with bare feet. The two natives cheered me up by saying there were plenty of Japanese soldiers around where we were. However, whenever they saw or heard anything suspicious they made sure I was well concealed.

¹²⁸ From report written by Wilbur Wackett after his return to Australia. Original handwritten report held by Arlette Perkins (née Wackett). A description of Wilbur's trek, based on this report and titled 'He Altogether Long Way', appeared in 1942 in the Australian War Memorial publication, *These Eagles: Story of the R.A.A.F. at War*, pp. 178–183.

We waded several rivers and I soon found out it was useless to ask them how far we had to go, for I always got the same reply: 'Ah, Masta, he altogether long way – too much!' About 6 pm we came to the mouth of the Buang River and then turned inland away from the Huon Gulf. This gave me the feeling that at last I was leaving Japanese occupied territory. We continued along the track by the river bank, through very thick tropical growth, and commenced to climb slowly. The ground was wet and soggy and as it was dark, I asked one of the natives, whose name was Tawnie, to walk ahead, as he had a white Lap-Lap or skirt, so I could follow through the dark jungle track. After a good six hours' solid walking we reached a deserted village called Lega, where we stayed the night. Sleep was practically impossible, for it rained heavily during the night and the roof leaked badly, so we just sat up and waited for the dawn.

We had Kai-Kai of coconuts and paw-paw, and about 5 am continued on our way. Soon we arrived at what appeared to have been an observation post, for the ground was littered with empty bottles and cigarette packets. The Buang River stretched below us and the waters of the Huon Gulf could be seen from Lae to Salamaua. We then continued climbing up the mountain range. The ground was very wet and thick vines made progress very slow. At noon we had a rest, and as we had nothing to eat we continued. Then we entered the leech country. They would fasten on to one's toes and suck blood, and it wasn't long before we were covered in them and we had to stop and scrape them off with sticks. My feet were sore enough as it was, without leeches biting my toes.

At about six o'clock that evening I was practically done in. We had climbed all day and it had been hard going, but Tawnie said we could not stay in the jungle, we must go on to the next camp. As we rounded a bend we met a native carrying a drum and on seeing us he started to tap out a message. He was answered by another drum in the distance. He then disappeared in the bushes. After walking for another hour we entered the outskirts of a large native village called Mapos. As I was staggering along, still carrying my faithful Mae West, I was confronted by six powerfully built warriors with drawn bows and arrows aimed straight at my chest. Tawnie, on seeing this, jumped forward and explained I was a friend and not a Japanese soldier. They lowered their weapons and escorted me to a hut.

An Epic Journey

Here I was met by the Tool-Tool (the hereditary village chief), Lului (appointed by the Administration) and the 'doctor' who wore an impressive peaked cap with a Red Cross badge. He gave me some sticking plaster for my cuts and made sure I was comfortable. The Lului returned with a packet of rice bubbles that some English soldiers had given him, and with great ceremony gave them to me. I had by now acquired the name of 'Captain belon Balus' which means 'Captain of Aeroplane'. A fire was started and yams and kow-kow (like sweet potato) were cooked in hot ashes until black. In the distance drums were beating and the chant of voices could be heard. It was bitterly cold and I later learned that the elevation of this village was 10,000 feet. We had climbed to this height in about twelve walking hours. After finishing some yams and kow-kow, we went into the hut and tried to get some sleep. It was bitterly cold even with a fire, so we all cuddled up together and had a reasonable night's sleep. All night the drums were beating and the chanting continued.

At dawn I was sleeping soundly, but was roughly awakened by Tawnie who seemed very nervous. He said: 'Balus belon Shapan, he come up along house Kanaka, quick time.' I didn't know exactly what he meant, so I drew my revolver in case it was a Japanese patrol after me. However, I could soon hear the drone of an aeroplane, but it passed away without coming into view. We continued down the track to the centre of the village. The drums and chanting grew louder, until finally we walked right into a 'Sing-Sing.' The women were providing the music on Condu, and the men were dancing around a fire and chanting wildly. All carried a bow and a dozen arrows and their bodies were painted in the wildest designs. Some wore beautiful head-dresses made from the plumes of the bird of paradise and looked most impressive.

We continued walking down the track. My feet were very sore and it was a pleasant sight for me to see that for some time we would be walking down-hill. The track led down to the Snake River which stretched along a valley far below us. When we finally reached the river we followed it downstream. We crossed and recrossed the swiftly flowing stream numerous times, climbed round some steep gorges as the river wound its way through the rugged country. Swamps held up our progress and often we were wading up to our waists in foul-smelling mud. The night was spent in such a swamp. The evil-smelling slush and the millions of

Lost Without Trace

mosquitoes made sleep impossible. We stretched out on some banana leaves and Tawnie, seeing I was troubled by my legs, sat up all night and massaged them.

At dawn we had breakfast of yams and continued to follow the river. After another hour we started to climb a hill covered in Kunai, a grass similar to sword grass. It was terribly hot and hard going. At about noon we came to a hut where a 'Bush Kanaka' lived, who gave me a tin of Capstan cigarettes. He spoke English reasonably well and told me we had another four of five hours walk before we could reach Bulwa.

We continued walking and about three o'clock we reached Baiune power house. It was completely deserted. We were now following the Bulolo River and evidence of the mining days could be seen in pipes and dredges lying idle by the banks. As we rounded a bend in the river we could see the houses of Bulwa in the distance. We soon were walking along a 'made' road, and then, to my joy, along came a motor truck driven by a soldier. After I had explained who I was, he took me to the settlement of Sunshine Gold Development Ltd which was occupied by the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, an organisation formed by the miners of peacetime days.



(From *These Eagles*)

After a clean up I was put to bed and my wounds dressed. Tawnie insisted on coming into my room to see me, and it was here that I learned what the argument at Busamo village had been about. Lieutenant Nobblett acted as interpreter. It appears that all members of the tribe agreed that I should be handed over to the Japanese. The Japanese had shown the village what they would do if the tribe displeased them, so they were acting under fear of the Japanese soldiers. The two natives that helped me were not from this particular village, and so were not obliged to fall in with the wishes of the Lului. I was extremely fortunate in meeting these two, and they were suitably rewarded.¹²⁹

After bidding farewell to his rescuers, Wilbur recuperated for a week in the Goldfields. He was then taken by lorry to Wau from where he departed with a group under the command of Lieutenant Fegent¹³⁰ to trek back to Port Moresby. They took only limited food supplies as they had been informed that there were food dumps on the way. However, after walking for eight hours to Kudjeru the expected supplies did not eventuate. Desperately short of food, the party struggled on slowly for a further two days to the village of Water Baun while the carriers were sent back to Wau for food supplies. By good fortune, after a few days a small, well-equipped party under Lieutenant Warner-Shand arrived.

He asked me to join his party which I accepted and we left at dawn. The track led down a deep gorge and through very wild country, but we made very good progress, and spent the night at House Karooka. Next morning we set off early and about six o'clock that night we reached Dead Chinaman's Camp, where we camped for the night. Next night we reached Bulldog on the Tiveri River [an eight-hour trek]. Here canoes and native crews were available and next morning, paddled by Papuans, we set off down the river to Terapo Mission. It took us about twelve hours to cover sixty miles, and this brought us within twelve miles of the [west] coast. After about an hour's paddling we entered the Lakekamu River which

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Lieutenant Herbert Lindsay Fegent, Australian Army, Service No. NGX254, b. Windsor, Vic. – 2 October 1905, Pacific Islands Regiment.

abounded in crocodiles. No one took a shot at them. At about ten o'clock that night we arrived at Terapo Mission.

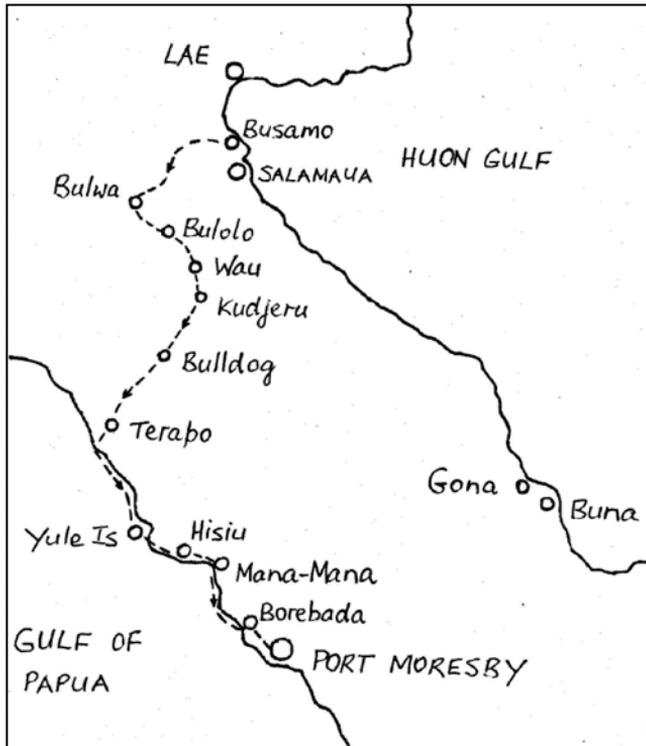
Good news awaited them the next morning for a launch was made available to take them to Yule Island. Setting out at eight, they reached the mouth of the Lakekamu in an hour. However, after crossing the bar they met very rough seas and were forced to anchor for the night. By next morning the seas had calmed and, after a 15 hour voyage south-east along the coast, arrived at the Government station on the island where they were welcomed by the District Magistrate. While awaiting the expected arrival of a mail boat upon which they hoped to complete the last 150 miles of their journey to Port Moresby, Wilbur suffered the first of what would become recurring bouts of sickness and was forced to spend several days in bed. Finally, with the long overdue schooner still not making an appearance after five days, the group decided to walk the rest of the way:

We were taken to the mainland in canoes and, complete with carriers, set off for the village of Lari. Here we rested and continued on the way to Oroki Plantation. We were met by a motor truck and conveyed to Hisui Village. This was as far as the 'road' went, so we walked for about four hours along the beach to Mana-Mana Village ... Sailing canoes were available and we sailed all night to reach Borebada Village at ten the next morning. Now at last our walking was over and after a wash we were taken by truck into Port Moresby.

It had been an epic journey of endurance during which, with the devoted assistance of his loyal Papuan guides, Wilbur had avoided capture and almost certain death at the hands of the Japanese. Barefooted, he had traversed Papua from north to south over some of the most rugged and tortuous terrain in the world. On 22 April, exactly one month from the day he had been shot down, he was overjoyed to rejoin his comrades in No 75 Squadron, still stationed at Seven Mile airfield in Port Moresby.

What Wilbur Wackett had achieved was, by any standard, extraordinary. The second part of his overland trek from Wau to Bulldog, known as the Bulldog Track, would soon be employed as a route for inserting and supplying Australian guerrilla forces (the *Kanga Force*) operating behind the Japanese bases

and airfields at Lae and Salamaua. This little-known track has been described as considerably worse than the Kokoda Track and ‘one of the most difficult and unpleasant areas ever to confront troops’. Peter Ryan, who was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry as a 19-year-old soldier in New Guinea, stated in a newspaper article in 2007: ‘As one of the few people who have trudged the full length of both tracks, I remember Bulldog as longer, higher, steeper, wetter, colder and rougher than Kokoda.’¹³¹



Map 8.1: Wilbur Wackett's route over the Owen Stanley Range from Lae to Port Moresby, March–April 1942

¹³¹ Peter Ryan, 'Losing track of heroism,' in *The Australian*, 27 October 2007. Ryan is the author of *Fear Drive My Feet*, a classic account of his World War II experiences behind enemy lines in New Guinea, first published in 1959 by Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

Wilbur would have to pay a heavy price for his survival. His days in mosquito-infested swamps resulted in him contracting malaria. Upon his return to Australia at the end of April 1942, he would be invalided and unable to rejoin No 75 Squadron before its return to New Guinea for its critical role in the Battle for Milne Bay of July 1942.

ANGUISH AND JOY

A day after Wilbur was shot down his father, Lawrence Wackett, received the telegram that all parents dreaded advising him that his son was ‘missing in action.’ He recorded in his autobiography the anguish shared with his wife, Letty:

I had to take the news to my wife who was heartbroken. It was so sudden that not for two days did I fully realize the situation. There was just the possibility that he was alive and unhurt, or that he had been captured, against the greater probability that he had lost his life. All the information I could gather was that two fighters had been lost in a low-level strike over Lae aerodrome, and those who had returned had not seen what happened to the missing two.¹³²

No further word came for another four anxious days. They had begun to give up hope when they received a call they would never forget:

... then while I was endeavouring to comfort my wife, the telephone rang:

‘This is the RAAF Casualty Section. We have good news for you. Flying Officer Wackett is safe and well. You are very lucky.’

I repeated the words so that my wife [Letty] could hear, said ‘Thank you so much,’ and hung up the receiver. I was just in time to catch my wife from falling.

We waited several weeks for further news, then received a telegram from Wilbur saying that he was on his way to Melbourne. The story he had to

¹³² Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, pp. 207–208.

An Epic Journey

tell us was quite a wonderful one, and later I had him sit down and write it all out.¹³³

For Wilbur's fiancée, Peggie Stephenson, it had also been a harrowing month. On 25 March she had received a telegram from the Air Board:

Regret to inform you that Flying Officer Wilbur Lawrence Wackett is reported missing as result enemy action near Lae aerodrome New Guinea on 21st March 1942. Any further information received will be immediately conveyed to you.¹³⁴

It would be several days before she received another telegram giving her the glad tidings that Wilbur was now safe. Some weeks later she received a letter from him written during his trek from Lae to Port Moresby:

My Darling Peg,

I hardly know how to start this letter; it's going to be pretty difficult. I am writing it in a place which is situated right in the dense jungle and the trees are so tall and so thick and the undergrowth is very dense and rarely does the sun ever reach the ground.

Perhaps the authorities informed you that I was missing, believed killed. Well the missing part was right, but I can assure you I am a hundred percent alive. What I have been through can only be described as hell and I was within an inch of death for a whole day and within a yard of starvation for four. Perhaps, dear, I had better tell you the complete story without telling you where or when, as that would surely be scrubbed by the censor

...¹³⁵

Immensely thankful for his remarkable survival, Wilbur's family and fiancée looked forward to welcoming him back home.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 163/63/142, WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence (Squadron Leader), Service Number 588 – Casualty File.

¹³⁵ Letter from Wilbur Wackett to his fiancée, Peggie Stephenson, 29 March 1942. Copied with kind permission from Julie Parsons.

CHAPTER 9

VALE PORT MORESBY

During Wilbur Wackett's one-month absence he had been promoted to flight lieutenant. Much had happened to No 75 Squadron at Port Moresby. It had been in almost continuous combat throughout the period and he was saddened to learn that eight of his fellow pilots had been killed.

The Japanese air units based in Lae had wasted no time in mounting a reprisal attack for the squadron's devastating raid on 22 March. The next day, coastwatchers reported to Port Moresby that a force of Japanese bombers and fighters had taken off from Lae airfield around midday. One did not have to be a genius to guess where they were heading. William Deane-Butcher takes up the story:

... I was standing near the pilots tent at the strip when suddenly it happened. The phone sounded harsh. Urgent directions came through the wire. It would be on in twenty minutes. Flying gear was hastily rechecked. Two trucks started up. Pilots were taken to their dispersed planes ... There was a rumble of engines as four Kittyhawks led by John Jackson taxied to the west end of the strip. With a final roar and a cloud of dust they were off.¹³⁶

The formation of 19 enemy bombers with their Zero escort had approached at 20 000 feet and, with their relatively slow climbing speed, the Kittyhawks could not gain adequate height before the enemy arrived overhead:

Fifteen minutes later there was an almighty crash as clouds of dust rose in the air. Bombs straddled the strip. High up, in the intensely blue sky a neat pattern of nineteen bombers were just out of reach of our climbing Kittyhawks. Three pilots (Les Jackson, Peter Turnbull and Barry Cox) had been unable to get their aircraft started in time. I was walking towards them when I heard a warning shout as several men hurled themselves into

¹³⁶ Deane-Butcher, *Fighter Squadron Doctor*, p. 30.

a nearby slit trench. The four of us were caught in the open and we had nowhere to go.

Low flying Zeros banked steeply round a hill and roared straight toward us with guns blazing. We lay face down in the fine low grass as the Zeros raced across us. Bullets ripped through the grass and I speculated madly on how to best cover all my vital parts under one tin hat ... Two of the aircraft were on fire and one badly damaged. The Zeros made a second run but our machine gunners on the surrounding hills opened up and one crashed into the ground exploding in a sheet of flame ... Then there was silence.¹³⁷

The air battle for Port Moresby had begun.

BATTLE FOR PORT MORESBY'S SURVIVAL

The Japanese were back again the following day (24 March) with a similar raiding force, hitting the airfield, the town and the military hospital (where 'one bomb made a direct hit right in the middle of the red cross on the roof').¹³⁸ A Kittyhawk was destroyed at Seven Mile airfield when hit by a bomb in its camouflaged pen. However, four Kittyhawks led by Les Jackson intercepted the enemy formation as it approached, shooting down a bomber and an escorting Zero.

Such scenes were to be repeated almost daily until early May as No 75 Squadron and their Japanese protagonists slugged it out and counter-punched in a battle for air supremacy. Such was the intensity of activity, the squadron had lost seven of its Kittyhawks within three days of its arrival in Port Moresby. John Jackson described the situation in a letter to his wife Betty at the end of March:

Have seen a good lot of action since we arrived, practically every day. The boys already have about five scalps, and about twelve aircraft destroyed on the ground and some damaged ...

¹³⁷ *ibid.* pp. 30–31.

¹³⁸ George Johnston, *War Diary 1942*, Collins, Sydney, 1984, p. 43.

One of our chaps [*P/O Wackett*], who was missing, has turned up and been reported OK, but it will probably take him weeks to get back to us, will probably have to walk with native guides and come by foot and canoe. Also hope three others will turn up eventually. I think we will hold the yellow b.....s here. We have already given them a few decent cracks.¹³⁹

With the welcome arrival of five replacement Kittyhawks at the end of the month, the squadron returned to the attack on 1 April when six of its aircraft escorted American A-24 dive-bombers on a successful raid against Lae. This was followed up three days later by a low-level strafing attack by five squadron Kittyhawks on the enemy airfield. Led by the CO, the raiders left seven enemy aircraft in flames and another 10 badly damaged. No enemy were met in the air and all pilots returned safely to base. It was the squadron's last strafing attack on Lae, its offensive operations for the remainder of April being confined to escorting bombing raids by American bombers. Two squadron pilots failed to return from these latter raids when the formations were intercepted by enemy Zeros.

Meanwhile, the defence of Port Moresby continued to take its deadly toll on the squadron, with the need for constant standing patrols and the almost daily scrambles to meet incoming Japanese raids. Exhausted ground crews laboured stoically to repair and maintain the precious Kittyhawks under the most primitive conditions on the often rain-soaked airfield. Attrition in pilots and aircraft would, nevertheless, have soon rendered the unit un-operational but for the trickle of replacements arriving from Australia. Through all this, morale remained remarkably high. It would soon be sorely tested.

THE CO MISSING IN ACTION

On 10 April, the squadron was shocked when Squadron Leader John Jackson failed to return from a lone reconnaissance flight over Lae, Salamaua and Nadzab. Affectionately known as 'Old John' due to his 'advanced' age of 34 years,

¹³⁹ Patricia M. and Arthur J. Jackson (eds), *A Lot to Fight For: The War Diaries and Letters of S/Ldr J.F. Jackson, DFC*, Church Archivists' Press, Virginia, Qld, 2001, p. 222.

he had been a highly popular and inspiring commanding officer. When, after a week, no further news had been received, his apparent loss weighed heavily on the squadron. Then on 18 April, celebrations broke out upon receipt of word that, like Wilbur Wackett, he had survived ditching in the sea and with the assistance of two friendly natives made his way to Bulolo. Jackson described the manner of his survival in a letter to his wife:

Just as leaving Lae, three Jap fighters surprised me and shot my plane to bits ... The aircraft was a mass of holes, windscreens etc all shot away, and on fire. I crashed into the sea about three quarters of a mile off land, near a native village. My aircraft sank in a few seconds – I was out in a flash but the oxygen tube held me for a while. I started off for land with the three Japs flying round and round me, and I had a few anxious moments waiting for them to strafe. After what seemed an eternity, they went away. The natives ashore seemed frightened, but a few boys, whom I later found were New Britain boys from Rabaul and Duke of York [Island], waited and helped me ashore ...

I knew the Japanese would send a search party straight after me so the boys packed their belongings and we hurried away. Hadn't gone far before we sighted Jap boats, so we went into the jungle, swimming creeks in my clothes and struggling through swamp and jungle, going down to the waist in slime and mud. The Japs landed and went along the way we were heading ...¹⁴⁰

Fortunately, they were able to keep ahead of their pursuers and over the next four days, in a bare-footed feat similar to that by Wilbur Wackett less than a month earlier, Jackson and his two native helpers climbed up the steep track to the mountain village of Malpos. There, they were able to make contact with a patrol from the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles. After resting for two days, they pressed on to Bulolo from where he was carried by stretcher to Wau. On 18 April, No 75 Squadron received the wonderful news that Jackson was alive and well. Unlike Wilbur Wackett a month earlier, the nightmare trek for Jackson

¹⁴⁰ Commenced on 12 April during his trek to Wau, in Patricia and Arthur Jackson (eds), *A Lot To Fight For*, p. 229.

would end at Wau. An aircraft landed on the hazardous hillside airfield on 23 April to airlift him back to Port Moresby.

His flight to freedom, however, nearly ended in tragedy. As they approached to land at Port Moresby, they were jumped by three Zeros. Fortunately no serious injuries were sustained and he was soon being warmly welcomed home by his relieved squadron. Jackson's arrival back at Port Moresby, coming only a day after Wilbur's return after his month-long trek, completed a morale-boosting two days for No 75 Squadron.

Wackett and Jackson would undoubtedly have had many notes to compare regarding their escapes from enemy territory. Unfortunately, neither has left a record of their conversation. What is clear from their stories, however, is the critical role in both cases of their loyal native helpers. Without their brave assistance, both airmen would undoubtedly have been captured by the Japanese or perished in the jungle. Sadly, John Jackson's good fortune would desert him only four days later.

LAST DAYS IN PORT MORESBY

The first few days following Wilbur's return to the squadron were relatively calm with little enemy activity until near midnight on 25 April when nine Nell bombers, escorted by Zeros, dropped 90 bombs on the nearby Three Mile airfield. It would be Wilbur's last night in New Guinea. The following day, still suffering from malaria and unfit for operations, he left the squadron and, after brief treatment in Port Moresby hospital, was flown back to Townsville.

A double tragedy struck two days later (28 April), when in the late morning the squadron's five serviceable Kittyhawks rose to attack a force of Japanese bombers and Zeros on yet another raid on Port Moresby. In the battle that followed, one Zero was shot down, but to the dismay of the squadron, their CO John Jackson did not return from the engagement and was later confirmed killed. Also lost in the battle was Barry Cox, who just over a month earlier had shared with Wilbur Wackett the distinction of shooting down the first Japanese

aircraft in New Guinea. Flying Officer Peter Masters,¹⁴¹ who flew as number 2 to John Jackson, has given a graphic description of this unequal encounter:

We had been airborne about 15 minutes when John started waving his arms and pointing upwards and ahead. There were silver specks in the distance but way above us by about 8,000 feet. There was no chance of us getting above or even level by the time we intercepted. We were still climbing flat out with our oxygen masks on ... John led Barry Cox and me to try to meet the eight Mitsubishi 'Betty' bombers side on ... He headed for the second in the vee. Barry was on the leader and I was on the third bomber on our side of the vee.

As I got close enough to fire at my target, my aircraft was virtually standing on its tail. I could see the face of the side gunner glaring out at me from behind the gun in the blister turret. In the next second I pressed the gun trigger on my control stick and saw holes appear in the underbelly and rear fuselage of the enemy bomber but at the same time my aircraft stalled, flipped on its back and went into a flat spin. In that mode the G's took over and for the next seconds or minutes I spent my conscious moments getting the aircraft stable for spin recovery.

Exactly what happened to John and Barry will never be known but I could hear John's voice when he finally broke radio silence shouting epithets as only he could do, indicating he was making one hell of a fight of it. I heard this as I came out of my spin but then all was silent again. When I got control again I proceeded to climb back up again to see what was happening. Way above in the far distance I could see four specks which looked like aircraft dog fighting, making streamers in the sky ...¹⁴²

One of the escorting Zeros had dived upon Jackson while he was engaging the bombers. To evade the attack, he had stalled his Kittyhawk and spun down, followed by Barry Cox. In the dog fights that followed either Jackson or Cox shot

¹⁴¹ Flying Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) Peter Addison Masters, Service No. 407330, b. Mymensingh, India – 23 December 1920, Nos 4, 75, 86 and 80 Squadrons.

¹⁴² Peter A. Masters, Australian War Memorial: MSS 0696 and MSS 0723, Masters, Peter A (Flight Lieutenant) – 'The Battle for Port Moresby'.

down a Zero, but both Australian pilots were themselves shot down and killed.¹⁴³ Jackson's aircraft was seen trailing smoke prior to crashing into the jungle-clad mountains.

The next day, with the squadron in deep mourning, Flight Lieutenant Les Jackson, John's brother, took over command. The unit was now reduced to only three serviceable and seven unserviceable Kittyhawks. In consequence, little could be done to interfere with Japanese Zeros that strafed the airfield. The air and ground crews had also reached the end of their endurance after over six weeks of almost continuous operations against the enemy. Weeks earlier, John Jackson had successfully resisted the recall of his battered squadron to Australia. Now it would have no choice. It was advised that it was to be relieved of the responsibility for the air defence of Port Moresby, a burden that it had borne alone with great courage since 21 March. On 30 April, they witnessed the welcome sight of two squadrons of American Airacobras flying in to Seven Mile airfield.

On 2 May, in a penultimate act of defiance, the squadron's three airworthy Kittyhawks joined newly arrived Airacobras in intercepting 20 enemy bombers escorted by Zeros. Regrettably, the squadron would suffer its final casualty when Sergeant Donald Munro¹⁴⁴ was shot down. With the news that a powerful Japanese naval force, including three aircraft carriers and a dozen troop transports, had been sighted entering the Coral Sea, believed tasked with the invasion of Port Moresby, it would be a dramatic last few days for the squadron at Seven Mile airfield. Peter Masters has described the scene.

Les [Jackson] said that the squadron was to be evacuated back to Australia by ship but he wanted two pilots to join him to fly the last three Kittyhawks back. He called for two volunteers. All pilots stepped forward ... Les then said in true leadership fashion, 'OK, you will draw straws.' And so it was that Mick Butler and I drew the short straws and the discussion was over. Twenty-five ground crew had also volunteered to stay behind to get the three Kittyhawks ready. On the night of 7 May, 154 officers and men of

¹⁴³ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 546.

¹⁴⁴ Sergeant Donald Whiteside Munro, Service No. 405641, b. Brisbane, Qld – 10 October 1922, No 75 Squadron, killed in action 2 May 1942.

Lost Without Trace

No 75 Squadron embarked on SS *Taroona* in Moresby Harbour, and thirty of us waved them goodbye.¹⁴⁵

Earlier that day, but unknown to the Port Moresby garrison, aircraft from the US carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown* had found and sunk the Japanese light aircraft carrier *Shoho* that was covering the invasion force as it approached the south-east corner of New Guinea. The troop transports were ordered to turn away and return to Rabaul. As the *Taroona* hastened south towards Townsville, the Battle of the Coral Sea reached its climax on 8 May with the Americans inflicting heavy damage on another Japanese aircraft carrier, but suffering the loss of the *Lexington*. The opposing forces disengaged over the next few days. Although suffering heavier casualties, the battle had been an important strategic victory for the Allies, with the Japanese denied their objective of capturing Port Moresby.

In the meantime, early on the morning of 9 May, No 75 Squadron's three serviceable Kittyhawks were on Three Mile airfield prior to departure for Australia when attacked by Zeros without warning. One was severely damaged but the other two, flown by Les Jackson and Michael Butler, were later able to take off for Horn Island—thereby bringing down the curtain on the squadron's heroic defence of Port Moresby. In its 44 days in New Guinea, the squadron had created a record of which it could be justly proud. Aircrews had scrambled almost daily to intercept incoming Japanese raids on Port Moresby as well as participating in numerous strafing and bombing raids on the strategic Japanese base at Lae. In the process they had destroyed 35 enemy aircraft, 18 of them in air-to-air combat, and damaged many others.¹⁴⁶

The squadron ground crews had also shown extraordinary resilience and ingenuity under appalling conditions to keep the Kittyhawks airworthy. With no workshops as such, they would chain engines to the branches of trees and often work on them all night under floodlights. Peter Masters has recalled:

¹⁴⁵ Masters, Australian War Memorial: MSS 0696, 'The Battle for Port Moresby'.

¹⁴⁶ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 548.

Vale Port Moresby

Our dedicated ground staff, under the leadership of Bill Matson,¹⁴⁷ went about their business working miracles every day in repairing or recovering aircraft that had been damaged, or ensuring our Allison engines and Browning machine guns and other equipment were in top class condition, and ducking into their slit trenches when the bombers were overhead or the Zeros were strafing.¹⁴⁸

Importantly in strategic terms, air superiority was at no stage yielded to the enemy. The resulting influence on the morale of the garrison troops in Port Moresby had been immense. However, the price had been high because in the process the squadron had lost 22 Kittyhawks and 12 pilots had been killed or were 'missing in action'. Surprisingly, not one decoration would be awarded to members of the squadron for their heroic efforts in the defence of Port Moresby.

In less than three months, after recuperation and rebuilding, the squadron would be back in New Guinea again for the critical battle at Milne Bay.

EPILOGUE – RABAU'S DARK SECRETS

For the surviving squadron members and especially for the families involved, the fate of the pilots listed as 'missing in action' was the source of ongoing anguish. Extensive efforts were undertaken by Australia and its Allies to establish what had befallen them. As a result, evidence dating from as early as 1943 has now revealed that two of the missing squadron pilots, namely Sergeant David Brown and Flying Officer Bruce Anderson, had in fact initially survived to become prisoners of the Japanese, only to be subsequently brutally murdered. They, regrettably, shared this fate with many others of the 500 RAAF personnel captured by the Japanese.

On 11 April 1942, Sergeant David Brown was one of seven squadron Kittyhawk pilots escorting US dive-bombers on a raid against Lae airfield

¹⁴⁷ Flight Lieutenant William Irwin Matson, MBE, Service No. 03452, b. Essendon, Vic. – 3 January 1902

¹⁴⁸ Masters, Australian War Memorial: MSS 0696, 'The Battle for Port Moresby'.

when intercepted over target by a large force of Zeros.¹⁴⁹ His aircraft damaged in the ensuing melee, Brown was seen to force land on a beach near Salamaua and to be taken prisoner.¹⁵⁰ No further information concerning his fate was received until postwar interviews of Japanese officers and freed Allied POWs revealed that he had been flown soon after to Rabaul where he was held at the Japanese Army prison camp.¹⁵¹ He was taken from this camp six weeks later in the company of American prisoners from whom he was separated before they boarded a ship for Japan. As no further news was heard of Brown, the evidence suggested that he had embarked on one of the transports and lost his life when it was sunk. However, the subsequent grim discovery in 1950 of the remains of 10 RAAF personnel in a grave on Matupi Island, Rabaul, led to the positive identification of David Brown as one of the victims.

Postwar investigations similarly indicate that Flying Officer Bruce Anderson, who had been shot down with Wilbur Wackett during the Lae raid on 22 March 1942, was also taken to Rabaul soon after his capture and there suffered the same fate.¹⁵² Thus, of the four No 75 Squadron pilots who are known to have survived being shot down in enemy territory, only Wilbur Wackett and John Jackson succeeded in evading capture and probable execution, emphasising the critical importance of help from friendly natives.

¹⁴⁹ Three Zeros were destroyed in the engagement, with one enemy aircraft apiece credited to Flying Officers Barry Cox, John Piper and Peter Masters.

¹⁵⁰ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, p. 545.

¹⁵¹ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 166/6/845, BROWN, David Stuart (Sergeant), Service Number 401489 – Casualty File.

¹⁵² 'The Warbird's Forum – Japan at War, 1931–1945 – The Prisoners of Rabaul', <http://www.warbirdforum.com/prisoner.htm>, accessed 1 September 2011.

CHAPTER 10

RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

Arriving in Townsville on the afternoon of 26 April 1942 after his flight from Port Moresby, Wilbur was granted several weeks leave. He immediately telegraphed his fiancé, Peggie, in Sydney:

Arriving Sydney Thursday [30 April]. Suggest you book seat for Melbourne Thursday night. Spend leave in Melbourne two weeks.¹⁵³

She was delighted at the news of his early return. After a joyful reunion in Sydney, they had much to talk about as they began their onward journey to Melbourne. In a strange coincidence, Barton Perkins,¹⁵⁴ who was later to marry Wilbur's sister, met them by accident when he boarded the Melbourne-bound train at Wagga Wagga. He had a few days leave from his engineering duties at No 5 Aircraft Depot in Wagga Wagga and was travelling to see his parents in Melbourne:

I knew Wilbur from earlier days in Sydney when my father and Lawrence Wackett helped found the Sydney Aero Club and we used to go as boys to the airfield. However, this was the first time I had seen Peggie. I found her beautiful and charming. Years later, I was fortunate to visit Peggie in Sydney after their daughter Rahna was born.¹⁵⁵

Arlette recalls Wilbur arriving back from New Guinea to convalesce at their family home in Brighton, Melbourne. She was shocked by his condition:

He was riddled with malaria and also had lots of nasty looking sores on his legs that had gone septic from his time in the jungle. We looked after him at home for about a month during which he also received medical treatment for his skin condition. Our Brighton home was only a few

¹⁵³ Documents kindly provided by Julie Parsons, 2008.

¹⁵⁴ Flying Officer Barton Edmund Perkins, Service No. 139855, b. Mosman, NSW – 17 April 1920.

¹⁵⁵ Barton Perkins to the author, 2009.

minutes walk from the beach. In those days, there was a thick grove of tea-trees growing along the cliff-line above the beach. It was very peaceful.¹⁵⁶

Brighton was an ideal place for Wilbur to relax and recover. It was also during this period that his father persuaded him to write the report (seen earlier in Chapter 8) describing his story of survival in New Guinea. As he regained his strength, he was anxious to return to active duty with No 75 Squadron, now based at Kingaroy, Queensland, where it was regrouping and training with fresh aircrew and Kittyhawk aircraft. To his great disappointment, his return was prevented by a regulation stipulating that military personnel who had contracted severe malaria could not return to service in the tropics for at least a year. Wilbur would therefore not be with the squadron when it returned to New Guinea again in July to play its heroic role in the defeat of the Japanese attack on Milne Bay. Instead, he was posted at the start of June to No 1 Embarkation Depot, Ascot Vale, Melbourne, for non-flying duties.

A DRAMATIC WEEK

Wilbur's posting coincided with an event that shook the nation and provided a dramatic reminder to all Australians of the threat still posed by the Japanese Navy, which was the surprise attack by midget submarines on Sydney Harbour on the night of 31 May – 1 June 1942. Three midget submarines managed to enter the harbour to make an attack on the American heavy cruiser USS *Chicago*, which led to the death of 20 Australian sailors when a torpedo, that narrowly missed its target, detonated against the sea wall where the depot ship HMAS *Kuttabul*—a former Sydney Harbour ferry—was berthed. The explosion ripped the bottom out of *Kuttabul* and sank her, killing 21 of the men on board.

By this time many of the Sydney harbourside residents were awake from the explosions and wailing sirens. Five hundred miles away in Laverton, Wilbur, like Australians all around the country, awoke to the shocking news of the attack. He was understandably concerned for Peggie, living with her parents in the Sydney

¹⁵⁶ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

Harbour suburb of Vaucluse. These concerns were heightened when a week later one of the mother ships involved in the raid carried out a brief bombardment of Sydney. The submarine fired 10 shells, five of which struck within a mile of Peggie's flat in Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill. The closest left a gaping crater in the road only 600 feet away, attracting a crowd of stunned neighbourhood residents later in the morning.

To many Australians, it appeared that the enemy was indeed 'knocking on the door'. However, a few days earlier, a major naval battle had occurred off the North Pacific island of Midway that would permanently change the complexion of the Pacific War. Japan lost four large fleet aircraft carriers in the battle, and the threat of Japanese invasion of Australia was finally eased.

MARKING TIME

Japan, however, was still determined to expand its defensive perimeter in the South-West Pacific. It would require a long and bloody struggle before the Allies could blunt its advance and begin to reclaim territories already occupied. Wilbur longed to be part of the battles that lay ahead. With only administrative duties to occupy his time, he was understandably restless. Like all Australians, he followed with concern the battles over the Kokoda Trail following the Japanese landings on the north-east coast of New Guinea in late July, and the subsequent battle for Milne Bay that commenced in late August. It was with particular pride that he learned of the role played by his old unit, No 75 Squadron,¹⁵⁷ in assisting the garrison to repulse the enemy attack and to inflict on the Japanese their first conclusive defeat in a land battle in the Pacific.

In the meantime, Wilbur made the most of his short leave periods to visit his fiancée, Peggie, in Sydney.

¹⁵⁷ Together with its sister Kittyhawk unit, No 76 Squadron.



**On leave in Sydney, August 1942. With childhood friend Rod Martin
outside the Australia Hotel in Castlereagh Street**

(Arlette Perkins (née Wackett))

TEST AND FERRY PILOT

It would be September before Wilbur returned to flying, when posted to No 1 Aircraft Depot, located at his old Laverton base where he undertook photo reconnaissance training while attached to No 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and later the Station Headquarters Flight. Late November 1942 would bring a move interstate with a posting to No 2 Aircraft Depot at Richmond, NSW, for test flying and ferrying duties. Although not an operational posting, Wilbur welcomed the move as he would, for the first time, be stationed near Peggie who

was still living with her parents in Bellevue Hill, Sydney. He would soon move even closer to his fiancée when at the start of December his group of 2 Aircraft Depot ferry pilots was transferred to No 2 Aircraft Park at Bankstown airport.

Wilbur's Richmond posting and subsequent transfer to Bankstown arose from new arrangements that had been implemented by the RAAF to achieve greater efficiency in aircraft testing and delivery by 2 Aircraft Depot and 2 Aircraft Park, who were struggling to perform their expanding workloads.¹⁵⁸ By November 1942, the output of military aircraft in the Sydney-Newcastle zone was running at 56 aircraft per month (15 Beaufort bombers from the Department of Aircraft Production (DAP) facility at Mascot and 41 training types from other contractors). During the following year, the impressive total of 350 Beauforts would come off the DAP assembly line. Acceptance testing and ferrying of these aircraft was in addition to the normal high output from 2 Aircraft Depot and 2 Aircraft Park of repaired aircraft and others assembled after arrival from overseas. The year 1943 would be the peak year for shipments of Kittyhawks from the USA, with 400 arriving in Australian ports. Ninety Beaufighters also arrived from Britain (largely at Sydney), as well as almost 200 Ansons in support of the EATS.

In late November 1942, the Central Ferry Flight at 2 Aircraft Park took control of aircraft testing at 2 Aircraft Depot together with the ferrying of aircraft to operational units and to training establishments around the country. As an experienced Anson and Hudson twin-engine pilot, also familiar with Kittyhawks and Wirraways, Wilbur came with an ideal background for this important but unglamorous role. Early in the New Year, he also became qualified on Beaufighters following a conversion course while on detachment to No 5 Operational Training Unit.

Over the next 15 months he would test and ferry a wide variety of aircraft, often involving long delivery flights to operational RAAF squadrons. It could be hectic at times. During a two-week period commencing late February 1943, he flew nearly 8000 miles as he carried out back-to-back ferry flights from

¹⁵⁸ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 231/9/1184 Part 2, Test and Ferry Flights.

Bankstown to Port Moresby and then almost immediately to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. In the process he would build up an impressive number of flying hours, totalling almost 1500 hours by early 1944 (see Appendix 2). There were also exciting tasks such as the delivery of Spitfires, many of which arrived in Sydney from Britain during 1943.

MARRIAGE

An attractive feature for Wilbur of his posting at Bankstown, despite his yearning to return to combat operations, was the facility with which he could see Peggie in Sydney during leave periods. Plans for their wedding progressed and finally, after a 16-month engagement, Wilbur and Peggie were married on 15 June 1943 in the historic All Saints' Church, Woollahra, Sydney. One of the bridesmaids was Wilbur's sister Arlette, who recently recalled:

The best man was Lieutenant Harry Trigg,¹⁵⁹ who was Wilbur's best friend and kindred spirit from Melbourne Grammar days. An air force navigator, Ross Ford,¹⁶⁰ was groomsman attending Peggie's cousin Joan Calligan who was the other bridesmaid. Unfortunately, our father missed the wedding by a few days due to transport delays in his return from his mission to the USA investigating the building of Mustang fighters in Australia.¹⁶¹

Although saddened by the unavoidable absence of her husband, Wilbur's mother, Letty, was a very proud witness of the happy event. Among the guests at the wedding and the following reception at the Lakes Golf Club in Kingsford was Wilbur's uncle, Air Commodore Ellis Wackett.

Wilbur had managed to obtain leave from his duties at Bankstown Aircraft Park and the happy couple set off the following day for their honeymoon in Wyong on the near Central Coast. However, their planned week's idyll by the

¹⁵⁹ Lieutenant Henry (Harry) Graeme Trigg, Service No. VX52031, b. Adelaide, SA – 8 March 1921.

¹⁶⁰ Flying Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) John Ross Ford, Service No. 416847, b. Broken Hill, NSW – 1 November 1917.

¹⁶¹ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

Return to Australia

water was cut short when Peggie came down with appendicitis on the first night and they were forced to return hurriedly to Sydney. Upon doctor's orders, she was confined to bed for two days. Fortunately, the symptoms subsided and the couple were eventually able to spend a few restful nights at the Watsons Bay Hotel on Sydney Harbour. They would have to wait until early August, when Wilbur was granted another two weeks leave, before they could enjoy a 'second' honeymoon.



Cutting the cake

(Julie Parsons)



Bridal party, 15 June 1943

L to R: Ross Ford, Harry Trigg, Wilbur and Peggie, Arlette Wackett, and Joan Callingan
(Arlette Perkins)

FERRY FLIGHT COMMANDER

In the meantime, Peggie moved into the flat that she and Wilbur had rented near Randwick Racecourse where he could join her for the occasional weekend. Other new responsibilities were also afoot for Wilbur. With the ever-increasing demand for delivery of aircraft to the RAAF, No 2 Aircraft Park received additional aircrew postings and in late August 1943 its test and ferry operations were reorganised. Wilbur was appointed Officer Commanding of the Ferry Flight, leading a team of 60 aircrew comprising 22 pilots, 17 navigators and 21 wireless/air gunners. Flying Officer Ross Ford, recently the groomsman at Wilbur's wedding, would be assisting him again as OIC of the wireless/air gunners.

With his new role, Wilbur also assumed other responsibilities, including a number of speaking engagements encouraging the Australian war effort. In one

of these, during the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign in September 1943, he shared the stage with the Federal Treasurer, Mr Ben Chifley, as he described to the crowds the attributes of a Kittyhawk fighter that was on display in Martin Place, Sydney. He also presided over a Court of Inquiry held in mid-September into the accidental burning down of the unit's old recreational hut during the exuberant celebrations marking the opening of the new facility. It was not only operational squadrons who could let their hair down!

The Ferry Flight aircrew at Bankstown would be kept fully employed, as clearly shown by their activities for the last five months of 1943 summarised in Table 10.1. The aircraft ferried encompassed the full spectrum of operational and training types employed by the RAAF.

Month	Aircraft Tested (Test Flights)	Flying Hours	Aircraft Ferried	Flying Hours
August	91 (251)	233	118	392
September	111 (321)	346	191	1418
October	115	451	183	968
November	95	399	131	998
December	124	436	152	1019

Table 10.1: Test and Ferry Flight Activities by No 2 Aircraft Park, August-December 1943

These ferry flights included trips to operational units as far away as Perth, Darwin and northern Queensland. Particularly noteworthy were a number to Milne Bay and Goodenough Island in New Guinea, a round trip of over 5000 miles in which five or six Kittyhawks would be typically accompanied by a Hudson bomber as navigational 'mothership'. The pilots would then return to Bankstown with aircraft from the operational units for repairs or modification. In September 1943, for example, pilots from No 2 Aircraft Park ferried some 40 Kittyhawks to and from Milne Bay and Goodenough Island.

Wilbur's Ferry Flight would sadly lose several pilots during these demanding long-distance flights. On 16 October 1943, while accompanying two other Kittyhawks on a delivery flight to Horn Island in the Torres Strait, Sergeant

Donald Wilum¹⁶² was killed when his aircraft inexplicably crashed into the sea 60 miles south of Mackay, Queensland. Two days later, Wilbur was notified that another of his ferry pilots, Pilot Officer Alfred O'Brien¹⁶³ was missing in the Princess Charlotte Bay area in northern Queensland while ferrying a Boomerang aircraft. Fortunately, in this instance the pilot and aircraft were later located on a beach south of Port Stewart where he had bellylanded after experiencing technical problems. Yet another pilot had a close call a few days later when forced to abandon his Kittyhawk after it went out of control near Rockhampton, Queensland. It had been a bad week but more than 180 other aircraft deliveries were successfully performed in October without incident.

PROMOTION AND EXCITING PROSPECTS

In early December 1943, Wilbur was promoted to squadron leader. During the month, several dozen Air Training Corps (ATC) cadets were entertained with flights in No 2 Aircraft Park aircraft as part of the Ferry Flight's regular involvement with the ATC. Unit morale was given a boost at year's end in true RAAF fashion with a slap-up Christmas dinner held in the Airmen's Mess at which the officers served the meal and the odd amusing speech delivered. It would be Wilbur's last Christmas celebration.

Although his increasing leadership role was welcome, he seemed no nearer to achieving his goal of returning to combat duty. Early in the New Year, he was disappointed to receive yet another non-operational posting, this time to No 3 Aircraft Depot in Amberley, Queensland. Wilbur began to worry that he may see the war out as a ferry pilot, his frustration compounded by the separation this new posting would entail from Peggie who was now pregnant. His time at Amberley, however, would be short.

¹⁶² Sergeant Donald Gregory Wilum, Service No. 416639, b. Wallaroo, SA – 15 March 1923, killed in aircraft accident 16 October 1943.

¹⁶³ Pilot Officer (later Flight Lieutenant) Alfred Harold O'Brien, Service No. O215078 (423253), b. Paddington, NSW – 3 May 1921.

It would be marked by two notable flying incidents. On 24 January, he was an hour into a ferry flight from Bankstown to Amberley when the aircraft developed engine problems and he was forced to make an unscheduled emergency landing at Nabiac near Forster on the mid north coast of New South Wales. It would be another four days before he could take off again for Evans Head. How he entertained himself in the historic little village located on the Wallamba River is unknown but, with his love of fishing, it would have been difficult for him to resist trying his luck in the stream which is still famous for its flathead and bream. A more serious incident occurred a week later (on 5 February) when taking off from Amberley airfield on a ferry flight with a new P-40N Kittyhawk. He had just become airborne when the engine suddenly cut out and white smoke began pouring from the motor. Fortunately, Wilbur managed to land the aircraft but it ran off the end of the strip and tipped onto its nose. He was uninjured. The Kittyhawk suffered damage to its prop, but after repairs would later serve with No 75 Squadron.

Two weeks later he received the good news that he was to be posted to No 2 Operational Training Unit in Mildura for training on fighters. He was delighted. After a final frustrating wait when the move was deferred for a month, Wilbur arrived at Mildura on 19 March 1944 to join No 30 Operational Training Fighter Course. Things had changed markedly from the bygone days when Wilbur and his fellow pilots in No 75 Squadron had been thrown into combat against the Japanese with only 10 hours experience on their Kittyhawks. Now, after completing their Service flying training, budding RAAF fighter pilots received a further seven weeks of operational training at Mildura before joining a front-line squadron. The trainees were impressed to find that the Chief Instructor was Clive Caldwell, Australia's leading fighter ace with 27½ victories to his credit.¹⁶⁴

Buoyed with the prospect of a return to combat operations, Wilbur had the excitement over the next few weeks of logging some eight hours flying Spitfires as well as renewing his acquaintance with the Kittyhawk. Interestingly, four of

¹⁶⁴ His official score at the end of World War II, although some subsequent sources credit him with up to 28½.

the surviving Kittyhawks from No 75 Squadron's heroic defence of Port Moresby in 1942 had subsequently made their way to No 2 Operational Training Unit. A most unfortunate incident occurred with one of these venerable aircraft (A29-22) a week after Wilbur's arrival. Its 19-year-old pilot had made an unscheduled mock attack on two Spitfires that were flying to the Gol Gol air-to-ground firing range when the Kittyhawk collided with one of the Spitfires. Spinning out of control, A29-22 crashed, killing its pilot. Fortunately the Spitfire, although losing its starboard wingtip, was able to land safely.

The trainees also received extensive classroom instruction on tactics and other relevant topics. Caldwell would occasionally turn up unannounced at these classes, as recalled by one trainee:

Caldwell told the lecturer that he would just sit in the back of the class and listen for a while. Eventually, he asked to say a few words. He told the pilots to listen closely to the instructors as they were experienced men who had learned their tactics the hard way. He also stressed that they were never to forget that 'Rule number one for a fighter pilot is—stay alive! It costs a lot of money to train you, so you are valuable, and we can't afford to lose you. Don't try to be a bloody hero—stay alive!'¹⁶⁵

However, only three weeks into the course, the RAAF would have yet another surprise in store for Wilbur. His future role would once again be turned on its head with a transfer on 13 April to No 5 Operational Training Unit in Tocumwal. Rather than being earmarked for Kittyhawks or Spitfires, he was to train instead on the twin-engined Bristol Beaufighter. It was a fateful move.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Kristen Alexander's, *Clive Caldwell, Air Ace*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006, p. 157.

CHAPTER 11

A NEW WARHORSE – THE BRISTOL BEAUFIGHTER

No 5 Operational Training Unit was based at Tocumwal in New South Wales, situated near the Murray River some 400 miles south-west of Sydney and about 150 miles north of Melbourne. Following a week's leave after departing Mildura, Wilbur arrived at Tocumwal on 24 April 1944 as one of a dozen pilots commencing training on No 18 Beaufighter Course. One of the other pilots, Ron Provost,¹⁶⁶ recalls meeting Wilbur:

He was a friendly chap who had already had a scrap with the Japs in New Guinea, after which he had spent some time in hospital. When we finished at Tocumwal he was very happy with his posting to 31 Squadron—he wanted to get his own back on the Japs.¹⁶⁷

Flying training, which commenced on 4 May, occurred in two stages. Pilots were first introduced to the less powerful, twin-engined Bristol Beaufort before converting to the Beaufighter. The Beaufort was a simpler aircraft to master and had the advantage of dual controls and a similar cockpit arrangement to the Beaufighter. Wilbur was fortunate to be familiar with the types, having previously clocked up over 50 hours on the Beaufort and about 40 hours on the Beaufighter from his ferry flight days. After only a few short hops flying circuits and bumps, he flew his first solo in the Beaufort.

Pairing with a navigator/observer occurred after about a week of flying training. Wilbur teamed up with a 23-year-old navigator, Pilot Officer Keith Noble.¹⁶⁸ The son of Eric and Minnie Noble, Keith had enlisted in the RAAF in July 1942 after a 10-month stint in the militia. Originally mustered for pilot training, he was remustered as a navigator in July 1943 during his elementary

¹⁶⁶ Flight Lieutenant Ronald Ashton Provost, Service No. 406060, b. Perth, WA – 5 March 1919.

¹⁶⁷ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Pilot Officer (later Flying Officer) Keith Eric William Noble, Service No. 424052, b. Kogarah, NSW – 24 November 1920, killed in action 24 September 1944.

flying training at No 10 Elementary Flying Training School, Temora. He subsequently undertook gunnery training at the air gunnery school at Ballarat and a six-month air observer course at No 2 Air Observers School, Mount Gambier. He was commissioned as a pilot officer upon graduation as a navigator in early February 1944.

Like Wilbur, Keith was blue-eyed and of fair complexion, but of more stocky build. He would fly with Wilbur for much of the remaining training on both the Beaufort and Beaufighter and subsequently partner him on operations with No 31 Squadron. This critical pairing of pilot and navigator was usually left to the young trainees to choose amongst themselves, although in Wilbur's case it appears there may have been some guidance from higher authority. John White,¹⁶⁹ a navigator on No 18 Beaufighter Course, recalled:

I nearly crewed up with Wilbur Wackett at No 5OTU. We got on well when we met at Tocumwal and he virtually invited me to be his navigator. However, I was only a Sergeant while he was a Squadron Leader. The OTU authorities clearly considered that Wilbur was destined to become a squadron commanding officer and should therefore have an officer navigator, so he was assigned Keith Noble.

I wasn't sure who I would end up crewing with. Fortunately, Bob Bowman subsequently asked me to crew with him. I jumped at the chance. We later went as a crew to No 31 Squadron along with Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble and became good friends with them.¹⁷⁰

The logbook entries of Keith Collett,¹⁷¹ who was also with Wilbur at Tocumwal, provide an informative record of what was involved in the training (see Table 11.1). Cross-country flying exercises and formation flying practice began within a few days of the pilot's first solo in the Beaufort, and night flying commenced a week later. The Beaufort course was rounded off with several days

¹⁶⁹ Sergeant (later Warrant Officer) John Sydney (Jack) White, Service No. 436340, b. Fremantle, WA – 27 October 1924.

¹⁷⁰ John White to the author, 2007.

¹⁷¹ Pilot Officer (later Flying Officer) Keith Lancelot Collett, Service No. 417946, b. Rose Park, SA – 22 July 1924.

of bombing practice, by which stage the pilots had obtained a total of about 25 hours flying on the type.



**Pilots and navigators in Course 18 at No 5 Operational Training Unit,
Tocumwal, taken on 26 April 1944**

Wilbur Wackett is seated on the far right of the second.
He would crew up with navigator, Keith Noble (third from right, back row)

(Australian War Memorial: P01167.036)

FLYING THE BEAUFIGHTER

With its massive rotary engines thrusting forward of the cockpit, the Beaufighter's sturdy profile portrayed a sense of power and aggression. It has been aptly described as 'two large engines followed by an aeroplane'.¹⁷² The 1725 hp Bristol Hercules Mk XVIII radials gave it a top speed of 320 mph

¹⁷² Neville M. Parnell, *Beaufighters in the Pacific: A History of the RAAF Beaufighter Squadrons in the South West Pacific Area*, self-published, Sydney, 2005, p. x.

at 10 000 feet or 305 mph at sea level, which was a major jump up from the Beaufort. It was exciting to fly and pilots, after experience, were almost universally complimentary as to its qualities. They enjoyed the unexcelled visibility from the roomy cockpit. The Beaufighter's large flaps gave it good low-speed characteristics that assisted landings. However, it presented challenges for the average EATS pilot. Most alarming was its marked tendency to swing on take-off and landing:

... many were the disasters and near misses. If there was nothing in the way, a Beau would always get off, even at right angles to the strip. There was so much power that the fuselage just followed the engines. The trick was to make it go straight. Landing was easier, as the undercarriage was immensely strong ... The Beau could be dropped from a considerable height without damage, except to the pilot's ego.¹⁷³

The British-built Mk IC and Mk VI Beaufighters employed at No 5 Operational Training Unit also suffered from pronounced longitudinal (fore and aft) instability. Although this was partly rectified by the adoption of a dihedral tailplane in the Mk X and Australian-built Mk 21 models later flown on operations, none could be flown 'hands off'. Ron Provost recalls:

As there was no automatic pilot, you had to 'fly it' all the time. It was very susceptible to weight change. If my navigator dropped his pencil, I had to re-trim! This instability was particularly noticeable when landing, as the centre of gravity was so far forward. However, overall the Beaufighter was beautiful to fly.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Jack Sandford, DSO, DFC (CO of No 30 Beaufighter Squadron), quoted in Parnell, *Beaufighters in the Pacific*, p. viii.

¹⁷⁴ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.



**View from the navigator's rear cabin of the pilot in the
roomy cockpit of an RAAF Beaufighter**

(Jack Brassil)

Due to the lack of dual-control Beaufighters, the pilots on No 18 Course received only one hour of dual flying training. This involved them standing behind the instructor while he flew the aircraft and demonstrated its controls and idiosyncrasies. They then faced the daunting task of flying their first solo. Keith Noble soon after joined Wilbur for their remaining training in the Beaufighter, including air-to-air combat 'experience' where fighter aircraft from the nearby No 2 Operational Training Unit would make mock attacks on their aircraft. These exercises were followed by air-to-ground gunnery practice carried out at the RAAF gunnery range near Mulwala, NSW. Unfortunately, a crew was lost in a fatal accident during one of these gunnery exercises, only 10 days from the completion of the flying program, when they inexplicably flew into the ground.

Sobered by this reminder of the dangers inherent in training with high-performance aircraft, the remainder of No 18 Course progressed to low-level formation training followed by several long cross-country exercises. The finale on 30 June was an exercise involving all the crews in a simulated low-level 'strike' in which they were intercepted by 'enemy' fighters. Keith Collett has briefly described this final training flight:

The last flight was a low level to Mildura where we were to be 'attacked' by Kittyhawks based at No 2 Operational Training Unit. After interception we proceeded to Lake Victoria for gunnery practice, returning to Tocumwal where we 'shot up' the aerodrome. A grand finale to our training before posting to an operational squadron.¹⁷⁵



Beaufighters tuck in tight at No 5 Operational Training Unit

(RAAF Museum)

¹⁷⁵ Keith Collett, in John A. Lever, *No. 5 O.T.U. R.A.A.F.: Number 5 Operational Training Unit, Royal Australian Air Force 1942–46 and 1970–71*, Sunnyland Press, Red Cliffs, Vic., 1999, p. 35.



**Happy graduates from No 18 Beaufighter Course at Tocumwal, 1 July 1944
(pilots seated, navigators standing)**

Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble are 6th from left in front and back row respectively. The other three crews posted to No 31 Squadron (Bob Bowman/Jack White, Ron Provost/Keith McGuire, and Bill Read/Hughey Leach) are 4th, 5th and 9th from left, respectively.

(Australian War Memorial: P01167.037)

It had been a very happy period for Wilbur. Peggie was expecting to give birth to their first child in late June. Early in the month, he had received a letter from his parents telling him that his sister Arlette was to become engaged to Barton Perkins. Wilbur was delighted with the news. In a congratulatory letter to Arlette on 5 June he asked, with typical humour, concerning the wedding plans:

Please let me know when the axe is due to fall. I would love to be able to be there. When we were young I used to tie you to the clothes props, so I would like to be there to see someone else tie the last knot ...

Congratulations and best wishes, Arlette, to you and Barton from Peggie and I and junior (due in three weeks).¹⁷⁶

Almost exactly three weeks later, on 24 June 1944, Peggie gave birth to a healthy baby girl, to whom she and Wilbur gave the name Rahna.

LAST FAREWELLS

Upon completion of their training at No 5 Operational Training Unit a week later, Wilbur and Keith were pleased to receive a posting to No 31 Squadron that was operating from Coomalie Creek in the top end of the Northern Territory.

Granted pre-embarkation leave, Wilbur wasted no time in hastening to Sydney to join Peggie and Rahna in their flat in Bellevue Hill. Keith Noble accompanied him to Sydney where he would stay with his widowed mother and sister in Manly. The Air Force had been kind to Wilbur, giving him special leave to remain for a month with Peggie and his newborn baby until early August. Photographs taken during his time in Sydney show him proudly holding his beautiful young daughter in his arms and Peggie walking Rahna in her pram.

It was undoubtedly with very mixed emotions that he bade farewell to his wife and child at the end of the extended leave and boarded a train at Central Station for the journey south to Melbourne prior to joining his new squadron. It was the last time they would see each other.

¹⁷⁶ Letter by Wilbur to Arlette Wackett, 5 June 1944. With kind permission from Arlette Perkins.



Wilbur with 3-week-old Rahna outside their Bellevue Hill flat

(Julie Parsons)

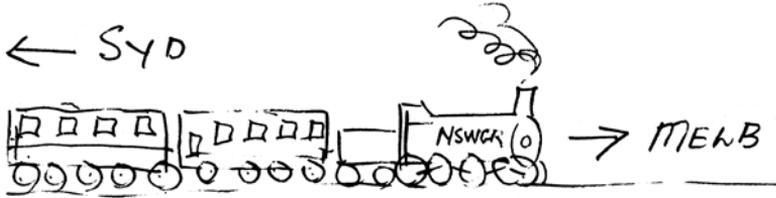
Fortunately, at this time Wilbur began a personal diary which, embellished with numerous amusing sketches, has provided a fascinating window into his life and that of the squadron over the next month.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Copy of diary kindly provided to the author by Julie Parsons (Peggie's daughter by her postwar marriage).

A New Warhorse – The Bristol Beaufighter

Friday, 4 August – Wilbur Wackett Diary

After a long leave, the day arrives for leaving home. Went into railway and fixed up seats for Keith and self. Peg and I went to Bondi Hotel for a few drinks and left Rahna with Mrs Stephenson. Left Sydney at 8.40 for Adelaide. Hard to leave Peg and baby.



Saturday, 5 August

Met Barton Perkins [Arlette's fiancée] at Albury and travelled down from Albury with him. Arrived Melbourne at 11.30. Met at Spencer Street by Mother, Dad, Arlette and Mr and Mrs Perkins, and came home. Afternoon spent in Beaumaris Hotel with Keith. Rang Peg and all are well.¹⁷⁸

By this time, Lawrence and Letty Wackett had moved with Arlette into their new home at Beaumaris, twelve miles south-east of central Melbourne on Port Phillip Bay. Arlette still remembers this last visit of Wilbur to the family home before he returned to combat duty:

I recall very well Wilbur bringing his navigator Keith Noble home to visit the family at Beaumaris. Dad took a movie of the two of them skylarking in the house. They were both very excited about heading off to the Northern Territory. They couldn't get there quick enough!¹⁷⁹

The following evening, Wilbur and Keith caught the train from Spencer Street Station to Adelaide, noting: 'Pleased we have a sleeper as it is pretty cold'. Lawrence and Letty Wackett, like other parents whose sons were leaving for

¹⁷⁸ Wilbur Wackett diary.

¹⁷⁹ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

active service, saw Wilbur off at the station with feelings of pride and misgiving. Sir Lawrence later recalled: 'we farewelled him, hoping for the best.'¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 209.

CHAPTER 12

NO 31 SQUADRON – COOMALIE CREEK

WAITING AROUND IN ADELAIDE

In Adelaide, Wilbur and Keith met up again with the other three Beaufighter crews from Tocumwal who were also on posting to No 31 Squadron. They were kicking their heels at No 4 Personnel Depot, having just completed a pre-operational fitness and hardening course at a camp in the Adelaide Hills where they 'were toughened up by marching about and tearing around hills.'¹⁸¹ It would be several days before their departure for Coomalie Creek. With an anticipated nine months of roughing it in the Northern Territory ahead of them, they filled in their time enjoying the pleasures of Adelaide. There were also medical inoculations to receive for their tropical tour.

Monday, 7 August 1944

Arrived Adelaide at 9.00 o'clock. Picked up kit bags and caught taxi to Spring 4 PD. Got cleared in and place to sleep. Met Bill Read, Bob Bowman and Ron Provost. Informed we won't be pushing off till Friday. Went into town at two o'clock and went to a newsreel and had a few beers at Australia [hotel]. Dinner at Covent Garden.

Tuesday, 8 August

Breakfast at 7.45 and wrote to Peg. Morning tea at Canteen ... Went to town for lunch at Covent Garden, then pictures. Few beers and back to camp for tea. Mess very dead. Rumour has it we go north on Thursday – this hanging around is getting us down.

Wednesday, 9 August

Rumour still strong re heading Up Top tomorrow. Should know by 11 o'clock for sure. Definitely going. Given TAB injection [vaccine against typhoid].

¹⁸¹ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

Lost Without Trace

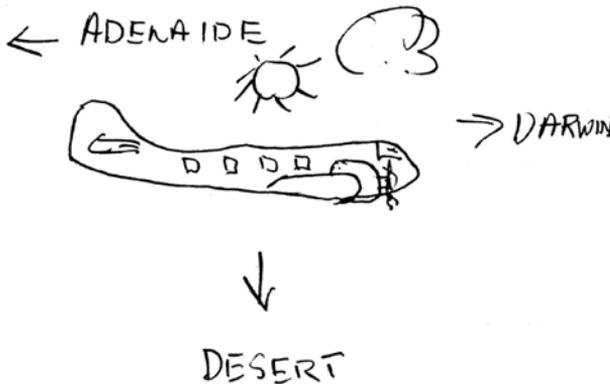
Spent afternoon getting cleared and went to town at 4 o'clock. Had a few beers then dinner and went to Theatre Royal to see 'Hi-Di-Hi'. Came back to camp and spent the night in front of fire.¹⁸²

JOINING NO 31 SQUADRON

Despite their lack of sleep, Wilbur and his companions were delighted to finally set off early the next morning to join No 31 Squadron at Coomalie Creek. Their new base was located some 60 miles south-east of Darwin, adjacent to the main north-south highway and eight miles south of Batchelor railway station. As seen from Wilbur's diary entries, reaching Coomalie Creek would be a tortuous process and it was a very weary group that finally arrived over 30 hours later.

Thursday, 10 August

Rose 4.00 o'clock. By tender to town – breakfast at South Australia Hotel ... Proceeded to Parafield. Caught Darwin plane [a Dakota] at 6.45 and landed Oodnadatta, Alice Springs – Birdum – Darwin – Batchelor. Arrived Batchelor at 7 o'clock. Caught tender to 2 RPP¹⁸³ (6 miles) at 7.30. Had tea, assigned quarters, turned in after shower. Very cold – needed blankets.



¹⁸² Wilbur Wackett diary.

¹⁸³ No 2 Reserve Personnel Pool, a transit camp located near Batchelor.

No 31 Squadron – Coomalie Creek

Friday, 11 August

Rose 7 o'clock ... Told to catch tender at 12.30 for Coomalie strip. Had lunch and boarded tender. Am very sore [after TAB jab] ... Arrived guard house for 31 Squadron at one o'clock. Picked up at 1.20 and driven two miles to squadron. Reported to adjutant and started getting cleared in. Reported to doctor who took my temperature and then put me in bed. Arm done up like a sore toe ... Glad to be here at last after bloody awful trip.¹⁸⁴

The next few days were spent settling in and familiarising themselves with the base and its facilities. First impressions were good.

Saturday, 12 August

[After] breakfast was allowed to leave hospital with arm still done up like sore toe. Found myself a bed in a hut with Keith and Bill Read. Lecture by Flight Lieutenant Norm Tritton¹⁸⁵ on Ops up here. CO D'Arcy Wentworth¹⁸⁶ also said a few words. Lunch. Very nice Mess, food seems good. Should be happy enough here for nine long months.

Had sleep, shave and shower. Few beers before tea and then carted chair from the Mess to open air picture show – 'Slightly Dangerous' – Lana Turner ... Sent Peg a telegram advising her I had arrived.

Sunday, 13 August

Arm now OK. Read in Mess and tried to draw equipment from store – closed up – stand down. Had lunch, then lecture on handling Hercules XVII [engines] by Pat Boyd¹⁸⁷ ['A' Flight Commander]. Did trip round strip and dispersals in command car. Shower, few beers, tea, censored letters, then to bed at 10.

¹⁸⁴ Wilbur Wackett diary.

¹⁸⁵ Flight Lieutenant Norman Charles Tritton, Service No. 404071, b. Brisbane, Qld – 17 December 1917, OC 'B' Flight, No 31 Squadron.

¹⁸⁶ Squadron Leader George D'Arcy Wentworth, DFC, Service No. 260604, b. 10 May 1917.

¹⁸⁷ Squadron Leader John A'Beckett Penleigh 'Pat' Boyd, DFC and Bar, Service No. 400691, b. Brighton, Vic. – 1 February 1915, No 125 Squadron, No 31 Squadron ('A' Flight Commander and later Commanding Officer).

Lost Without Trace

Monday, 14 August

Rose 7.30 for breakfast. Went to equipment store and drew flying and jungle equipment. Spine bashed until lunch. Got fitted with parachute ... Took shirts (green) and Mae West to parachute section for alterations. Had a few beers, tea and caught tender to NWA HQs [North-Western Area Headquarters] to see 'Charlie's Aunt' at their picture show. Came home and wrote to Peg, then bed. Rumour has it we fly tomorrow.¹⁸⁸



Typical living accommodation at Coomalie Creek

(No 31 Squadron Beaufighter Association)

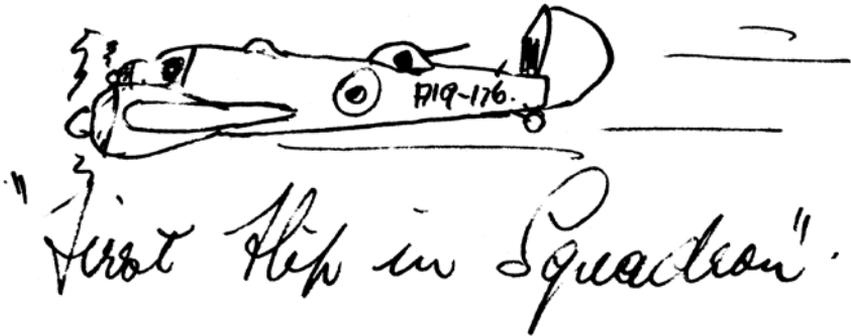
¹⁸⁸ Wilbur Wackett diary.

FAMILIARISATION FLIGHT

The rumour was correct. Wilbur and Keith would take their first training and familiarisation flight with the squadron on 15 August. Accompanying them in another Beaufighter were their friends from No 5 Operational Training Unit, Ron Provost and his navigator Keith McGuire.¹⁸⁹

Tuesday, 15 August

Flying 0900. Down to Ops Room at 0830 and briefed. Down to strip in jeep and flew A19-176. Took off in company with Ron Provost and flew to Peron Island – Cape Fourcroy along Bathurst and Melville Islands to Cape Holtham – Darwin – Base (Coomalie Creek). Total flying time 2 hrs 20 mins.¹⁹⁰



It was a valuable introduction to the flying conditions they would encounter in the following months. Navigation in the north-western operational area was particularly challenging, as No 31 Squadron veteran Fred Anderson recalled:

There were no radio aids so navigation was by dead reckoning and nothing else. The weather forecast was a lot of guesswork because they didn't know what it was like over the target three or four hundred miles away. You had to navigate over the sea for three hours at zero feet. You would have to look through the floor of the aircraft at the water racing past and see

¹⁸⁹ Sergeant (later Warrant Officer) Keith Anthony McGuire, Service No. 434207, b. Brisbane, Qld – 10 February 1924.

¹⁹⁰ Wilbur Wackett diary.

if you could get drift from that. It was a rough guess. You could also tell from the whitecaps how fast the wind was blowing and in which direction so you would get an idea of how much you should be drifting and make allowance accordingly ... Above your head, a small instrument panel, altimeter, airspeed indicator and compass. The radio was situated behind and below me and you would have to spin the seat right around and bend down to tune it in properly. There was a remote control switch on the side to transmit and receive. There was also my parachute clipped on the side of the fuselage, we wore the harness while the pilot was sitting on his in the well of the seat.¹⁹¹

Arriving back at Coomalie Creek after their 'first flip,' Wilbur and Keith had exciting news. Told to report for a briefing at 4.30, they learned that they were to fly their first operational sortie in two days time.



A Beaufighter taking off from Coomalie Creek airstrip, 1944

(RAAF Museum)

¹⁹¹ Flying Officer Frederick Bertram Anderson, MID, Service No. 32784, b. East Hills, NSW – 9 August 1920. Quoted in Parnell, *Beaufighters in the Pacific*, p. 77.



**Beaufighter over Coomalie Creek airstrip, looking south-west –
the No 31 Squadron camp was one mile north (to lower right)**

(Fred Anderson)

THE BEAUFIGHTER IN OPERATIONS

By August 1944, No 31 Squadron was flying the improved British-built Mk X Beaufighter with a dihedral tailplane. The snub-nosed Beaufighter had a rugged, bulldog appearance that bespoke aggression. It certainly packed an impressive punch with its four 20-mm cannons and six wing-mounted machine guns, later augmented by rocket projectiles. The pilot was also well protected, as noted by Ron Provost:

In front of you was a large bullet-proof windscreen. It was several inches thick and took four men to lift. Once we fired a cannon shell at it and it only went half way through! There was armour plate in front of the instrument panel and also under your seat. Between the pilot and the observer there was a steel bulkhead across the fuselage, fitted with a door to give access fore and aft. We kept the door closed during ops, although some crews left it open. It could stop a cannon shell – so if the enemy fired

at you as you left the scene after ground strafing, it would save the pilot from being hit.¹⁹²

The sleeve valves of the Hercules engines gave the Beaufighter its distinctive whistling sound in flight, giving rise to its nickname ‘Whispering Death’. Often ascribed incorrectly to the Japanese, this sobriquet in fact originated from a colourful quote made in an RAF Mess and taken up by Allied propaganda. Be that as it may, in the low-level attacks carried out by No 31 Squadron over Timor and beyond, its Beaufighters were generally upon the enemy before they heard their approach. The engines were also extremely reliable—‘seldom overheated on the ground in the tropics and kept on pounding even with severe damage from enemy action.’¹⁹³

Many of the operations by No 31 Squadron against targets in Timor, or when escorting Catalinas on operations further north, were near the limit of the Beaufighter’s endurance, with flights often of six hours duration or more. Squadron Leader D’Arcy Wentworth, the unit CO during Wilbur’s period, has described the *modus operandi* to achieve the maximum range from the Beaufighters in these long oversea operations:

We cruised at 180 [knots] all the time on sweeps even when attacking the target. You would lose a little bit of speed when climbing up to three or four hundred feet, but then at the bottom of the dive you would have gained a bit, never touching the throttles as there was not enough petrol to play around with. If we had been chased, we couldn’t open up because we wouldn’t have made it back to our own base or even Australia. They [the Beaufighters] weren’t designed for the long trips we had to do and they were bloody uncomfortable after about six or seven hours.¹⁹⁴

Although impressively armed for ground and ship attack, the Beaufighter was at a distinct disadvantage against a Japanese Zero fighter in terms of speed and manoeuvrability and possessed quite inadequate rear defence. No 31

¹⁹² Ron Provost to the author.

¹⁹³ A. Sutherland Brown, *Indian Days – Burmese Nights: Personal Reminiscences of Wartime Service with the RAF*, A. Sutherland Brown, Victoria, BC, Canada, 1992, p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ George Wentworth, quoted in Parnell, *Beaufighters in the Pacific*, p. 120.

Squadron navigator, Jack White, considered the rear machine gun worse than useless: “The bloody thing was a nuisance as it got in the road. I never fired it in anger.”¹⁹⁵ Flying Officer Fred Anderson further elaborated:

If we were outnumbered, the orders were to get down on the deck and to go for your life. We had the initial defence of a fast dive to pick up a lot of speed and they would find it harder to get down and shoot at us. There wasn't much use with the rear 0.303 machine gun, the tail plane and the rudder got in the way, about 45° each side of the rudder. It was really only a scare gun.¹⁹⁶

Wilbur and Keith would have to wait several more days before commencing operations when the sortie scheduled for 17 August was cancelled. In the meantime they carried out gunnery training at the nearby firing range. They also made use of the time to move into a tent of their own and set about acquiring spartan furnishings and erecting an extension with the aid of a scrounged tarpaulin.

Wednesday, 16 August

Job cancelled till further notice. Spine bashed till lunch time. Pat Boyd informed us we do some gunnery at 2 o'clock. Took off in A19-180. Flew about 10 miles east [to gunnery range]. Guns not working too well. Keith fired the rear gun. Says it won't be much good against ground targets. After tea – party – good supper and so to bed.



¹⁹⁵ Jack White to the author, 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Fred Anderson, quoted in Parnell, *Beaufacturers in the Pacific*, p. 89.

Lost Without Trace

Thursday, 17 August

Missed brekky – stayed in bed. Got up at 9 o'clock and got some malthoid for our floor, some boxes and beds. Moved into tent on hill. Seems to be a good spot. Spine bashed during afternoon. Tea and few beers. Pat Boyd awarded DFC. Drinks all round for the Maumere show.¹⁹⁷

Friday, 18 August

Got up 7.30 for brekky. Informed flying 9 o'clock. Got dressed in 'Jungle Greens' and artillery,¹⁹⁸ and took off in A19-184 for gunnery practice. Did some good shooting but pulled out a bit low in some dives. Lunch. Worked putting up tarpaulin to extend tent. Seems ideal. Had shower and got cleaned up ... Few beers, tea and received letter from Peg.¹⁹⁹



A week had now passed since Wilbur and Keith arrived at Coomalie Creek and they were becoming familiar with their new bush setting. Life at the squadron campsite, approximately one mile north of the airstrip, was not without its pleasures and the odd surprise, as their next door neighbour, Ron Provost, recalls:

¹⁹⁷ The DFC was awarded to Boyd for his outstanding leadership of the destructive raid a month previously against Maumere on the island of Flores, during which he shot down a Kawasaki Ki-45 Nick fighter.

¹⁹⁸ The 'artillery' was the Smith and Wesson .38 calibre revolver carried by Allied aircrew in the South-West Pacific campaign.

¹⁹⁹ Wilbur Wackett diary.

No 31 Squadron – Coomalie Creek

Coomalie Creek went right through the camp area. Our tents were in the bush on the side of a slight hill, a fair way up from the creek. Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble were in a tent beside the one I shared with my navigator. There were stories about crocodiles but the biggest problems were snakes. When you went around at night, you sometimes would suddenly hear ‘Bang, Bang!’ as some silly bugger shot at them. We had big calico water bags hanging outside our tents – and snakes used to wind themselves around them to get some water.

The Officers and Sergeants Messes were quite pleasant. They had comfortable furniture and the sides were open at the top and bottom to allow air to move through. There was also a lovely wooden chapel. The chaplain, Reverend Beyer, was a real character. He used to come down to our area and say, ‘Righto, you buggers, I want you all to turn up at the service and you’ll get a pack of smokes and chocolates.’ So we used to go.²⁰⁰



No 31 Squadron Officers Mess at Coomalie Creek, 1944

(No 31 Squadron Association)

²⁰⁰ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.



No 31 Squadron Officers, Coomalie Creek, August 1944

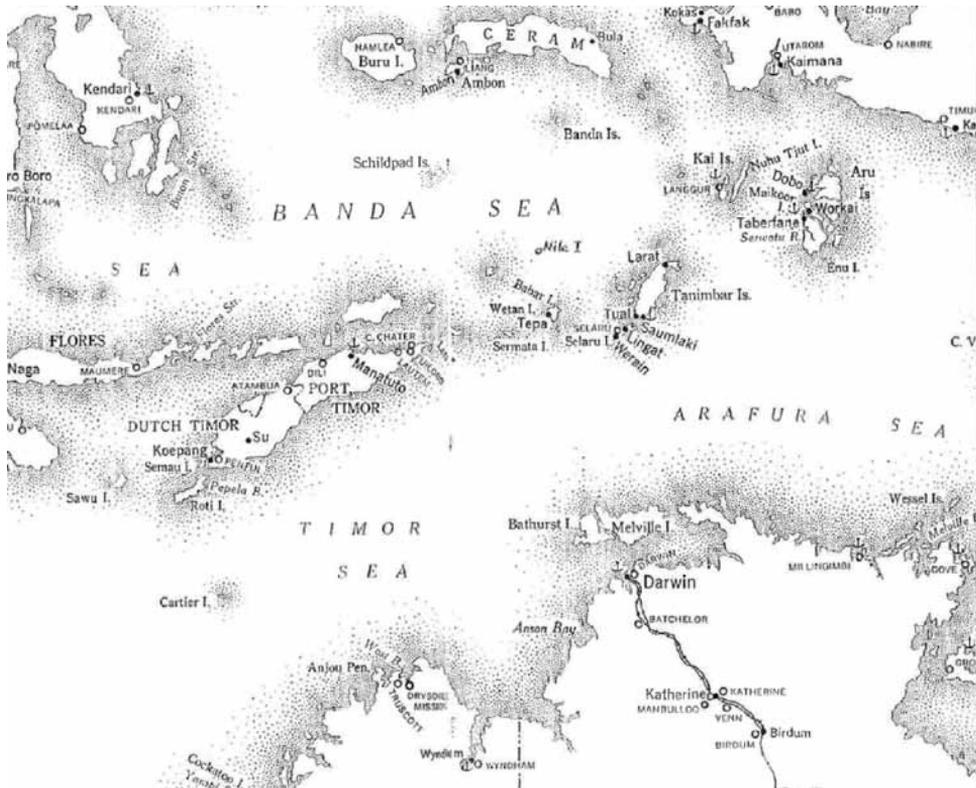
Wilbur Wackett is 6th from the left, front row. Ron Provost is to his right and Pat Boyd and D'Arcy Wentworth (CO) to his left. Keith Noble is second from left, back row.

(Australian War Memorial P01167.038)



Relaxing at Coomalie Creek. The last photograph of Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble (centre front), taken in the Officers Mess in mid-August 1944. Other recent arrivals enjoying a beer are Bill Read (far right, front row) and Ron Provost and Bob Bowman (second row, far left and second from left).

(Julie Parsons)



Map 12.1: Operational Area of No 31 Squadron from Coomalie Creek in 1944

(From George Odgers, *Air War Against Japan 1943–1945*²⁰¹)

There were also more evening movies to watch and intelligence summaries to read before one's first operational sortie with the squadron.

Saturday, 19 August

Did a spot of washing and read some intelligence summaries ... Had lunch and a snooze. Afternoon tea ... Shaved off 'mow' – feel much cleaner. Had tea and went to squadron pictures to see 'Mr Lucky' and 'Road to Singapore.' Had a case of 'Cuss Cuss' trouble – kangaroo rat sliding down our tent.

²⁰¹ George Odgers, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945 – Series 3 (Air) – Volume II – Air War Against Japan 1943–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 98.

Lost Without Trace

Sunday, 20 August

Got up 7.40 and had breakfast. Read some intelligence summaries ... Walked round No 1 Photo-Reconnaissance Unit [also based at Coomalie Creek]. Keith took some Astro shots and did a spot of W/T at Signals. Lunch and slept during afternoon. Informed over loud speaker to attend briefing at 1630 hrs. Had shower and a few beers, then tea. After tea George Bowden came over - had a few beers with him.²⁰²

²⁰² Wilbur Wackett diary.

CHAPTER 13

BACK ON OPERATIONS

CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

Apart from its usual menu of attacks on Japanese road transport and shipping around Timor and islands in the Banda Sea (see Map 12.1), No 31 Squadron also played a significant but largely unknown role in the support of clandestine operations by Special Operations Australia. These operations, carried out by 'Z' Special Unit of the Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD), involved the insertion of small teams of intelligence operatives by motor launch or Catalina aircraft onto enemy-occupied islands in the former Netherlands East Indies.

Wilbur's first operational sortie with the squadron would be part of one such undercover operation, codenamed Operation *Adder*. Begun under controversial circumstances (*vide infra*), the operation would end in tragedy.

OPERATION ADDER

The purpose of Operation *Adder* was to insert an SRD team near the north-eastern tip of Timor to obtain intelligence on Japanese activity in the area and, in particular, on an enemy airfield believed to be under construction. After an abortive attempt in mid-May 1944, the SRD party composed of Captain John Grimson,²⁰³ Sergeant Ernest Gregg²⁰⁴ and three Timorese set sail again from Melville Island (Northern Territory) late on 20 August aboard the RAN Fairmile motor launch ML 429. The lightly armed 75-ton Fairmiles were very suitable for this role, being highly manoeuvrable and fairly fast with a top speed of 20 knots. However, the 600-mile round trip to Timor would have to undertaken at a more economical speed,

²⁰³ Captain John Edward Grimson, Service No. NGX10, b. Armidale, NSW – 19 Jul 1908, killed in action 22 August 1944.

²⁰⁴ Sergeant Ernest Harry Gregg, Service No. NX7435, b. Manchester, England – 20 Aug 1915, killed in action 22 August 1944.

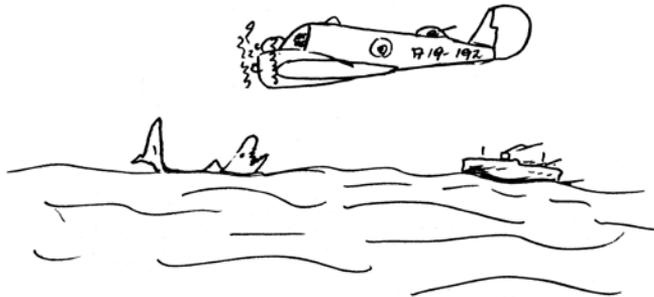
Lost Without Trace

and during the long hours of daylight it was essential that they be provided with aerial cover in case of interdiction by enemy aircraft or naval vessels.

To this end, throughout 21 August, No 31 Squadron dispatched a total of 14 Beaufighter crews, operating in pairs, to protect ML 429 and its brave complement as they made their way across the Timor Sea. Departing Coomalie Creek at 90-minute intervals from dawn at 5.40 am,²⁰⁵ the relays of Beaufighters kept close company with the launch until last light. Wilbur and Keith were tasked in the third pair, taking off in Beaufighter A19-192 at 8.30 am in company with the CO, Squadron Leader D'Arcy Wentworth. As noted in Wilbur's diary (and artwork), no enemy sightings were made during their four and a half hour patrol. Their first operational sortie with the squadron now safely logged, they enjoyed a relaxing afternoon before celebrating with a few beers in the Mess that evening.

Monday, 21 August 1944

Got up 7 o'clock, had breakfast 0715. Ops Room 0730 and down to strip in CO's car. Took off at 0830 and headed over Timor Sea. Saw many sharks and sea snakes. Weather was pretty good though very hazy. Anti-aircraft cover [for motor launch]. Nil sightings bar three B-25s going out to drop some eggs on the Nips. Landed back at Coomalie at 1300 hrs.



²⁰⁵ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A9186, Item 61: RAAF Unit History Sheets (Form A.50) [Operations Record Book – Forms A.50 and A.51], Number 31 Squadron, Aug 42 – Aug 45, Unit History Sheet 20/21 August 1942. Note: The times quoted above are local times at Coomalie Creek base. These times are 9½ hours ahead of those detailed in the No 31 Squadron Unit History Sheets and Operation Reports, which employed Greenwich Mean Time (identified with a suffix 'Z').

Back on Operations

Had lunch and rested till shortly after two when Keith and self went to fix up our pay at the Pay Section. I am drawing six pounds to cover fees to the Mess. Back on spine till five. Shower ... Few beers, then bed. Very hot night with no breeze.²⁰⁶



RAN Fairmile motor launch ML 814 at speed. The depth charges seen aft were not carried on Operation *Adder*

(Australian War Memorial: 301793)

RELAXING AT COOMALIE CREEK

Wilbur and Keith would be returning to Timor in more aggressive fashion in a few days time. In the meantime, they took the opportunity to relax and enjoy some of the extracurricular activities that helped to maintain squadron morale at Coomalie Creek.

²⁰⁶ Wilbur Wackett diary.

Lost Without Trace

Tuesday, 22 August

Spine bashed and read some intelligence summaries. John Klug handed out photos taken at guest night last week. Will send copy home. Had lunch and sun-baked for a while. Afternoon tea then back to hut. Shower and tea then went in truck to NWA HQ to pictures and saw Marx Brothers in 'Go West' and James Cagney in 'Johnny Come Lately.' Back to camp and to bed. Got tomorrow off.

Wednesday, 23 August

Got up 7.30. After brekky, hopped on truck and went to Berry Springs. Beautiful spot. Swam, sunbaked and had nice lunch. Plenty of fish – must take a line next time we go. Keith got a bit burnt. Home by five.²⁰⁷



An armed forces rest and recreation camp had been established at Berry Springs beside a series of lagoons and a small waterfall fed by clear spring water, providing an idyllic spot for swimming and picnicking by the pools.²⁰⁸ Transport for the 30-mile trip up the Stuart Highway was laid on by the squadron on a regular basis for off-duty personnel. Not surprisingly, these expeditions were very popular with aircrew and ground staff alike. Another popular diversion

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Presumably, regularly checked for the presence of uninvited crocodiles. It is still a very popular watering hole for Darwin residents, despite a 4.7-metre monster having been caught one kilometre downstream in 2009!

from the monotony of life on their remote base was visits to lakes in the South Alligator River area that abounded with magpie geese and other birdlife. Commandeering a truck, groups would enjoy an occasional day's hunting while helping to stock the squadron larder:

There were tens of thousands of geese and ducks on the lakes. When we disturbed them they would rise up in a mass and literally blacken the sky. You didn't have to aim your rifle – you simply shot up into the sky and would be almost certain to bring one down. They made a good meal for our Mess.²⁰⁹

STRIKE ON TIMOR

Upon their return from Berry Springs, Wilbur and Keith were told to report shortly for briefing for an operation the following day (24 August). Their hopes of some lively action had been answered. Wilbur penned a quick note in his diary:

Briefed for job at 7.10. Strike on Timor. Take off 0930 for Truscott ... I'm flying No. 2 to CO. Wrote to Peg. Had a few gin squashes. Checked over jungle kit, etc and into bunks.²¹⁰

After a break of three weeks, 24 August marked the return of No 31 Squadron to attacks upon Japanese installations on Timor. It would be a busy day, with 12 Beaufighter crews tasked for three separate raids on the island. Wilbur and Keith would join a raid by four squadron Beaufighters on West Timor. Led by the CO, their task was to sweep roads between Koepang and Atamboea [Atambua] (see Map 13.1) and strafe any enemy activity. Because of the distance to target, the aircraft would stage through the newly developed Truscott airfield on the Kimberley coast. Wilbur's diary takes up the story:

Down to strip in truck and took off in A19-198 for Truscott at 9.30. This strip named after 'Bluey' Truscott. Arrived 11 o'clock – trip took 1½ hours.

²⁰⁹ Jeff Love to the author, 2007

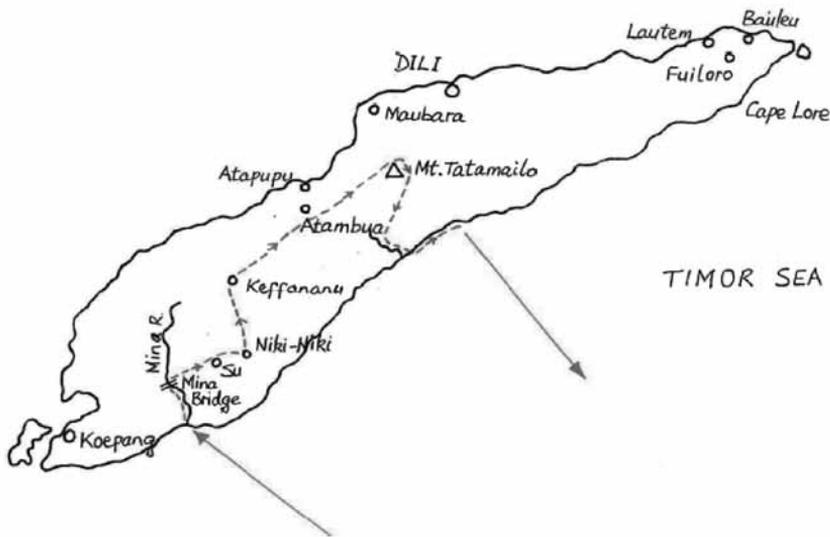
²¹⁰ Wilbur Wackett diary, entry for 23 August 1944.

Lost Without Trace

Sat around and had lunch at Truscott. After lunch inspected a crashed Jap Dinah shot down by Spits.²¹¹ Looks a nice job. Met boys came in from previous strike. They said the Japs were well stirred up in Timor, with two Beaufighter raids, a B-25 and a B-24 raid.

Took off 1530 hours and headed for Timor. Forty minutes out dropped down on the water to avoid enemy radar. Strafed jeep, huts at Keffannanoe [Kefannanu] village and observation posts. No sign of Nips but saw plenty of Bofors ack ack. Left coast of Timor at 6 o'clock and landed back at base at 2010 hours and did good night landing.

Up to Mess tea, then interrogation. Two letters from Peg waiting for me. Went to bed dead tired.²¹²



Map 13.1: Wilbur's Beaufighter strike with No 31 Squadron on Timor, 24 August 1944

²¹¹ Meeting its demise at the hands of two Spitfires a month previously, this Mitsubishi Ki.46 Dinah was the last Japanese aircraft shot down over Australia. It was no pushover for Allied fighters—its top speed of 397 mph was only a little slower than the Spitfire Mk VIII.

²¹² Wilbur Wackett diary, entry for 24 August 1944.

No 31 Squadron Operation Reports provide further detail.²¹³ The formation had flown north from Truscott cruising at 180 knots some 2000 feet over the Timor Sea under cloudless skies. Soon after dropping to sea level, cumulus cloud greeted them as they approached the south Timor coast. The Commanding Officer's navigator, Flying Officer Bob Miller, had done an excellent job finding landfall at 5 pm being 'spot on' at the mouth of the Mina River (see Map 13.1). Following their leader, the formation swept up the river at low level to the Mina bridge which was devoid of traffic. Turning east along the main road, an enemy jeep was strafed and destroyed at Lalip, a train of about 60 packhorses also observed being left unmolested.

Continuing on at close to zero feet, the Beaufighters surprised a group of Japanese troops in Niki-Niki and strafed with cannon and machine-gun fire a barracks building into which they fled. It was burning fiercely as the four aircraft left the scene heading north along the road to Atambua. In quick succession, enemy-occupied buildings in Kefannanu and Delolok were similarly attacked and set on fire. Finding no more targets along the road to Atambua, the formation turned east and flew as far as Mount Tatamailo,²¹⁴ whose peak they circled before heading south along the Sue River. Some medium ack-ack fire was met but no aircraft were hit.

Reaching the coast, the Beaufighters turned eastward flying along the shore for 15 miles at wave-top height and raking three Japanese observation posts that they encountered with cannon fire. So rapid and unseen had been their approach that the enemy had no time to respond. The photographs taken of these attacks are no longer available, but Wilbur Wackett has left us with a drawing in his wartime diary:

²¹³ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A11312, Item 2/5/INTEL Part 2, No 31 Squadron – Operation Reports, 'Report on Operation C005 of 24th August 1944', 25 August 1944. Note: Although the National Archives reference gives the file as '2/5/INTEL Part 2', it is actually Part 1 of this file.

²¹⁴ Rising to 9700 feet, and the highest peak in Timor, Mount Tatamailo was a good pinpoint.



A course was then set for home. For Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble it had been an adrenaline pumping experience. Flying as number 2 to Squadron Leader D'Arcy Wentworth, they had been in the van throughout, expending half of the cannon rounds fired by squadron aircraft during the operation. With their first offensive strike under their belt, they now felt fully-fledged members of the squadron.



**Mina bridge photographed from a No 31 Squadron Beaufighter
on an offensive road sweep of West Timor**

(Jack Brassil)

A NEW MONTH AND NEW CHALLENGES

After the excitement of the strike on Timor, the remainder of August would be an anticlimax. With squadron operations curtailed, Wilbur's diary entries bemoaned 'nothing doing at all'. There were, of course, the odd 'few beers with the boys', which elicited a salutary note the following morning: 'Got up late at 9.30. Had a bit of a head. Only a couple of glasses of beer in this heat and you've had it!'

For one squadron crew, however, the 25th August brought some unwelcome excitement when their Beaufighter (A19-172) swung on take-off and careered off the runway, coming to an ignominious end just short of the scrub (see photograph). Fortunately, the crew were uninjured, but A19-172 would not fly again and was converted to components.



Beaufighter A19-172 looking the worse for wear after ...

(RAAF Museum)

With time on their hands, Wilbur and Keith Noble were inspired to start the new month with an enterprising project—establishing a vegetable garden. A violent thunderstorm would also liven up the proceedings.

Friday, 1 September

Got a truck and went down to Coomalie Creek and got some soil for a garden. Had to make two trips to get enough. Lunch. In afternoon, Keith worked in garden and I read. Few beers, tea and wrote to Peg. Lightning burst on the strip, nose wheel [on aircraft] collapsed.²¹⁵



The squadron also swung back into action on 2 September with a long-range shipping sweep of the southern Aru Islands off the west coast of Dutch New Guinea. The following morning, Wilbur and Keith were awoken from their sleep at 8.30 am by a call over the loudspeaker to attend a briefing at nine.²¹⁶ With five other crews, they were tasked to carry out an armed shipping and road sweep of Timor. Unfortunately, Keith had developed a ‘Singapore-type’ ear infection and, to their disappointment, they were replaced on the operation by Ron Provost and his navigator. They would have to wait another two weeks before they would join another low-level strike.

In the meantime, with other squadron aircrew, Wilbur and Keith would be absorbed by an important new development. No 31 Squadron was to become the first Australian unit in the South-Western Pacific to be armed with rocket projectiles.

²¹⁵ Wilbur Wackett diary.

²¹⁶ *ibid*, entry for 3 September 1944.

ROCKET ARMED BEAUFIGHTERS

In late August 1944, several truckloads of strange looking equipment had arrived at No 31 Squadron's base at Coomalie Creek. The Squadron Engineering Officer, Frank Stewart,²¹⁷ has provided an amusing tale of the first tentative trials with this powerful new weaponry:

As Engineering Officer of the squadron, I was let into the secret and was informed that these plates, about four feet square, were to be attached to the underside of the Beaufighter mainplane and then rocket rails fitted to the plates. This then was the launching platform for aerial rockets. Pending the arrival of instructional staff, we set about fitting these ugly looking plates to a few aircraft ... The next step was to find out if we had fitted the equipment correctly and that the rockets would actually leave the rails.

So one bright morning, we trundled a Beau along one of the back roads and pointed it towards the bush. The road ran out a few yards ahead, but there was a track that led up a hill into the next valley. I posted a few chaps up on top of the hill to keep a lookout while we prepared the aircraft for firing and when we were ready we recalled them by Aldis lamp. When they were safely back in our area, we started the engines and with Sid Sippe at the controls, we revved up the engines until it was blowing a fair breeze over the mainplane and making quite a lot of noise.

Of course it was quite a gala atmosphere around the aircraft. We had collected up every available fire extinguisher which were strategically placed around the Beau, just in case the damned things didn't leave the rails and started a fire. The rockets, eight of them, were fitted with concrete practice heads, which weighed approximately 50 pounds. When everything had settled down and all the 'observers' were in place, the pilot pressed the switch and with a God Almighty swish, the rockets took off in a cloud of smoke towards Queensland, or anyhow, out that way somewhere.

We stopped the engines and examined the aircraft. No damage. With a few 'official' observers we jumped into a truck and proceeded up the hill to inspect our handiwork. From the firing site to over the next valley

²¹⁷ Flying Officer Francis 'Frank' Louis William Stewart, Service No. 035478 (8466), b. Perth, WA – 23 July 1911.

must have been a couple of miles and the going was pretty rough, so total elapsed time from firing to when we reached the top of the hill must have been 60 minutes. The concrete heads certainly did their work. They had cut down trees that would have done a Gippsland timber getter proud. And there, right in the middle of it all, an Army patrol had just arrived and were preparing to boil a billy – and would we care for a cuppa?

I diplomatically made some enquiries and was told the patrol had just that minute arrived and that this was a nice clear spot for lunch. Wonder how all the trees were chopped down? Must have been that thunderstorm and lightning the night before, I suppose! None of our party let on and the Army patrol went one way and we back tracked over the hill to Coomalie Creek, offering a silent prayer up to the saints that protect us from court martial!²¹⁸

It was now the turn of the squadron aircrew to share the excitement. On 4 September, four rocket projectile-fitted Beaufighters arrived at Coomalie Creek together with four experienced instructors. Squadron operations would cease for the next 10 days as each of the aircrews undertook rocket firing training under the watchful eye of the instructors. Unfortunately, Wilbur Wackett's diary entries cease on this date, so we do not know his reaction. However, judging from the comments of other pilots, there is little doubt that he would have found it an exhilarating, if not frightening, experience. With each aircraft mounting eight of the 60-lb high explosive rockets, Fred Anderson was suitably impressed: 'Equal to a cruiser broadside, and four DFC winners to instruct us.'²¹⁹

The logbook of Ron Leckie²²⁰ indicates that he and his pilot, Norm Tritton, carried out rocket training on the 13th and 18th September, performing 10 and 20 per cent angle dives on the target. He points out a potential danger to crews in this new mode of attack: 'In contrast to firing the cannons and machine guns, which made a hell of a racket, you usually didn't hear the rockets go—

²¹⁸ Frank Stewart, in 31 Squadron Association Newsletter. Copy held in the RAAF Museum, Point Cook.

²¹⁹ Fred Anderson wartime diary. Copy kindly provided to the author.

²²⁰ Flight Lieutenant Ronald 'Ron' Harry Leckie, RAAF No. 424493. b. Sydney, NSW – 25 April 1922.

just a light “whoosh”. You had to be careful not to dive into the ground during these attacks—the pilot could become so fascinated watching the rockets flying towards the target that he could forget to pull up in time.²²¹ This was tragically emphasised in a subsequent rocket training exercise remembered by another No 31 Squadron navigator, John White:

Bob Bowman and I had just landed back at base from our first rocket firing exercise when we learnt that the crew that took over from us had met their fate at the practice range. The pilot misjudged how high he was above the trees after firing and hit a tree. He had left it too late to pull out. The aircraft burst into flames and the crew were killed.²²²



Armourer Leading Aircraftman William Forrest fits warheads to rockets at Coomalie Creek, under the watchful eye of Flying Officer Syd Green (left) and Flying Officer Allan Cobb (right)

(Australian War Memorial: NWA0676)

²²¹ Ron Leckie to the author, 2007.

²²² John White to the author, 2007. The crew members were Flying officer Ian James Ingle (pilot) and Pilot Officer Alan Stanley Way (navigator), killed in aircraft accident 6 October 1944.

RETURN TO TIMOR

The squadron's first operational use of their new rockets would not take place until 29 September. In the meantime, Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble were in action again on 17 September, flying this time in Beaufighter A19-189. Together with five other No 31 Squadron crews, they were briefed to carry out a search and strafing attack on a Japanese motor transport convoy sighted the previous day on the Fuiloro to Lautem road in East Timor.



A trio of No 31 Squadron Beaufighters formate as they set out on an operation

(Jack Brassil)

Led by Flight Lieutenant David Doughton,²²³ the six Beaufighters took off from Coomalie Creek around 5.20 am.²²⁴ After forming and crossing the Australian coast, the strike force crossed the Timor Sea in a loose gaggle just below the cloud base at a height of 1000 feet. After two hours, landfall was made at Bauleu from where the formation tracked along the coast to Cape Lore before turning north to follow the road towards Fuiloro (see Map 13.1). Hampered by heavy cloud and thick scrub on both sides of the road, the crews strained to pick up enemy movement.

Before long their search bore fruit when a group of 3 to 4-ton motor transports was sighted sheltering among large palm trees by the side of the road. Diving to zero feet, the Beaufighters strafed the vehicles with cannon and machine-gun fire. The trucks, which were loaded with drums, burst into flames and, burning furiously, were completely destroyed. A further burst of cannon fire into a group of Japanese observed running from the scene was believed to have killed two of the enemy troops. Soon after, a Japanese armoured motorcycle unit was sighted and given a similar pasting; two strafing runs left the vehicles ablaze.

The formation continued at low level along the road as far as Fuiloro, where it circled and strafed the airfield, scoring numerous strikes on buildings. On leaving the target, the Beaufighters came under accurate light and medium ack-ack fire, with shells bursting around the aircraft at 300 feet. Flight Lieutenant David Strachan²²⁵ spotted the two guns responsible, protected in a sandbag emplacement in which the crews could be clearly seen. Turning hard to port, he made a low-level attack on the position, raking it with a long accurate burst. Smoke and debris erupted, causing 'consternation and evasive action by the gun crews.' During his head-on attack, Strachan's aircraft received two ack-

²²³ Flight Lieutenant David Percy James Doughton, Service No. 408638, b. Melbourne, Vic. – 13 August 1918.

²²⁴ Details from National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A11312, Item 2/5/ INTEL Part 1, No 31 Squadron – Operation Reports, 'Report on Operation C00 21 of 17th Sept', 18 September 1944. Note: Although the National Archives reference gives the file as '2/5/ INTEL Part 1', it is actually Part 2 of this file.

²²⁵ Flight Lieutenant David Bryan Frith Strachan, Service No. 401862, b. Sydney, NSW – 25 August 1921, Nos 31 and 94 Squadrons.

ack strikes in the belly, cutting the air lines to the cannons and rendering them unserviceable. A cannon shell also struck his windscreen but fortunately did not penetrate, demonstrating once again the vital, protective role of the Beaufighter's thick bulletproof windscreen during such dangerous low-level attacks.

Intense but ineffectual small arms fire was also met from a hillside south-east of Fuiloro, with crews observing flashes from all over the hillside. No damage was inflicted on any of the aircraft and the formation proceeded westwards as far as Pedra Branca searching for a suspected enemy camp area. No sightings were made and, with the Beaufighters nearing the limit of their endurance, the leader signalled it was time to return home.

Flying at 3000 feet and battling headwinds and a shortage of fuel, Wilbur Wackett and two other crews had to stage through Truscott airfield on the north-west Australian coast, where they landed at 9.45 am after a four and a half hour sortie. In a letter written to his family the following day, Wilbur described his impressions of the raid and life at Coomalie Creek, clearly also brimming with pride at the progress of his young daughter:

Over the last week we have been pretty busy flying and finished up yesterday with a good smack at Timor. We took off very early in the morning and it was jolly near half way before light came, so we could count the kites and make sure everyone was in his right place. You can imagine how tired Keith and I were when we finally got back filthy dirty at 4.30 in the afternoon. After tea we went to bed and slept soundly for twelve hours.

I am as fit as a fiddle and, of course, getting quite brown. We are very comfortable in our tent now and have a water bag similar to our camping one, which of course is in great demand as you certainly seem to be always thirsty up here ... The weather up here is marvellous. Yesterday six new crews arrived and so we don't feel as if we have just arrived anymore – we feel as if we know a bit about it now!

I received some lovely snaps from Peg of Bubby [Rahna] the other day. Gee she has grown and looks absolutely lovely. She is taking a little bit of orange juice now and Peg says she just laps it up. She is very happy and

spends most of her 'awake' hours grinning from ear to ear and plays with a rattle. Coming on, isn't she?²²⁶

OPERATION ADDER FINALE

The final phase of Operation *Adder* called for the extraction from Timor of the five SRD operatives landed there on 21 August. Operating from their Darwin base, the RAN Fairmile motor launches ML 807 and ML 814 were tasked to carry out the operation. Protection was again provided by No 31 Squadron, with four Beaufighters giving cover until last light on 19 September as the two Fairmiles made their way towards the Timor coast.

The following morning Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble, again flying in Beaufighter A19-189, were one of four crews providing aerial cover during the return voyage. Taking off from Coomalie Creek just before sunrise in company with Bob Bowman and John White (in A19-198), they made contact with the Fairmiles an hour and 40 minutes later. After signalling a greeting via Aldis lamp, the pair continued to circle the two vessels at low level for the next 1½ hours. Nothing untoward was observed. At 0945 hours with their charges now considered out of danger they set course for home, arriving back at base after almost five hours on patrol.²²⁷

²²⁶ Wilbur Wackett letter to his parents and sister Arlette, 18 September 1944 – Wackett family files

²²⁷ Details from National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A11312, Item 2/5/INTEL Part 1, No 31 Squadron – Operation Reports, 'Report on Operation C00 23 of 19th and 20th Sept', 22 September 1944; and National Archives of Australia, A3269, Item 12, D5/E: ML 809 Report 29/9/44, ML 814 Report 1/10/44 (by Lieutenant Alfred Fry, the senior naval officer on *Adder*).



A Beaufighter leaves the Australian coast en route over the Timor Sea

(RAAF Museum)

Frank Nolan, a crew member on ML 814, has given a graphic description of this final phase of Operation *Adder*:

Tuesday, 19 September 1944

Hardly slept last night, too tense ... we should reach the enemy coast tonight – running on one engine to conserve fuel – skipper came round and had a little talk to each of us probably a morale booster – I think he was just as tense as us.

Beaufighter escort did not arrive until mid-afternoon ... he flashed a message to us, probably 'Good luck' ... At 1650 we increased speed running now on both engines into action stations. We should sight the coast about 7 pm [1900hrs]. Coast now fully in sight, closing quickly. It is completely dark .. everyone peering looking for signal from our party – several fires sighted, going in to investigate, closely followed by 807, we can clearly see the outline of the trees no more than 200 yards away – motors just idling waiting for any signal. Still nothing. Two more fires sighted. We are all on tiptoes straining our eyes into the darkness; landing crew at the ready but the CO won't risk us unless the signs are positive – cruising slowly a little

Back on Operations

further up the coast spotted a light flashing near a gap in the hills but it died out quickly – more fires seen, the tension is intense. Where are they? Is it a trap? We only hope the poor bastards haven't been caught – we don't want to come all this way under the noses of the Nips without a result.

It is past midnight – we are waiting no longer – off at 1600 revs – we are all bitterly disappointed and frustrated all the effort and training and nothing achieved. ML 807 has disappeared astern of us – the coast is now receding into the darkness ...

Wednesday, 20 September 1944

Dawn finds us speeding south – am absolutely exhausted having had virtually no sleep for 24 hours ... Beaufighter escort arrived again which eased the tension a bit. 807 reported 20 miles astern – arrived Snake Bay jaded and very despondent. How did it all fail.²²⁸

What had befallen the SRD operatives would not become known until after the war. Regrettably, an earlier intelligence team landed on Timor had been captured by the Japanese and subjected to horrific torture. Forced to send false messages back to Australia, the leader omitted the required 'authenticator word'. Inexplicably, SRD Headquarters in Melbourne failed to react to this clear evidence that the mission had been compromised and, oblivious to the danger, continued to send messages containing highly sensitive information to Timor. In consequence, the Japanese had detailed foreknowledge of the plans for Operation *Adder*. The brave intelligence team inserted by ML 429 on August 21, led by Captain Grimson, had been betrayed by this gross intelligence blunder. They were ambushed soon after landing and all were captured and executed the following day.²²⁹

The involvement of No 31 Squadron a few days later in another clandestine operation, providing cover for the insertion by Catalina flying boat of intelligence

²²⁸ Frank Nolan wartime diary, quoted in Peter Evans (ed.), *Fairmile Ships of the Royal Australian Navy, Volume 1*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, NSW, 2002, pp. 177–178.

²²⁹ Evans, *Fairmile Ships of the Royal Australian Navy*, pp. 196–197. Further details at <http://www.specialoperationsaustralia.com/soa>.

teams onto islands in the Banda Sea north-east of Timor, would also have tragic consequences.

CHAPTER 14

LOST WITHOUT TRACE

*Long hours we flew above the empty miles
Of endless sea, like eagles hung in space,
So motionless, with neither cloud or ship
To mark our speed. It seemed Eternity
Had come and gone since that uncertain hour
Of darkness when we cleared the jungle strip
And headed for the sea ...
High-poised in space, we held our steady course
While distance and the hours of daylight fled ...*

Kevin Collopy, RAAF²³⁰

ESCORTING CATALINAS TO NILA

In addition to its involvement in the clandestine *Adder* operations, No 31 Squadron had since mid-1944 been closely associated with another series of secret SRD operations: the insertion by Catalina aircraft of intelligence teams onto Seroea and Nila Islands in the Banda Sea (see Map 12.1). Operatives placed on these two islands, north-east of Timor and strategically located near the southern entrance to the Banda Sea, would monitor Japanese movements in the area for several weeks before being picked up again by another Catalina.

On the 3rd and 4th June, eight Beaufighter crews from Coomalie Creek, operating in relays, had provided protective cover for the outward and return

²³⁰ From poem, 'Action Over Timor', by Kevin Collopy, RAAF, in *As You Were, Australian War Memorial*, Canberra, 1949, p. 48.

flight of a Darwin-based Catalina flying boat carrying the first SRD team to be inserted on Seroea Island. The missions were then continued every few weeks. In similar operations to nearby Nila Island that began for the squadron in late July, the Beaufighter crews were fascinated as they circled around the alighted flying boat to see canoes came out from the island to meet the Catalina, and Dutch flags flying from several villages. 'All natives seen were waving ... and appeared friendly.'²³¹ Harold Adams,²³² who was a flight engineer on No 43 Squadron RAAF Catalinas involved in these clandestine operations, remembers the welcome committees well:

When landing at Nila, the natives used to paddle out to us in dugout canoes and throw bananas and coconuts into the aircraft. We used to become so overloaded with fruit that sometimes we had to shut the blister canopy. They couldn't do enough for us – they were a terrific mob. When we were dropping off an intelligence team, several of our crew would go ashore in a native canoe to assist them to carry and set up their radio gear. They could receive radio messages but, to avoid detection, could not transmit.²³³

These demanding sorties were of almost six hours duration, entailing a return flight of some 1100 miles from Coomalie Creek base. The marked mismatch between the cruising speeds of the Catalinas and their Beaufighter escorts also complicated matters. Harold Adams has humorously suggested: 'The Catalina was so slow, it was the only aircraft that could get a bird strike from the rear!'²³⁴ Wilbur's friend Ron Provost has elaborated on the challenge this mismatch presented to the squadron pilots:

²³¹ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A11312, Item 2/5/INTEL Part 2, No 31 Squadron – Operation Reports, 'Report on Operation C00 31 of 31 July 1944', 1 August 1944. Note: Although the National Archives reference gives the file as '2/5/INTEL Part 2', it is actually Part 1 of this file.

²³² Warrant Officer Harold Victor Adams, Service No. 11061, b. Narrandera, Vic. – 24 May 1917.

²³³ Harold Adams to the author, 2007. Further details of these missions to Nila Island may be found in: Harold Adams, *Sunset to Sunrise – A Catalina War*, 2nd Edition, self-published, Lavington, NSW, 2007.

²³⁴ Harold Adams to the author, 2007.

Lost Without Trace

The Catalina had a cruising speed of only 110 knots. As our Beaufighters cruised at almost twice this speed, the Cat would leave its Darwin base several hours before us. We had no radar to assist our rendezvous. However, we were given their track at briefing, so we would fly over the Arafura Sea at a few thousand feet until catching up with them. We would then have to fly wide circles around the Cat as we would fall out of the sky if we tried flying at their speed.²³⁵



A Catalina of No 43 Squadron in flight

(Australian War Memorial: 128021)

²³⁵ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.



Heading across a calm Timor Sea

(RAAF Museum)

The first of the squadron's clandestine operations to Seroea and Nila Islands after Wilbur's arrival at Coomalie Creek occurred on 23 September, to be followed by further missions over the next few days. Operating in pairs, the squadron Beaufighters would give staged cover for the Catalinas during their period of greatest vulnerability when approaching the Banda Sea. Flying at a few thousand feet, the initial pair of Beaufighters would rendezvous with the Catalina between the Tanimbar and Barbar Islands (see Map 12.1). A second pair of Beaufighters that had taken off later from Coomalie Creek would arrive on the scene after the Catalina had alighted, and provide cover for the Catalina's subsequent lift-off and return flight.

Unfortunately, an added hazard faced by the tired crews upon their nighttime return was poor visibility due to smoke from the end of dry season grass fires endemic to the Northern Territory at this time of year. Ron Provost, who flew on the first of these operations on 23 September, recalls:

Lost Without Trace

After take-off we encountered considerable smoke haze as we flew from Coomalie Creek to the coast. The mainland was an absolute disaster at this time of year as the air was full of dust and smoke. Visibility was terrible at night and I was worried about the problems this might cause us on our return. As we crossed Bathurst Island I saw a large bushfire burning and said to my navigator, Keith McGuire: 'Make a note of exactly where that fire is. When we come back we may be off course, so it should provide us with a good guide.'

Together with another Beaufighter, we flew at 3,000 feet across the Arafura Sea until about 100 miles from Seroea Island. Dropping down to sea level, we flew on to the island where we found the Catalina on the water. They had dropped off several bods, including an intelligence officer and a radio operator to man a listening post for Japanese activity in the area. We took over cover of the Cat from two other No 31 Squadron Beaufighters²³⁶ that were already there and remained with it until dark before leaving for base. The flight back over the Arafura Sea was not a lot of fun as I had to feather my starboard engine, which began to run rough.

When we finally got near the Australian coastline Keith dropped a flare to determine the wind direction. I told him: 'We are not going inland until we find that bushfire on Bathurst Island to check where we are.' We found it after a quick square search and realised we were 20 miles off course to port. We flew over it and Keith gave me a course to Coomalie Creek. Visibility was terrible and navigation was entirely on instruments. When we estimated we were about 10 miles from base I broke radio silence and requested them to turn on a searchlight to help guide us. In the murk, I was within five miles before I saw the beam. I then restarted the feathered engine and was fortunately able to make a safe landing.²³⁷

²³⁶ Crews: Flight Lieutenant Jack Gibbings/Pilot Officer Harry Moo, and Pilot Officer Lloyd Ritchie/Warrant Officer George Warner

²³⁷ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

A FATEFUL OPERATION

Saturday 23 September had passed uneventfully for Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble back at Coomalie Creek until mid-afternoon when they were called on the tannoy to report for briefing. The Intelligence Officer, Bill Sugden,²³⁸ informed them that they would join three other crews in carrying out another Catalina cover operation the following day (24 September), in this case to Nila Island.

Flying in Beaufighter A19-208, they would be paired with Flying Officer Lloyd Ritchie²³⁹ and Warrant Officer George Warner²⁴⁰ (in A19-192) who, unusually, would be doubling up after their similar escort sortie to Seroea Island the previous day. Take-off was scheduled for 3.15 pm, some 40 minutes after the first pair of Beaufighters who were to cover the outward flight of the Catalina. All crews were instructed to fly to within a hundred miles of Nila Island at 1500 feet before dropping to sea level and to attack and destroy with cannon fire all vessels not showing the agreed signals. Returning to his tent, Wilbur penned what would be his last letter to his family:

Dearest Mother and Dad,

I received your very welcome letters and was so glad to get the latest news. Things here are much the same, but we have been on the job once more and I'm glad to say there are less Nips in the world since I wrote last. We have been mainly concerned with road sweeps and there's nothing burns like a nice big truck after a burst of cannon.

Actually we have been kept pretty busy lately but we don't mind as it makes time fly. We have been here almost two months now, and a batch of new crews arrived since I last wrote which makes us feel a bit better. We are not the mugs any more. Keith is very well, though he has been a bit off colour, due to an inoculation the doctor gave him.

²³⁸ Flight Lieutenant William 'Bill' Frederick Sugden, Service No. 255881, b. Narrandera, NSW – 22 November 1905.

²³⁹ Flying Officer Lloyd Francis Ritchie, Service No. 426287, b. Brisbane, Qld – 6 December 1922, killed in action 24 September 1944.

²⁴⁰ Warrant Officer George Robert Warner, Service No. 418028, b. Coburg, Vic. – 22 April 1922, died c. 2001.

Lost Without Trace

I wish to congratulate you both on your silver anniversary and only hope that Peg and I shall be as happy as you both are when we have ours, in umpteen years time. It must have been a very nice party by the sound of it. We are pretty low now as far as beer goes up here and only get the bare two bottles per week. When we first arrived the bar had a pretty good stock which was being continuously replaced by aircraft coming up from the south, but now that seems to have fallen off.

Tonight is picture night and last night we had a concert. Some of the shows up here are very good indeed. I believe Stella Wilson is on down at NWA on Sunday night, so we'll all trod down. Filling in the nights till its bed time is one of the hardest tasks up here. The insects nearly drive you mad if you stay indoors, so open air shows are the solution. We are going on a duck shooting trip next week, out to one of the big lagoons a few miles from here. I hope we do, since a good feed of wild duck would go just right at the moment. I'm also in with a crowd that are keen on fishing, but at the moment transport is our problem, and it's hard to get recalled if a job is on. Bubby [Rahna] seems to be coming on wonderfully well and Peg says she is absolutely beautiful now. It's a pity I'm missing out on the fun of seeing her grow up but still there you are.

I have my own kite now and she's a little honey. We received a couple of Aussie jobs [Beaufighters] the other day and we are going to try them out ... Well folks, no more news for now. Do not worry too much about me I'll be OK, and home again before you know where you are.

Your Loving Son,
Wilbur²⁴¹

Wilbur's 'little honey', A19-208, was one of the last British-built Beaufighters to be assembled in Australia and had only arrived on squadron a few weeks previously. When Ron Provost learnt of Wilbur's sortie that afternoon, he spoke to his friend of the navigational difficulties that he had experienced the previous night, and strongly recommended:

²⁴¹ Wilbur Wackett letter to his parents, 23 September 1944 – Wackett family files.

On the way out you should look for the big bushfire on the western side of Bathurst Island and note its position. It will give a good reference point when you return tonight. You could easily be quite a bit off course, as we were. If you can't find the fire when you approach the coast whatever you do, do not go inland. Visibility is nil over the land. But it is good over the sea, so turn starboard and follow the coast to Darwin. From there it should be a relatively straight-forward flight south to base.²⁴²

Norm Tritton, the No 31 Squadron 'B' Flight Commander, also vividly remembers the preparations for the sortie:

I had seen a lot of Wilbur on the flight and in the Mess since his arrival on the squadron. He was a hell of a good bloke and a very experienced pilot. He and Keith Noble shared a tent near mine. On the day of their sortie to Nila I picked them up at their tent to drive them to the strip in my jeep. When I arrived, Wilbur showed me photos of his wife and young daughter that were on a box in his tent. He was very proud of them.

Before he took off we spoke about the difficulties recently experienced by crews in the hazy conditions. I told him of a nasty experience of mine one night when a bad storm had knocked out our radio and we were lost in the dark. I recounted asking my navigator, Ron Leckie, if he knew where we were. When he responded 'I haven't got a clue', I had decided that we may have to climb and bale out, even at the risk of landing in the sea or alternatively getting a gum tree up our back sides. However, upon switching on the SOS signal on our IFF,²⁴³ almost immediately a searchlight had come on in Darwin. It was the best sight I had ever seen. We were almost over the place but had not seen it for the murk.

I strongly suggested to Wilbur that he take similar action if he should become lost in the haze and smoke. The last thing I said to him before he and Keith climbed into the aircraft was: 'If you get thoroughly lost and your radio is out, use your IFF to send an SOS. If that doesn't help, bale

²⁴² Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

²⁴³ IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) was an electronic device carried by Allied aircraft to indicate they were not enemy aircrafts.

out.²⁴⁴ I watched his Beaufighter and that of Lloyd Ritchie take off. Little did I realise that I would be the last person on base to see them alive. I was absolutely mortified when they did not return.²⁴⁵



Photo of Peggie kept by Wilbur in his tent

(Julie Parsons)

Forty minutes earlier, at 1439 hours, the two Beaufighter crews tasked with rendezvousing with the Catalina had departed Coomalie Creek.²⁴⁶ They met the

²⁴⁴ Wilbur had apparently also recently indicated to other aircrew that he believed climbing and baling out the most sensible option if caught in this situation. See Parnell, *Beaufighters in the Pacific*, p. 122.

²⁴⁵ Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

²⁴⁶ Flight Lieutenant Strachan (pilot) / Warrant Officer Brassil (navigator), and Flying Officer Cockroft (pilot) / Pilot Officer Davis (navigator).

Cat on schedule some 80 miles south of Nila Island. Escorting it to the island, they arrived at 1739 hours to find Dutch flags flying from all points on the island and the natives appearing friendly and unafraid of the aircraft. Less welcome was a strong sea swell that was running, causing the Catalina to become airborne again when first attempting to land. Soon after, one of the Beaufighters developed a problem with its port engine. Fortunately, the timely arrival of the replacement pair of aircraft, piloted by Wilbur Wackett and Lloyd Ritchie, allowed the first duo to depart.²⁴⁷



Nila Island, dominated by the thickly forested 780-metre cone of its dormant volcano

The Catalina eventually succeeded in alighting near the island and, after providing cover until last light, Wackett and Ritchie duly set course for base. With Wilbur in the lead in A19-208, their passage south across the Arafura Sea was uneventful and at 2050 hours they were reported by radar to be approaching Melville Island from the north-west. Nine minutes later, in response to a request from the Duty Operations Officer at No 31 Squadron, No 105 Fighter Control

²⁴⁷ After great difficulty, this first pair arrived back safely at Coomalie Creek at 2030 hours (six hours after take-off).

Unit advised that radar plots (Table 14.1) showed them to be slightly off course being 20 miles east of Cape Hotham, their intended landfall (see Map 14.1).

A DARK AND TRAGIC NIGHT

It was assumed that upon sighting the mainland coast, the two aircraft would shortly alter course and make the correct approach over Cape Hotham. However, no change in course was made, as the next radar plot at 2118 hours located the pair 70 miles east of Sattler airfield. The coast had apparently been crossed sight unseen and now, deep inland and well east of their intended track, the fliers were in serious trouble.

At 2120 hours, it being estimated that the Beaufighters had only half to three quarters of an hour fuel left, Batchelor Signals Section received permission to broadcast, in plain language, the following message: 'You are 60 miles east of Sattler, turn west.' There was some hope that this message was received when 10 minutes later the aircraft were plotted 50 miles east of Livingstone airstrip and turning south-west. However, these hopes were soon dashed when they were reported at 2142 hours to be circling Finke Bay (see Map 14.1) some 90 miles to the east of Darwin. Their decision to fly north-east at this stage remains a puzzling mystery. They were now clearly lost and in grave danger.

Livingstone and Fenton airfields were asked to turn on their searchlights and flare paths, and the controller at No 79 Wing was requested to urgently broadcast to the aircraft the message: 'You are 90 miles east of Darwin, turn west to Darwin, searchlights on there.' Darwin duty pilot simultaneously broadcast on R/T in plain language, advising the crews to turn west and land at Darwin. At 2145, Batchelor D/F Section²⁴⁸ reported that Groote Eylandt and Merauke D/F Stations in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Papua, respectively, had heard A19-192 (Ritchie) make requests to Batchelor for bearings, and had passed his bearings.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ A high-frequency radio direction-finding (D/F) station.

²⁴⁹ The impressive range of the Beaufighter radios is recalled by Ron Provost. Often when returning from raids on Timor, he would tune into a Perth radio station for the evening news! Ron Provost to the author, 2007.

Strangely, Batchelor had not heard the request and, upon responding, had received no reply from the aircraft. No messages of any nature were received from Wackett's aircraft.

Despite the evident and most unfortunate radio problems being experienced by the two Beaufighters, hope rose again for the crews when a further radar plot at 2153 hours showed that they had turned south again and were now 50 miles east of Coomalie Creek base. Sattler, Strauss and Hughes airfields were asked to turn on their flare paths and be ready to receive the two aircraft, should they try to land there. However, the aircraft continued to track south-west, as revealed by a radar plot at 2207 hours locating them only 35 miles east-south-east from Coomalie and apparently heading towards Fenton airfield.

By this stage, both aircraft were thought to have only minutes of fuel remaining and No 31 Squadron operations staff awaited anxiously the next advice from 105 Fighter Control Unit. Arriving at 2227 hours, it gave the surprising news that the two aircraft had separated. High hopes were now held for the recovery of one aircraft, identified as A19-192 (Ritchie), which was within 7 miles of Fenton airfield, approaching from the north. However, to the consternation of those at Coomalie base, Wackett's aircraft had inexplicably turned east and was now some 65 miles north-east of Fenton and heading north. It was 'showing SOS on its IFF'.

Three minutes later, Batchelor D/F Station phoned to say that they had heard Ritchie's aircraft asking for a bearing, and had told him to proceed on his present course. Regrettably, nothing further was heard from the aircraft. At 2244 hours, the squadron received the dreaded news that an aircraft had crashed a few minutes earlier in the vicinity of Brock's Creek, only a few miles north-east of Fenton. After all the efforts to guide them home, the crew had tragically run out of fuel when only a few minutes from safety.

All hope was also now gone for the safe return of Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble in A19-208. The last reliable radar plot at 2227 hours (over 7 hours after take-off) had located them flying at 16 000 feet over wild and inhospitable country well to the south-east of Coomalie Creek, at the southern end of what is now Kakadu National Park (Map 14.1). With fuel almost gone, they had apparently climbed in preparation for baling out. At 2254 hours, 'as both aircraft

had faded from the radar screens, Fenton, Darwin, Livingstone, Hughes and Batchelor airfields were notified that they could now put out their searchlights and flare paths, as there was no hope of the aeroplanes landing anymore.’

Time	Location (Heading)
2050 hrs	North of Melville Island, heading south.
2059 hrs	20 miles east of Cape Hotham, their intended landfall (70 miles north-east of Darwin).
2118 hrs	70 miles east of Sattler aerodrome.
2119 hrs	60 miles east of Sattler aerodrome.
2130 hrs	50 miles east of Livingstone airstrip, turning south-west.
2142 hrs	90 miles east of Darwin, circling Finke Bay.
2153 hrs	50 miles east of Coomalie Creek base, heading west.
2207 hrs	35 miles from Coomalie Creek, bearing 100° (True), and heading towards Fenton.
2224 hrs	One aircraft (A19-208, Wackett/Noble) 65 miles from Coomalie Creek, bearing 095° (True).
2227 hrs	One aircraft (A19-192, Ritchie/Warner) 7 miles north of Fenton, heading towards Fenton. Other aircraft (A19-208, Wackett/Noble) 65 miles north-east of Fenton, heading north. Showing SOS on IFF.
2234 hrs	Last momentary plot on aircraft A19-208 (Wackett): 13° 11' S 132° 00' E, 55 miles north-east from Fenton, speed 160 mph, height unknown.
2244 hrs	No 31 Squadron informed an aircraft [A19-192] had crashed a few miles north-east of Fenton.
2254 hrs	Aircraft A19-208 had faded off the radar screens.

Table 14.1: Radar Plots from No 105 Fighter Control Unit for A19-192 and A19-208 on night of 24 September 1944²⁵⁰

It was extremely disturbing news for the squadron. However, there was still hope that the crews may have been able to bale out before their aircraft had run out of fuel and crashed. Exiting a Beaufighter was relatively straightforward for both the pilot and navigator via hatches in their cockpit floors. Once opened by

²⁵⁰ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 166/30/81, NOBLE, Keith Eric William (Flying Officer), Service Number 424052 – Casualty File; and letter from Group Captain Charles Eaton (RAAF Headquarters Darwin) to Lawrence Wackett, 8 Oct 1944.

a quick release, the hatches protruded into the slipstream affording a measure of protection to exiting crew members, even in a high-speed dive.²⁵¹

The search for survivors would now begin.



A No 31 Squadron Beaufighter flies over bushland of the Northern Territory Top End

(RAAF Museum)

²⁵¹ See 'Century of Flight – British Aircraft of World War Two', http://www.century-of-flight.net/Aviation%20history/photo_albums/timeline/ww2/Bristol%20Beaufighter.htm, accessed 1 September 2011.



Map 14.1: Wreck sites of Beaufighters A19-208 (Wackett/Noble) and A19-192 (Ritchie/Warner) – Last radar plot for A19-208 marked with crossed arrow

(No 31 Squadron Beaufighter Association – RAAF Museum)

CHAPTER 15

THE SEARCH FOR SURVIVORS

The search for possible survivors began at first light the following morning (25 September) when three squadron aircraft took off from Coomalie Creek to search the last known locations of the two missing Beaufighters. Soon after, hopes were raised when George Warner, the navigator from A19-192, was picked up at 8.20 am by a southbound train near Howley, having walked there from the crash site of his aircraft. Returning to the squadron later that day, he was able to provide some insight into the drama that had unfolded the previous night.²⁵²

As suspected, the crews had not sighted the coast as they crossed it around 8 pm. The two aircraft continued on together for another two hours, although unable to communicate with each other by R/T. At this stage, Lloyd Ritchie advised his navigator that he was going to take over the lead as he believed they were lost. He then flew in front of A19-208 and waggled his wings, while George Warner signalled by Aldis lamp, 'Follow me'. No reply was received from Wackett's aircraft. A19-192 then homed on Fenton beacon and, after about 20 minutes, lights were sighted which turned out to be a bright fire and beyond that a circle of bright electric lights. They flew past these for a few minutes, whereupon Warner informed Ritchie that he considered they were near Fenton and that they should be able to see the Fenton searchlight.

However, no searchlight was sighted. As there was by then very little fuel left, Ritchie decided to fly towards the previously mentioned bright lights, gain altitude and bale out. He circled once around the lights in a climbing turn and called the navigator to the front cockpit where he tightened the pilot's parachute straps and removed his earphones. As the fuel gauges were then registering zero,

²⁵² National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A9186, Item 61: RAAF Unit History Sheets (Form A.50) [Operations Record Book – Forms A.50 and A.51], Number 31 Squadron, Aug 42 – Aug 45, Operations Record Book and Unit History Sheets September 1944; and National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 166/43/871, WARNER, George Robert (Warrant Officer), Service Number 418028 – Casualty File.

Ritchie instructed Warner to open the bottom hatch, and a few seconds later gave the order to jump. Over 40 years later, Robert Warner still recalled clearly the events following his exit from A19-192:

After baling out, I pulled the ripcord and the 'chute opened and I pulled up with a sudden jerk, except for the boot on my right foot which kept going. I recall the Beau swooping or so it seemed, with the motors windmilling and it seemed very close ... It was a very dark night and suddenly I hit the ground, knocking the wind out of me (although I already had the wind up) and injuring my right foot and the base of my spine. I landed in a small open spot in the bush and after a minute or so shouted out for Lloyd Ritchie, who I thought would not be far away. When I could not hear anything, I was not worried as I expected to link up with him in the morning. I heard the aircraft hit the dust before I landed ... I remember wild dogs or dingoes howling, so I wrapped the 'chute around me and went to sleep.

I woke at daylight and shouted Lloyd's name several times and then walked in all directions for a few hundred yards or so, but no sign of him. My ankle and back were paining quite severely by then, so I ... [began walking] in a westerly direction. Some hours later I struck the train line running north/south. This was the first sign of civilisation that I had seen. I stopped at the train line intending to follow it north, and on cue a train turned up. It stopped and a couple of Army chaps helped me into a truck. They dropped me off at a small siding, where an old bush character had a house and, it being lunch time, gave me some fresh fish which was probably his lunch.

I got through to the squadron and a couple of hours later an ambulance turned up with two squadron members, one of whom being the doctor. They took me back to the squadron. I remember I could not sit down on the trip as the road was a mass of potholes and it hurt my back too much, and the right ankle was giving me trouble, so I hung on and stood on one foot, glad when it was over. I then spent a few days in the squadron hospital.²⁵³

The No 31 Squadron Commanding Officer, D'Arcy Wentworth, has also recounted the events of that first day:

²⁵³ Robert Warner, in letter to John Brassil, 17 June 1988. Copy in No 31 Squadron files, held in the RAAF Museum, Point Cook.

The Search for Survivors

At first light I flew three navigational tracks in on [Wackett's] radar plottings from different directions. We got a good pinpoint and started from there ... With the bush fires, smoke would be rising everywhere as soon as it started to warm up, so we had to go there before first light while all the fires were dead in case he was anywhere near, and we could pick up his signal ... We never found anything.²⁵⁴

The other two squadron crews on the early morning search also reported no sightings of the missing airmen or their aircraft. Further searches by another Beaufighter trio that began five-hour reces from early afternoon were also fruitless, as was an air search until last light made by D'Arcy Wentworth. It had been a frustrating day.

In the meantime, at 5.30 that evening in Sydney, Peggie Wackett was telephoned by the RAAF Casualty Section with the devastating news that Wilbur was 'missing on operations'. In Melbourne shortly after, Lawrence Wackett was informed by his brother, Air Commodore Ellis Wackett. He sadly noted years later in his autobiography:

... we farewelled him, hoping for the best. Letters arrived telling that he had made several sorties in the course of a few weeks; and then, one day, while I was at my brother's office at Air Force headquarters, he handed me a telegram, his face tense.

The telegram said that Wilbur was missing on a night flight after having been out over the Timor Sea. I had to break the news to his mother and young wife ...²⁵⁵

Wilbur's sister, Arlette, still vividly remembers the day: 'Dad picked me up in his car in the city where I was working. He told me the terrible news as we drove home – I will always remember him saying, "I don't know how I am going to be able to tell your mother"'²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ D'Arcy Wentworth to Neville Parnell. From a letter by Parnell to Barton Perkins in Aug 1980.

²⁵⁵ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 209; also original manuscript of Lawrence Wackett's autobiography, held in the National Library of Australia (MS 4858).

²⁵⁶ Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) to the author, 2009.

Lost Without Trace

The following day (26 September) a land party, led by the No 31 Squadron Engineering Officer, Frank Stewart, and aided by directions provided by George Warner, located the wreck of Ritchie's aircraft (A19-192) in dense, rocky bushland approximately two miles north of Brock's Creek (see Map 14.1). D'Arcy Wentworth again recalled:

There was nobody in the aircraft except for a wallaby and a bird that had been killed in the crash. No sign of Ritchie. We worked out from the observer that the aircraft couldn't have been in the air for more than a minute after he baled out, so we plotted back from there travelling at say, 200 mph, giving the area where Ritchie could have landed. We got all the prisoners from the [Army] detention camp at Brock's Creek and put them within sighting distance of each other and searched the whole area. We never found anything of him at all.²⁵⁷



Wreckage of Ritchie's Beaufighter A19-192 when located on 26 September 1944

(RAAF Museum)

²⁵⁷ D'Arcy Wentworth to Neville Parnell. From a letter by Parnell to Barton Perkins in August 1980.



**One of the Bristol Hercules XVIII radial engines of Beaufighter A19-192,
photographed at the crash site on 26 September 1944**

(RAAF Museum)

The only item located by the almost 100 Army and RAAF personnel during their thorough search was Warner's parachute, found about 400 yards from the wreckage. When extensive squadron air searches throughout the day again yielded no sightings of Wilbur's aircraft or the three missing aircrew, very grave concerns began to be felt for their survival. In particular, it seemed highly likely that Lloyd Ritchie had lost his life. He could not have parachuted more than five miles from the crashed aircraft, and as the location had Army camps practically all around, it seemed inconceivable that he could have wandered away without striking one of these camps.

On 26 September, Peggie and Wilbur's parents received telegrams confirming their earlier verbal advice, and informing them of the finding of one of the aircraft. There was no new information concerning Wilbur and his navigator. In this distressing time, Peggie had moved with young Rahna from their flat in Bellevue Hill, to join her parents living a few doors away. Both families would now begin the anxious wait for more news.

Lost Without Trace

T.G. 41A		COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA-POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT		No.
CASH REGISTER 191857		URGENT TELEGRAM This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.		AFFIX STAMPS HERE
SCN. C. 4121-4/1943-M.P.CO.-16772		THE ADDRESS MUST CONTAIN ALL INFORMATION NECESSARY TO ENSURE DELIVERY		
WORDS.....	CHARGE.....	TIME.....	BY.....	REMARKS.....
To TELEGRAPHIC ACKNOWLEDGMENT DELIVERY		PERSONAL MRS. W.L. WACKETT		
C/O COL. J.H. STEPHENSON, FLAT 8,		81 BIRRIGA D. BELLEVUE HILL, N.S.W.		
588 SQUADRON LEADER W.L. WACKETT MISSING STOP REGRET TO CONFIRM VERBAL ADVICE CONVEYED BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT TANNER THAT YOUR HUSBAND SQUADRON LEADER WILBUR LAWRENCE WACKETT IS MISSING AS RESULT AIR OPERATIONS ON 24th SEPTEMBER 1944 STOP KNOWN DETAILS ARE HE WAS CAPTAIN AND PILOT OF BEAUFIGHTER AIRCRAFT RETURNING FROM OPERATIONAL ESCORT DUTY WHICH FAILED TO REACH BASE STOP TWO AIRCRAFT ARE MISSING ONE KNOWN TO HAVE CRASHED VICINITY BROCK'S CREEK IN DARWIN AREA BUT IDENTITY OF THIS AIRCRAFT NOT				
CHARGES FOR URGENT RATE TELEGRAM FOR 14 WORDS OR LESS: WITHIN A 15 MILE RADIUS, 1/6; BEYOND A 15 MILE RADIUS, 2/-.		FROM.....		
EACH ADDITIONAL WORD IN BOTH CASES 2d.		RAAF CASUALTY SECTION		

T.G. 41A		COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA-POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT		No.
CASH REGISTER 191857		URGENT TELEGRAM This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.		AFFIX STAMPS HERE
SCN. C. 4121-4/1943-M.P.CO.-16772		THE ADDRESS MUST CONTAIN ALL INFORMATION NECESSARY TO ENSURE DELIVERY		
WORDS.....	CHARGE.....	TIME.....	BY.....	REMARKS.....
To.....			
YET ESTABLISHED STOP LAND AND AIR SEARCHES ARE PROCEEDING STOP THIS INFORMATION IS CONFIDENTIAL AND NOT FOR PUBLICATION STOP THE MINISTER FOR AIR JOINING WITH AIR BOARD IN EXPRESSING SINCERE SYMPATHY IN YOUR ANXIETY STOP WHEN ANY FURTHER INFORMATION IS RECEIVED IT WILL BE CONVEYED TO YOU IMMEDIATELY				
CHARGES FOR URGENT RATE TELEGRAM FOR 14 WORDS OR LESS: WITHIN A 15 MILE RADIUS, 1/6; BEYOND A 15 MILE RADIUS, 2/-.		AIR FORCE, 391 LITTLE COLLINS ST MELBOURNE,		
EACH ADDITIONAL WORD IN BOTH CASES 2d.			

Telegram received by Peggie Wackett from RAAF Casualty Section
on 26 September 1944

(Julie Parsons)

The search for Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble now had added urgency. It was the end of the dry season and, without rain in the area for over three months, the missing men may already be without water. Other aircraft, including DH-84 Dragons from a nearby communications unit, joined in the aerial search.

The Search for Survivors

On 27 September, as well as continuing air searches, an overland search party largely comprising Army personnel set out before dawn from Coomalie Creek. Flying Officer Fred Anderson, who had flown on several of the search flights during the previous two days, was tasked with two other squadron aircrew (Allan Cobb and Syd Green) and the squadron Medical Officer ('Doc' Ken Corlis) to assist in the expedition. Over the next three days, the team travelling in Army trucks battled its way through country so rough that tyres were constantly shredded and replacements had to be airdropped to them. Fred's role in the lead vehicle was to keep in radio communication with search aircraft and the base as they attempted to follow radar plots recorded for the missing Beaufighter. His brief diary entries provide some idea of the difficulty of the country the search party had to traverse:

September 26, 1944

Flew with CO on search – still no trace. Up until one a.m. organising truck for search party.

September 27, 1944

Up at 4 am and off in convoy of 9 trucks – led the way in W/T truck, guided by R/T from aircraft, through trackless timbered, waterless country. Search parties lost 4 wheels.

September 28, 1944

Searched to no avail – ordered 12 tyres and tubes and told to return. Had 5 blowouts to mend.

September 29, 1944

Left early and arrived back at 7.30 pm, dirty, unshaven and very tired.²⁵⁸

In a letter to the Wackett family many years later, Jack Batchelor, one of the Army personnel on the search, graphically described the ordeal that they

²⁵⁸ Fred Anderson wartime diary. Copy kindly provided to the author

endured in the rough country, highlighting the challenges that would have faced a survivor from the crashed Beaufighter in attempting to walk out:

I was a member of a Commando unit camped on the Mary River some miles south of Darwin. We were told that a Beaufighter was missing and were asked to take part in the search as we were very experienced in map reading and compass bearings. We travelled in a southerly direction for three days and suffered from heat and flies and lack of water and food. They dropped tyres for us when we would have preferred water canisters. The country was rugged and one would have to walk right on the plane to find it. We failed to find it and we knew that all was lost as the conditions were really bad. One of our boys died from the ordeal and was buried at Adelaide River.²⁵⁹



Some of the Army/RAAF land party in rough bush country during their unsuccessful search for Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble from 26 to 29 September 1944

(Fred Anderson)

²⁵⁹ Letter from Jack Batchelor to Phillip Crowther (son-in-law of Arlette Perkins – née Wackett).

Early on 28 September there had been brief hopes that Beaufighter A19-208 had been found when a No 31 Squadron crew reported an aircraft crashed into the side of a hill about 3 miles from Annaburroo homestead near Burrundie (see Map 14.1). A ground party was quickly dispatched to the location but the wreckage turned out to be that of a Guinea Airways aircraft lost years earlier. Hopes of finding the missing men alive now seemed remote and the official search was called off on 29 September. Desperate for further news, Lawrence Wackett wrote on 5 October to Group Captain Charles Eaton,²⁶⁰ at RAAF Headquarters Darwin, who he had known since the early days of the RAAF in the mid-1920s:

Dear Charlie,

It is only because of the strain which I have to carry while the fate of my son is in doubt that I dare to trouble you with a letter of inquiry at this time. His mother and his wife press me to get all the news possible ... He has been missing ten days at the time of writing, and naturally we are thinking of some of the possible things which may have happened.

I feel that his navigation was at fault, and in the dark he possibly mistook the lower part of the South Alligator or West Alligator for the Adelaide River, and when he did come down he may have believed he was in the area SW of Batchelor and started walking towards what he thought might be the direction of the railway. If he came down anywhere in the vicinity of the last radar plot, which I am advised was 132°E 13°11'S, then he probably started walking towards the South Alligator River, possibly towards its junction with Jim Jim Creek ...

I have every confidence that everything is being done to locate these men, and furthermore I feel that my boy is capable of putting up a good show in the bush if he managed to get down without being injured. I would appreciate a letter from you outlining any information you can give me

²⁶⁰ Group Captain Charles Eaton, OBE, AFC, Service No. 24, b. London, UK – 21 December 1895, Officer Commanding No 79 Wing RAAF (comprising Nos 1, 2 and 31 Squadrons and No 18 (Netherlands East Indies) Squadron), d. 12 November 1979.

Lost Without Trace

of his suspected whereabouts, and any theory which has been formed regarding what happened.

With best wishes,

Yours Sincerely,

Lawrence Wackett²⁶¹

Group Captain Eaton replied to this inquiry (and a similar request from Wilbur's uncle, Air Commodore Ellis Wackett) a few days later, giving details of the searches to date but held out little hope for the safe recovery of the lost airmen:

Dear Wack,

Your letter of the 5th October reached me today ... The searches have been conducted on the basic ground of the radar plots. This has been done exhaustively, with all types of aircraft, particularly the slow and good visibility DH 84s. Apart from this intensive search of a particular area, a huge area has been covered. Naturally, I took part in the search myself, in a B25 [Mitchell bomber], searched the coastline and other areas. The only fire seen was thoroughly investigated and found to be fires started by natives along a creek, but without any sign of the Beaufighter or its crew. Searches were also made at night and lights fired from aircraft.

I contacted the Army and they organised a ground party in conjunction with our own men, to search the area of the last plot of Wilbur's aircraft. The going proved most difficult, the men on the ground could not move without a compass or without air guide. Some became lost, were recovered, exhausted, and the search given up. Honestly, I believe the statement from the searchers on the ground, that nothing can be accomplished by ground searches in such country. To tell the truth, unfortunately I do not think that life can exist from the missing crews, unless some indication is given from them. The odd lagoon or waterhole is about, and if made, I am certain the missing airmen would stay there and have indicated their presence to searching aircraft. A long journey in such country, however well equipped, is impracticable.

²⁶¹ Wackett family files. Kindly provided to the author by Arlette and Barton Perkins.

The Search for Survivors

Although organised searches have ceased, I have given instructions that all aircraft on practice or training flights are to continue a search of the area, as practicable, and I can assure you that even today [8 October] seven aircraft were over the area. It is bad country, and apart from these latest Beaus, the Wing has lost one Beaufort, one Hudson and one Beaufighter without trace over this or adjacent areas. My opinion is that it was left too late to bale out but again there may be the chance, however remote, of the lads turning up on account of some unforeseen set of circumstances.

Young Wilbur of course I knew in the same circumstances as I meet all pilots of the squadrons of the wing. I do know that his commanding officer thought a lot of him and knew him to be well above the average in all ways. I personally regard his loss as a blow, not only to the squadron or the wing, but to our post-war Air Force, of which he undoubtedly would have been a member.

I am sincerely sorry that this is such a gloomy and uncomfoting letter, but I feel you require the facts. My own feelings about it are too difficult to write. Without saying any more, my sympathies to you and yours, Wack.

Kindest Regards,
Charles Eaton²⁶²

In the meantime a further search party, led by an expert bushman from the Northern Territory Army Observation Unit and including black trackers, had been sent to Jim Jim Creek and the locality of the last radar plot of A19-208. This party apparently met with no success, as did others referred to by Group Captain Eaton in a further communication to the Wackett family on 10 November:

I quite agree with you, that as Wilbur was bushed, there was a distinct possibility of [him] making along one of the rivers to the coast; and searches covering this aspect have been carried out. We are, LJ, still carrying on, but naturally with a faint hope and I am afraid that is the only solace I can afford you.²⁶³

²⁶² Letter dated 8 October 1944 – Wackett family files. Kindly provided to the author by Arlette and Barton Perkins

²⁶³ Letter dated 10 November 1944 – Wackett family files.

The New Year came without further clues as to the fate of Wilbur and Keith Noble. The failure of parallel searches to locate Lloyd Ritchie, the pilot of the other No 31 Squadron Beaufighter lost on the night of 24 September, despite the proximity of his crash site to the north-south railway and highway, highlighted the extreme difficulty of searches in the Northern Territory bush. Lawrence Wackett has recalled the anguish for the family during the long months of waiting for news: 'We waited, hoping for the best, for we remembered how he had survived his New Guinea experience ... The search went on for weeks, and gradually our hopes faded.'²⁶⁴

A TRAGIC MISADVENTURE

In Sydney, Peggie struggled to carry on in the knowledge that Wilbur had almost certainly perished. She was fortunate to have the support of her parents and drew great comfort from watching Rahna continue to grow and develop. By July 1945, the war in Europe had ended and one-year-old Rahna was taking her first tentative steps. With Japan facing certain defeat, there was the hope that the terrible war that had cost Peggie so dearly would soon be over. However, a further cruel tragedy would within weeks devastate her life and those of the Stephenson and Wackett families.

In early August, Rahna received a vaccination against diphtheria and whooping cough. For reasons that are not entirely clear, but apparently due to a non-sterile needle, she soon after became seriously ill with a virulent bacterial blood infection. Rushed to Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children, her condition continued to deteriorate with her small body racked with fever. Acute pneumonia set in and 20 hours later, despite the desperate efforts of the medical staff, Rahna died. It was 13 August she was less than 14 months old. Lawrence Wackett has described the tragic events that unfolded:

... I received a telephone call from Sydney, from Peggy's [sic] father, Joe Stephenson, who told me that little Rahna had become gravely ill. My wife and I lay awake for hours, thinking of our dead son and now his sick baby.

²⁶⁴ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, p. 209.

At 6 a.m. Joe Stephenson rang again to say little Rahna had died. I cannot recall how we passed the next few hours for our grief was overwhelming. We left that night to attend the funeral and arrived in Sydney to encounter cheering crowds [in the streets]. The war was over.²⁶⁵ But my wife and I had to view in the funeral chapel the tiny white coffin of Wilbur's baby. On one arm I supported my wife and on the other, Peggy [sic] who had lost in a little over a year both husband and child.²⁶⁶

DISCOVERY OF BEAUFIGHTER A19-208

Before the close of 1945, the families of Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble would receive a partial answer to the mystery of their disappearance with the unexpected news that the wreckage of Beaufighter A19-208 had finally been found. However, as we shall see, this remarkable discovery would unfortunately not provide closure for the families.

In late October 1945, thirteen months from the date of its disappearance, the wreckage of Beaufighter A19-208 was discovered accidentally by a prospector, Mick Connell, in Coirwong Creek approximately six miles north of Goodparla homestead. Its position (13° 22' S 132° 13' E) was only about 10 miles south-east of the last radar fix (see Map 14.1). It seems highly probable that this location was overflowed by a number of aircraft during the numerous aerial searches undertaken during the last months of 1944. Unfortunately, owing to the dense tree cover and the rough nature of the country, they had failed to spot the wreckage or any potential survivors.

Upon receipt of this information, the Air Officer Commanding North-Western Area, Air Commodore Alan Charlesworth,²⁶⁷ organised a party to investigate the site. As an old friend of Lawrence Wackett, he took the

²⁶⁵ Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945.

²⁶⁶ Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer*, pp. 209–210.

²⁶⁷ Air Commodore Alan Moorhouse Charlesworth, CBE, AFC, Service No. 37, b. Lottah, Tas. – 17 September 1903, AOC North-Western Area 1944–46.

opportunity to join this initial reconnoitre, providing a preliminary report to the Secretary of the Air Board on 13 November 1945:

In company with the SASO [Senior Air Staff Officer] and the Medical Officer, I proceeded by truck on 11 November to Pine Creek, where we picked up Mr. Connell and proceeded to the scene. The roads were very rough, and in parts literally non-existent, and the party did not arrive at the crash until 0630 hours on the 12th. It would appear the aircraft hit the tops of light timber about 30 feet high which ripped off the rudder and the aircraft then crashed on to the edge of the creek. The tail unit then came apart and the aircraft came to rest with its nose in the creek.

It is believed that both members of the crew were in the aircraft at the time of the crash, as there are two areas of distinct smell, which, in the opinion of the Medical Officer, were caused by decaying flesh – under the port wing and underneath the fuselage. Having no tools with which to break up the airframe structure, it was impossible to make more than a visual inspection from above, but through a small hole in the port wing caused by the wheel being pushed through the upper surface could be seen a dinghy attached to [what appeared to be] a parachute pack.

In view of the fact that we have had already several storms, it is considered too risky to send a vehicle back again, as there are numerous water creeks to cross and large patches of river flats which would be impassable after heavy rain. Accordingly a party has been arranged to go out on horseback led by Mr. Connell, which will endeavour to recover the remains of the bodies ... If it can be proved that the crew were still in the aircraft at the time of the crash it can be taken that both were killed instantly.²⁶⁸

News of this discovery, conveyed to them by telegram on 14 November, came as a bolt out of the blue to the families of Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble. Although deeply saddened by the apparent confirmation of the death of their loved ones, it gave hope that at long last the mystery of their disappearance may be resolved.

²⁶⁸ National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A705, Item 163/63/142, WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence (Squadron Leader); Service Number 588 – Casualty File.

T.G. 42. Beh. C.4417 7/1944.	This Telegram has been received subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations. The time received at this office is shown at the end of the message.	COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT	The date stamp indicates the date of reception and lodgment unless an earlier date is shown after the time of lodgment.	Office Date Stamp T. C. B.
Office of Origin. <i>Melb</i>		No. of Words. <i>100</i>	Time of Lodgment. <i>10/10/45</i>	No. <i>1045</i>
<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Postal acknowledgment being Personal</i></p> <p><i>Reference previous communication concerning your son 588 Squadron leader Velbur Lawrence Hackett stop regret to inform you that the wreckage of the aircraft of which he was pilot has been located in a creek five miles north of Goodparlaptation northern Territory stop evidence so far</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Hackett Hannapde Hmarive</i></p>				
T.G. 42. Beh. C.4417 7/1944.	This Telegram has been received subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations. The time received at this office is shown at the end of the message.	COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT	The date stamp indicates the date of reception and lodgment unless an earlier date is shown after the time of lodgment.	Office Date Stamp T. C. B.
Office of Origin. <i>Melb</i>		No. of Words. <i>100</i>	Time of Lodgment. <i>10/10/45</i>	No. <i>1045</i>
<p style="text-align: right;"><i>POST</i></p> <p><i>available seems to confirm that your son lost his life stop further investigations are proceeding and you will be advised immediately further report received stop desire to assure you of constant sympathy of department of Air</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>airforce 391 Litta Ollis 588 St. Melbourne</i></p>				

Telegram advising of discovery of aircraft wreckage

A second party was duly sent out a few days later to thoroughly investigate the wreckage. Since no horses were available, it was decided to take a risk and send a second truck. In addition to the prospector who originally found the aircraft, the party comprised an engineering officer experienced with Beaufighters, a flight mechanic with considerable bush experience, and Flying Officer Robert Grant-Stevenson,²⁶⁹ who filed the report upon their return. In

²⁶⁹ Flying Officer Robert Alan Grant-Stevenson, Service No. 402923, b. Melbourne, Vic. – 5 July 1920.

contrast to the preliminary findings from the earlier reconnoitre, their thorough search of the wreck and its environs provided unequivocal evidence that neither Wilbur Wackett nor Keith Noble were in the Beaufighter at time of its crash:

The scene of the wreckage of Beaufighter A19-208 was reached at dusk in the evening of 18th November 1945, and operations were commenced early the next day. More than one and a half day's investigating was carried out on the wreckage of the aircraft, and in the creek bed in the immediate vicinity of the wreckage, [giving] no indication that the crew was present in the aircraft when it crashed. However, considerable evidence was found indicating that the crew had vacated the aircraft by parachute before the time of the crash:

- The forward bottom escape hatch was open and could be clearly seen to be in such a position that it might have been open at the time of the crash.
- The pilot's Sutton harness and the navigator's safety belt were both unfastened and undamaged, with no signs of strain or stretching.
- No trace was found of bodies, parachute packs, parachute harness, helmets or pieces of clothing; although all other items of the aircraft's equipment, and all parts of the aircraft itself, were found in or around the wreckage.
- One set of earphones was found lying loose beside the pilot's seat ... and appeared to have been removed from a helmet carefully and not torn out. They were undamaged and lying in a position suggesting they had been removed by the pilot or navigator while preparing for a descent by parachute.
- The pilot's seat was in the collapsed position – the position necessary before the pilot can enter or leave a Beaufighter aircraft.
- Pieces of emergency cross-country kit, such as rope and message bags, were found amongst driftwood in the creek, and amongst the aircraft wreckage, but no torn clothing or pieces of parachute.
- Grappling with steel cables and a power driven winch, and probing with the hands, was carried out for some two feet down in the gravel under the wreckage and in a pool nearby.

The Search for Survivors

- Searches were also carried out for several miles downstream in the creek by members of the party including the aboriginal guide, and although some wreckage was found, including the starboard main wheel and a petrol tank, no traces of bodies, clothing or parachutes were seen.²⁷⁰

The import of this dramatic new evidence was relayed by telegram to the families of the two airmen on 29 November. One can only imagine the emotional roller-coaster that the unexpected news would have engendered. Far from giving closure, it suggested that both the pilot and navigator may possibly have made it safely to ground on that dark night 13 months before. The families could imagine only too clearly the young airmen waiting vainly for help until in desperation setting out into the unforgiving bush.



**Wreckage of A19-208 photographed when located by the RAAF
search party in Coirwong Creek on 12 November 1945**

(Ellis Wackett – via Roger Perkins)

²⁷⁰ National Archives of Australia, A705, Item 163/63/142, WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence – Casualty File.

CHAPTER 16

AN ENDURING MYSTERY

TESTING DAYS – A SQUADRON IN PERIL

Receipt of the telegram from the RAAF Casualty Section on 29 November galvanised Lawrence Wackett into writing an impassioned letter to the Air Member for Personnel on the Air Board in Melbourne urging further attempts to locate any potential survivors, despite the long months since their disappearance. For a man who, in his own words, was ‘never given to demonstrative emotion’, it was a cry from the heart for a lost son:

3 December, 1945

Dear Sir:

I have just received a telegram from the Casualty Section which states, inter alia, the following ‘Have to inform you search party found no trace of crew in wreckage or in surrounding area. Open escape hatch and similar evidence indicates your son and Pilot Officer Noble had left the aircraft before it crashed.’ I desire to bring to your notice my observations and opinions in the hope that it may yet be possible to find one or both of these men still alive.

Until now I had not ventured to put forward any proposal because while there was a war on I felt that it was not reasonable to ask for any special search, more particularly as I had almost become resigned to believe the universal opinion expressed by many senior officers on the spot and others, that the men probably crashed in the aircraft through flying too low. While I never believed this was likely in the case of my son, I did not have, until now, a vestige of evidence to prove otherwise.

I had always believed that the radar location some 60 miles from Fenton could only have been made if the aircraft had been [at] several thousands of feet, and furthermore, the IFF signal during the last 10 minutes and its sudden termination I regarded as a warning that the crew was preparing for the end and about to bale out. The discovery of the plane about 10 miles further on, with evidence that the crew had baled out, is complete

confirmation of this probable course of events. I had often discussed with my son the possibility of such a happening, and he always assured me that he would gain height and bale out if he ever got caught in bad visibility or was running out of fuel in impossible conditions. The evidence is all in favour of the assumption that he behaved exactly as he had often said he would.

It is, I contend, more than probable that one or both men reached the ground uninjured. The fact that they were not found by searching aircraft can be explained in many ways, particularly in difficult country. It is certain that many of the searching aircraft flew over the crashed aeroplane and all failed to see it. It is little wonder that the air search did not locate the men [since] it takes a considerable time for a [signalling] fire to build up sufficiently to be seen from a plane, and by this time the plane would have gone ...

The prospect of aircraft sighting lost airmen in thick timber is remote – in fact, as a result of his New Guinea experience my son regarded it as hopeless to expect to be seen by searching aircraft in jungle country. I consider that too much faith was placed in the possible success of an air search in such country, and the importance of a ground search was not given sufficient attention and was given up without an adequate search having been made in the locality of the last radar plot.

I consider the fact must now be accepted that one or both of these men were probably alive on the ground for some considerable time at least, and it is conceivable that one or both might still be alive. I urge that everything possible should be done to search for them.

I give hereunder some good reasons to support this statement:

My son was a naturally good bushman and hunter, and he had already successfully overcome great hardships in New Guinea ... He carried on his person a special jungle kit which he had prepared as a result of experience in New Guinea, and this would enable him to put up a good fight for existence. He was resourceful and would rely largely on catching fish in the deep holes along the river courses. He had a good supply of fish hooks and lines sewn into his clothing. One small fish every other day will enable a man to live indefinitely ...

If he got down safely he would, with luck, be able to live if he were in a favourable locality. If he were injured, or if his mate were injured, they

might not be able to walk very far and one might not be able to leave the other ... In any case, they might choose to stay in some favourable location rather than attempt a long walk in a direction which might lead them further from help. They might have decided that they should remain somewhere in the neighbourhood where the radar had possibly located them – wait to be found rather than wander. On the other hand, they might have wandered in a direction further and further to the east or south-east, believing that in this direction they would reach the railway. There is definite indication that they believed they were west of the railway all the time they were flying round, and they were flying east during the last 15 minutes and would naturally walk that way.

I remember reading the report of the ground search during the month following the night of September 24th, 1944 ... It struck me as inadequate and inefficient, but I did not criticise it at the time as I believed that the air search was good and there was then no positive evidence to point to the men actually being down in the locality of the last radar plot. As it now turns out, the men most certainly did land in the area between the last radar plot and the place where the crashed aircraft was found (a distance of 10 miles), and it is obvious that only a more thorough ground search might have found them in such thick country.

Whilst a ground search in this area might still find traces of them, it might not be an area in which they could have lived for long, and it is more than probable that if they are still alive or lived for any length of time, they moved further east and south on to one of the rivers ... [If so] from a study of the map I should say that it is possible that they left traces of their presence along the South Alligator River or Jim Jim Creek between the points where these rivers cross the track to Oenpelli and their sources in the hills.

I suggest that a party should explore the course of the South Alligator River and the Jim Jim Creek and look for signs such as old camp fires, abandoned bush shelters, carvings on trees, at likely places along the river where they may have stopped to get water, to catch fish in the deeper holes, or to camp. Even though they may not be there now, having possibly moved further east or perished, it is possible that they left traces. I know that my son would be very likely to carve trees to indicate that he had been there and indicate which way he had moved ...

I also think that a special enquiry should be made as to what aborigines inhabit the upper regions of the East Alligator River, 60 miles south of Oenpelli Mission ... While I admit that the prospects are not bright, it is just possible that the men may be found. Early Australian history has dozens of instances of lost white men having survived several years with the aborigines in Northern Australia ...

Yours faithfully,

L.J. Wackett²⁷¹

Despite the implied criticisms, these suggestions were favourably received by the Air Member who contacted Air Commodore Charlesworth in Darwin requesting that 'action be taken with the utmost possible speed' and that the relatives be assured that everything possible would be done. Owing to the commencement of the wet season with its attendant growth of grass and foliage, and difficulties of movement, it was considered most inadvisable for a search to be undertaken by Air Force personnel. The Superintendent of Northern Territory Police (A.V. Stretton) was contacted, and willingly agreed to institute a search by constables assisted by aborigines. Although most cooperative, the police held out little hope for success. As well as the extreme difficulties of movement off the main roads at this time of year, it was felt that the four to five foot growth of grass 'would make practically impossible any discovery of remains or signs'. Such would prove to be the case.

The search party, led by Constable T.L. 'Tas' Fitzer, duly set out on horseback from Annaburroo, near Burrundie (see Map 14.1), on 1 January 1946. Fitzer's report to the Superintendent on 30 January 1946, following their return some three weeks later, gives a graphic description of the difficulties encountered by the team:

SEARCH PATROL FOR MISSING AIRMEN WACKETT AND NOBLE

Prior to the commencement of this patrol, both Police Trackers and Natives accompanying the patrol ... were instructed what indications to

²⁷¹ National Archives of Australia, A705, Item 163/63/142, WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence – Casualty File.

An Enduring Mystery

carefully watch for, such as remains of human bones, identification discs, pieces of clothing tied to trees, markings on trees or flat stones which may have been made by the missing men, or portions of the parachutes which may have been caught up in tree tops.

Leaving Burnside Station, a patrol was made to Price's Spring where a corroboree was then taking place, and the natives attending it who had recently arrived from the vicinity of the Oenpelli Mission Station and East and South Alligator River areas were all questioned regarding the missing men. But although these natives had heard recently of the plane being found, they had not seen or heard anything of the missing airmen. Two of these natives named Leura and Hector who knew the country wherein the plane came down were taken as pilots.

The following morning a patrol was made in a direct line to where the plane was supposed to be, and the country in behind Annaburroo and the Mary River properly searched. This country comprised low ranges and hills and the flats were heavily timbered. The ranges and hills were climbed by the trackers and natives and a horse patrol made on the flats and timbered country keeping a strict watch for any signs of portions of a parachute in the tree tops.

Arriving at the Mary River this was found to be in flood. Fresh tracks of natives were seen here and the trackers followed these out and returned in the afternoon with an aged native named Wingee and two younger natives. With others they were on a walkabout from the South Alligator River, but had not seen any indications of the missing airmen or their whereabouts. With the assistance of these natives, the horses were swum across the Mary River and the packs and saddles were boated across in the flys.

Keeping in a line with Goodparla Station and the vicinity of the plane, the search was continued through the country that became very swampy and boggy. This country was searched for four days and Wire-Yard [Coirwong] Creek, on which the plane was reported to have come down, was reached on 17th January. It was followed until 4.30 pm when the plane was found lying in the creek, portion of the tail up on the bank.

A general search of the plane and around it was made hoping to find some indication of the missing men that had been overlooked by the military and air force parties who had visited the plane in November 1945, but no success was achieved. The plane was ... six miles north-east of Mr Hardy's

[Goodparla] Station, 200 yards in Wire-Yard Creek from an old road that runs from Old Goodparla Station to Kalpalga Station (now abandoned). This old road was followed out to the Mary River as it was thought the missing men may have cut this road and followed it along.

The following morning a return was made to the plane. Tracker Nipper was sent east, tracker Joe west, native Leura north, whilst native Hector and myself covered the area south. A search was then begun in a circle of the plane for a distance of approximately ten to fifteen miles and all parties arranged to meet at the foot of a small low range about eight miles north of the plane that evening. On the return of all parties they stated that they had not met with any success. Searching and crossing this low range without success, a line was taken towards Batchelor Aerodrome as it was thought the missing men may have with the aid of a compass made for there.

This country opened itself up on to very open country with long paper-bark swamps and billabongs, some of them a mile and a half in length. Working around these swamps, an old abandoned station called Black Jungle previously owned by Mr Hall was reached. This was a few miles from Bamboo Creek which was mostly heavy thick Jungle country. Here four natives and their wives and families were located making towards Mt. Bundy, having come from a farm owned by a man known as 'Yorky Billy' who resides on Gin-Gin Creek about twenty seven miles south-east of the plane. These natives stated they had not seen anything of the missing airmen.

A search was then continued in the country between the plane and the Pine Creek-Oenpelli Road towards the Motor Crossing high up on the Mary River. This was reached without any success on the twentieth of January. The following day, after crossing the Mary River, a patrol was made to the Eureka Tin Mine and the Manager Mr Butcher and his natives were all questioned but without result.

In conclusion, I would like to say that everything possible under the existing conditions was tried to obtain some success even to following out of cattle pads, as from previous experience it is known that lost persons in this country will invariably follow these tracks with a thought that they must lead to 'somewhere.'

The natives in these parts are detribalised and employed in the capacity of buffalo shooters, skimmers, stockmen and yard builders. I feel assured that had the missing men been alive they must have by now contacted some natives or Europeans who would have reported their whereabouts or anything found that would have given a lead to the finding of their remains. This patrol has become common knowledge amongst the natives and wherever they were contacted they were asked to keep a lookout in future for any indications of the missing men and if successful report it to their employers where upon they would receive some suitable reward.

Leaving Daly River on the morning of the 22nd December, 1945, this patrol has covered a vast amount of country and by the time the horses return to Daly River they will have travelled approximately 440 miles.²⁷²

The report was forwarded to the relatives a few weeks later. Any slim hopes of finding the missing men alive were now dashed. In a summary written at the time, Lawrence Wackett regretfully concluded that in their perilous night-time descent by parachute 'both men were killed instantly in thick bush, and no traces are ever likely to be found as any relics would be completely covered by thick undergrowth.'²⁷³ No new evidence was forthcoming in the next few months, and on 11 March 1946 Peggie and Wilbur's parents received the melancholy advice that the death of their husband and son had 'now been presumed for official purposes to have occurred on the 24th September 1944'. Lawrence Wackett recalled: 'My dear wife was overcome by grief'.

This appeared to close the sad story. However, unknown to the families of the missing men, a further detailed search of the area near the wreck site would be carried out by a Northern Territory Police team a few months later, revealing startling new evidence.

²⁷² *ibid.*

²⁷³ Wackett family files, kindly provided to the author by Arlette and Barton Perkins.

WERE THERE SURVIVORS?

In early May 1946, Mr Harry Hardy of Goodparla cattle station informed the police at Pine Creek that aborigines had found two parachutes a few miles from the crashed Beaufighter. Headquarters in Darwin were notified and instructions received for Constable Ted Morey, stationed at Pine Creek, to patrol the Goodparla area in search of the missing men.

The patrol began on 28 May, with a tracker setting out with six packhorses while Ted Morey followed several hours later with another tracker in the police ute carrying 'the swags, tucker, my saddle and tools.' After a difficult crossing of the Mary River, they met up the next day at Goodparla homestead from where they rode to a campsite near the aircraft wreck in Coirwong Creek. Over the next four days they used this camp as a base from which they thoroughly investigated the vicinity of the Beaufighter as well as carrying out in-depth mounted searches to the north, east and south of the site. Ted Morey later recalled:

The aircraft had crashed nose first into the high bank on the western side of the creek. It was almost covered by tons of matted debris of grass, sticks and mud that had been washed down in a big flood and had set as hard as concrete. With picks and shovels, we would work at the tangled mess around the aircraft for about an hour, and then for a spell get on the horses and ride around the [nearby] country to try to find any trace of the remains of the airmen. After an hour or so we would return and have another go with the picks and shovels.²⁷⁴

On the second day, on a low rocky outcrop approximately 400 metres east of the wreck they found a parachute!

It had been rigged up as a tent and fastened to a couple of spindly trees. The weight of the parachute and the wind had snapped off the trees and all were flat on the ground. He must have been reasonably fit to have climbed up the rough hill with his parachute. There were some emergency ration

²⁷⁴ Notes by Ted Morey to his son, Perry, 1980 (copy provided to Wackett family by Bill Kinsman); also from letter by Ted Morey to Arlette and Barton Perkins, 20 May 1980.

tins [nine] lying around and although we spent a long time, we could not find any message. This was most disappointing. If the pilot [or navigator] had scratched on a tin, left a note in a tin, or arranged stones on the ground to indicate which direction he was going to take, it would have been very helpful. But there was nothing.

A rubber dinghy was also found on the rocky outcrop, possibly forming a shelter with the parachute. These remarkable new discoveries, including the nine opened ration tins, clearly indicated that at least one of the airmen had survived and camped nearby for a time. Uncertain of the direction the survivor(s) may have subsequently taken, the patrol spent the next three days carrying out searches on horseback for 30 miles north, 30 miles east and fifteen miles south of the wreck:

All we could expect to find were bones scattered by dingoes. As the crash had occurred over a year ago, there was no sign of tracks. All trees were inspected for any markings but none were found. As Harry Hardy and his stockmen were often in this area, we concentrated in the direction of the railway line towards Burrundie and Fountain Head but found no sign of the missing airmen.²⁷⁵

After a final excavation in Coirwong Creek, the party departed for Pine Creek carrying with them a number of items found near the wreck including the parachute, ration tins, dinghy and a life preserver. Also weighing down Ted Morey's ute was a large boulder that they had carried from the location of the apparent 'survivor's camp'. The patrol arrived back at Pine Creek on 5 June. Ted Morey's son, Perry, recalls vividly their return:

As well as the parachute and rubber dinghy, my father had also found a yellow Mae West, a dinghy pump and nine empty ration tins. He brought it all back to the Pine Creek Police Station, which was next door to the school where I was a seven year old student. A day later, he showed the gear to all the children, laying it out on the ground. I remember using the concertina-type dinghy pump, which still worked well but the dinghy and

²⁷⁵ Pine Creek Police Station Journal Report, 2–4 June 1946, from Northern Archives, Darwin. Copy kindly provided by Julie Parsons.

the Mae West were quite perished. It made a very big impression on me and the other children.

It was all entrained a few days later to Police HQ in Darwin together with my father's report. No trace of either his report or of the relics has ever been found, despite many searches by myself and others.²⁷⁶

The mailing of these items and Ted Morey's report to Darwin Police Headquarters is confirmed from the Pine Creek Police Station Journal entry for 7 June 1946.²⁷⁷ Their apparent disappearance is most unfortunate. The only surviving relic from the patrol is the large boulder that Constable Morey's team had laboriously hauled back from near the site of the parachute. Ted had placed it under the Police Station building in Pine Creek with the thought it could be forwarded to the parents of one of the airmen. It would lie there unnoticed for several decades.

In retrospect, it seems very surprising that the earlier RAAF and police searches had not made these highly significant findings of a parachute and other survival gear so near to the crash site. Even more extraordinary is the fact that the results of Constable Morey's patrol were never divulged to the families of the missing airmen. The evidence is compelling that at least one of the crew of A19-208 must have survived baling out from the doomed aircraft relatively uninjured, since climbing the rocky ridge would have been extremely difficult for a seriously injured survivor. The evocative finding of nine empty ration tins suggests that either two men were using the shelter or that one survivor remained there for several days. He/they would almost certainly have seen, and possibly attempted to signal, some of the aircraft that were searching the area before setting out in desperation to seek their own way back.

²⁷⁶ Perry Morey to the author, 2007.

²⁷⁷ Pine Creek Police Station Journal Report, 2–4 June 1946.



The 'survivor's ridge', located 436 yards east of the Beaufighter A19-208 wreck site

(Julie Parsons)

A FINAL TWIST

In a final twist to the saga, in early December 1946 a stockman reported to Darwin Police that while mustering cattle about 50 miles north-west of Stapleton homestead near the Adelaide River, his group had discovered what he believed to be a white man's skull on the banks of a creek. He also stated that he had heard rumours from the local aborigines of a parachute having been found in the vicinity some time previously. A brief article on these findings appeared in the *Melbourne Herald* newspaper, together with the suggestion that the skull may 'belong to an RAAF pilot forced down during the war'. There is no evidence that Wilbur Wackett's family were aware of this report at the time, or of the subsequent investigation of the matter by the Northern Territory Police. However, RAAF Headquarters Melbourne requested North-Western Area

Headquarters Darwin to investigate whether the remains were those of Wilbur Wackett or Keith Noble.²⁷⁸

A police party immediately travelled to the scene of the discovery and recovered the skull on 7 December. They also carried out extensive interviews of Stapleton station personnel and local miners and aborigines. One of the aborigines stated that the skull belonged to 'Old Dick', a leper who lived by the creek and had died three wet seasons ago. He further claimed to have been previously shown the burial site by the creek. Subsequent examination of the considerably corroded skull by the Chief Medical Officer, Northern Territory, tentatively concurred with the view that it was of an aborigine. No dental evidence could be obtained as the mandible was without teeth.

A FINAL PUZZLE

The reason(s) for Constable Morey's Report not being divulged to the aircrew's families will never be known. There is no mention of Ted Morey's patrol or his findings in any of the numerous RAAF files searched by the author. It is possible his report was not passed on to Air Force by the Northern Territory Police. Alternatively, the information may have been suppressed for humanitarian reasons to avoid further stress for the families. In this regard, Peggie Wackett's daughter by a later marriage, Julie Parsons, recently remarked: 'If my mother had been given this information in 1946, she would never have been able to get on with her life. She would have always been expecting Wilbur to walk in the door.'²⁷⁹

It would not be until 1980 that the Wackett family learnt by chance of the highly significant findings by Constable Morey.

²⁷⁸ RAAF internal signal, National Archives of Australia, A705, Item 163/63/142, WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence – Casualty File.

²⁷⁹ Peggie's daughter from her subsequent marriage to ex-RAAF pilot, Squadron Leader Jim McHale, DFC.

CHAPTER 17

EPILOGUE

Philip Crowther, the husband of Lawrence and Letty Wackett's granddaughter, Dorothee, has recently described the fortuitous circumstances whereby the Wackett family learned the story of Constable Morey's expedition:

Dorothee and I moved to Alice Springs in 1979 where I became manager of the local commercial radio station 8HA. On one of my first visits to Rotary, I was introduced to Bill Kinsman, who was the founder of Central Australian Aircraft Museum. During our conversation I told him that my wife, Dorothee, was the granddaughter of Lawrence Wackett. This was of great interest to him as several years earlier he had salvaged a Wackett Trainer from desert country south of Alice Springs.

Soon after, I was contacted by Perry Morey, the son of Constable Ted Morey. Over a number of years he and Bill Kinsman had carried out numerous searches for aircraft lost in the Northern Territory during World War II. We soon became very friendly and Perry told us of the discovery by his father of a parachute and ration tins at the wreck site of Wilbur's aircraft. I contacted Dorothee's parents [Arlette and Barton Perkins] who were very surprised and moved by the information. Sir Lawrence and Lady Wackett were still alive, but we thought it best to wait until we had more definite details before informing them.²⁸⁰

Several months later, Arlette and Barton Perkins visited their daughter and son-in-law in Alice Springs, during which time they met Bill Kinsman on a visit to the Central Australia Aircraft Museum. In talking of aircraft crashes in the Northern Territory, Arlette mentioned the loss of her brother in 1944 and Bill Kinsman kindly gave them a copy of a recent document written by Constable Ted Morey describing his 1946 expedition to the Beaufighter crash site. A meeting was also arranged with Ted's son, Perry, who gave the family further

²⁸⁰ Phil Crowther to the author, 2009; and details from Wackett family files kindly provided to the author by Arlette and Barton Perkins

valuable information. Upon their return to Sydney, Barton Perkins recently recalled:

We told Lawrence and Letty Wackett of Ted Morey's discoveries. They were very surprised but took the news well and were pleased that we had told them. As a result, and for the first time, they gave us all the documents that they had concerning Wilbur's crash including the actual photograph taken when it was first visited by the RAAF in late 1946.²⁸¹

A BUSH MEMORIAL

Following these meetings, Bill Kinsman and Perry Morey began planning an expedition to the crash site of Beaufighter A19-208, with the aim of erecting a suitable memorial to the long-lost airmen. They asked Philip Crowther to join them, representing Wilbur's family. Wilbur's widow, Peggie, had sadly died of cancer in 1956. Aged 33, she had only survived him by 12 years. All attempts to trace the family of Keith Noble were unsuccessful. His widowed mother had died in July 1946, less than two years after the loss of her son.

On 1 August 1980, the Alice Springs party led by Perry Morey and including also a member of the Alice Springs RSL (ex-Beaufighter pilot, Ted Marron) departed the Alice in four-wheel drive vehicles. They were met at the crash site by another team from the Darwin area including the Commanding Officer of Base Squadron RAAF Darwin (Wing Commander Roger Phillips), historian John Haslett, a representative of the Darwin Aircraft Museum, and a member of the Darwin RSL (ex-Wing Commander Vince Meakin). John Haslett described the scene at the wreck site:

They found the aircraft nose into the creek headed easterly and a 300 metre timber trail caused by the shallow descent of the aircraft still evident as reported by Mounted Constable Morey in 1946. Some evidence existed that an attempt had been made to remove the port engine from the wing, without success. The aft fuselage beyond the navigator's cupola had been

²⁸¹ Barton Perkins to the author, 2009

Epilogue

removed by the Darwin Aviation Museum enthusiasts and it rests in their museum.²⁸² The rest of the aircraft was full of compacted silt, the starboard engine had been wrenched clear of its mountings and was under the leading edge of the wing. The forward section of the cockpit and fuselage was gone ... the port undercarriage and wheel could clearly be seen still under the nacelle. Oxidation had set in. The roundel had faded but a perfect circle could still be seen.²⁸³



Wreckage of A19-208 on the bank of Coirwong Creek

(No 31 Squadron Association)

²⁸² The bulk of the A19-208 wreckage, apart from sections still in Coirwong Creek, now resides with John Haslett's Aviation Historical Society in Darwin. This includes the two large Bristol Hercules engines, whose missing propellers are believed to have been used in the Beaufighter rebuild at Moorabbin Air Museum in Melbourne.

²⁸³ John Haslett in a document 'Three of our Airmen are Missing,' extracted from an article by John Haslett (Beaufighter 208) – copy held in the No 31 Squadron Association records at the RAAF Museum, Point Cook.



Another view of A19-208 in Coirwong Creek, showing (left) a Hercules engine under the starboard wing root and (right) the fuselage mid-section sloping up the bamboo covered bank

(Roger Perkins)

Philip Crowther recalls that they mounted the memorial ‘in a cleared area at the highest point of the land about 150 metres from the site of the crashed plane, placed centrally with four large Bloodwood gumtrees at each corner.’²⁸⁴ On the afternoon of Sunday 3 August 1980, a dedication service was held for the two deceased airmen, officiated by Wing Commander Phillips. The two RSL representatives unveiled the memorial plaque that had been covered by a Royal Australian Air Force flag provided by Sir Lawrence Wackett. The simple

²⁸⁴ Philip Crowther to the author in 2009, and details in Wackett family files.

Epilogue

but moving ceremony was completed with the *Last Post*, whose haunting notes reverberated through the surrounding bush. Philip Crowther then placed a single rose at the base of the memorial.



Commemorative service to the lost airmen at Coirwong Creek, 3 August 1980.

Beside the memorial are ex-Squadron Leader Ted Marron and ex-Wing Commander Vince Meakin (Alice Springs and Darwin RSLs). Phil Crowther places a rose at the base of the memorial.

(Phil Crowther)

The following morning, several of the party walked to the apparent ‘survivor’s ridge’ where Ted Morey had found the parachute and ration tins after the war. It was an emotional moment. On the return trip to Alice Springs, they stopped briefly at the Pine Creek Police Station where Perry Morey collected the boulder that his father had brought back from Coirwong Creek 34 years previously. It

would be sent to Lawrence and Letty Wackett in Sydney, who placed it in their garden in memory of their lost son. It remains with the family today.



Boulder from Coirwong Creek

(Arlette and Roger Perkins)

COMMEMORATIVE SERVICE IN ALICE SPRINGS

At dusk on 24 September 1980, the anniversary of Wilbur and Keith's death, a further ceremony was held at the Central Australian Aviation Museum, attended by some 60 people including Northern Territory Senator Bernie Kilgariff and Wilbur's niece Dorothee Crowther. A memorial display to the two lost airmen was unveiled, which included a flap and undercarriage control quadrant salvaged seven weeks previously from the wreckage of Beaufighter A19-208 and the RAAF flag used in the dedication at Coirwong Creek. In a final gesture, after the close of the official ceremony, Bill Kinsman presented the Alice

Epilogue

Springs RSL with a plaque on which was mounted the fuel transfer valve from A19-208, a gift considered 'most appropriate, for it was through fuel starvation that these two gallant men were lost.'

A NEW MEMORIAL

In March 1981, Perry Morey visited Sir Lawrence and Lady Wackett in their home in Sydney. They showed him with pride the boulder from the crash site that he had kindly forwarded to them, now placed in their garden in memory of their son. Lawrence Wackett passed away the following year.

The lonely memorial at Coirwong Creek would receive only an occasional visitor over the next several years. One of these was the grandson of Lawrence and Letty Wackett, Roger Perkins, who with his wife June visited the crash site in 1986 in company with Perry Morey. They were pleased to find that the memorial was still intact. However, its future was uncertain. The Kakadu National Park had been proclaimed in 1979 and, following its expansion in 1987, the resting place of Beaufighter A19-208 became absorbed into the park. The Goodparla station was closed and its cattle and buffalo herds cleared from the area by the end of 1988. This brought significant changes to the nature of the country. Without the grazing and controlled burning there was a major growth in the vegetation. Bill Kinsman and Perry Morey grew concerned about the survival of the memorial from the occasional severe bushfire that now swept the area. In 1990, they returned to Coirwong Creek where they were saddened to find that the memorial had suffered considerable damage from a recent bushfire.

During June 1995, the memorial was removed by Bill Kinsman and delivered to No 75 Squadron at RAAF Tindal for refurbishment.²⁸⁵ Restoration was delayed due to various postings until 1997 when the brass plaques salvaged from the earlier memorial were remounted on a stainless steel plate. Access to Coirwong Creek had in the meantime become more difficult because of the prolific vegetation growth and deterioration of the unused track. In July, Perry

²⁸⁵ Letter by John Haslett to Jack Anderson, Secretary of No 31 Squadron Beaufighter Association, on 5 July 2007.

Morey and a young RAAF non-commissioned officer, Shane Johnston, surveyed a route into the crash site for the RAAF team. However, in the event, the memorial components (together with cement) were moved by helicopter to the remote site, where a No 75 Squadron working party constructed a new memorial cairn appropriately composed of local boulders. A new location in an open area near the northern bank of the creek was chosen to provide more protection from fires. A formal rededication ceremony, officiated by Wing Commander Graham Silcock from RAAF Tindal, was held on 24 September 1997, the anniversary of the wartime crash.



**The new memorial cairn to Wilbur Wackett and Keith Noble
at the Coirwong Creek crash site**

(Roger Perkins)

Since the resumption of Goodparla Station into the Kakadu National Park, permission is now required to enter the area and the track into the crash site is no longer graded. An attempt by Perry Morey to check the condition of the

Epilogue

memorial in July 1999 was thwarted by the appalling condition of the track, with tons of flood debris choking the approach to the Goodparla Creek crossing. However, in October he succeeded in reaching the site and was relieved to find the memorial still intact. Taking a number of photographs, he kindly forwarded these to Wilbur's family confirming the good condition of the cairn.

A FINAL CLOSURE

Following this trip, the remote crash site would remain unvisited for over a decade, except by an occasional Park Ranger. However, in 2007 Perry Morey was contacted by Julie Parsons, the daughter of Peggie Wackett from her second marriage, who was visiting the Northern Territory. As a result of their meeting he organised, with the assistance of Kakadu National Park Rangers, a further—and possibly final—expedition in July 2008. Julie has recently recalled:

For the last 30 kilometres or so to Coirwong Creek, the going was very rough, especially in areas of dense thick corkscrew grass which grew to windscreen height. It may not have been possible at all if the rangers had not recently burnt the grass off in places to assist us. It was very hot and dry. Seeing the country along the route, you realised that Wilbur and Keith really didn't have a chance in hell of getting out.

When we arrived at the crash site, it was very emotional to see the stone memorial still standing there above the creek. We walked down into the dry creek bed which was shaded by trees, and I was surprised to see part of an aircraft wing still wedged into the bank. It made it so real for me, but also quite confronting. There was an old snake skin in the wing which the snake may have used as a shelter.

We then climbed up the opposite bank and made our way a few hundred yards to the group of red boulders on top of which Perry's father had found the parachute and opened ration tins. About 50 yards to the left of the boulders there was a small lagoon with a little water, and I thought of the survivor(s) possibly finding water there. The area was fairly clear around the boulders where they may have erected the parachute shelter to increase their chances of being spotted from the air.

After a few hours, we sadly left the site and set off back to Pine Creek. For me, it represented a final closure for my mother, Peggie, who had died of cancer in 1956 without knowing of Ted Morey's discoveries.²⁸⁶



This scroll commemorates
Squadron Leader W. L. Wackett
Royal Australian Air Force
held in honour as one who
served King and Country in
the world war of 1939-1945
and gave his life to save
mankind from tyranny. May
his sacrifice help to bring
the peace and freedom for
which he died.

²⁸⁶ Julie Parsons to the author, 2008 and 2009.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: TROOP CONVOYS PROTECTED BY NO 2 SQUADRON IN 1940

CV	Troop Transports	Departure Port (date)	Entered Bass Strait	Arrived Fremantle
US1	Orion, Rangitata, Sobieski, Dunera, Empress of Canada, Strathaird	Auckland, NZ (6 Jan)		
	Orcades, Strathnaver, Otranto, Orford	Sydney (10 Jan)	12 Jan	18 Jan
	Empress of Japan	Melbourne (12 Jan)		
US2	Strathaird, Dunera, Ettrick, Neuralia (joined in Fremantle by Nevasa)	Melbourne (15 Apr)	15 Apr	21 Apr
US3	Empress of Britain, Empress of Japan, Aquitania, Andes	Wellington, NZ (2 May)		
	Queen Mary, Mauretania	Sydney (5 May)	6 May	10 May
	Empress of Canada	Melbourne (6 May)		
US4	Mauretania, Empress of Japan, Orcades	Wellington, NZ (28 Aug)		
	Aquitania	Sydney (29Aug)	30 Aug	4 or 5 Sep
US5A	Christian Huygens, Nieuw Holland, Indrapoera	Sydney (14 Sep)		
	Johan de Witt	Sydney (30 Sep)	1 Oct	
US5B	Nieuw Zeeland	Melbourne (2 Oct)		
US6	Queen Mary, Aquitania	Sydney (20 Oct)		
	Mauretania	Melbourne (21 Oct)	21 Oct	25 Oct
US7	Orion, Batory	Sydney (14Nov)		
	Stratheden, Strathmore	Adelaide (19 Nov)	15 Nov	21 Nov
US8	Dominion Monarch, Awatea	Wellington, NZ (20 Dec)		
	Queen Mary, Aquitania	Sydney (28 Dec)	29 or 30 Dec	3 Jan 41
	Mauretania	Melbourne (30 Dec)		

APPENDIX 2: FLYING HOURS BY WILBUR WACKETT ON VARIOUS AIRCRAFT

Aircraft Type	Hours on Each Type		
	Captain	2nd Pilot	Total
DH Gipsy Moth	22.25	27.35	50.00
Hawker Demon	27.30	25.10	52.40
Avro Anson	110.00	85.20	195.20
Lockheed Hudson	433.55	120.15	554.10
DH Moth Minor	23.25	0.30	23.55
CAC Wirraway	192.25	6.00	198.25
Fairchild 24R	0.20	–	0.20
CAC Wackett Trainer	60.00	0.20	60.20
Airspeed Oxford	35.45	2.00	37.45
DH Tiger Moth	20.35	–	20.35
Avro Cadet	3.20	–	3.20
Westland Wapiti	0.40	–	0.40
Curtis Kittyhawk	29.35	–	29.35
Republic Lancer	2.20	–	2.20
DH Dragon	14.00	–	14.00
Bristol Beaufort	64.25	18.05	82.30
Bristol Beaufighter	69.00	3.30	72.30
Fairey Battle	4.05	–	4.05
Supermarine Spitfire	24.00	–	24.00
Vulzee Vengeance	0.30	–	0.30
Brewster Buffalo	2.20	–	2.20
CAC Boomerang	3.30	–	3.30
Bell Airacobra	0.30	–	0.30
Ryan ST4	2.00	–	2.00
DH Mosquito	1.10	–	1.10
Noorduyn Norseman	1.10	–	1.10
Lockheed Vega	0.20	–	0.20
Douglas C47 Dakota	4.00	1.05	5.05

Source: National Archives of Australia: Royal Australian Air Force, A9300, Item WACKETT W L: WACKETT, Wilbur Lawrence, Service Number 588 – Personal File, ‘Half-Yearly Return of Flying Hours’. The entry also records his Grand Total All Flying as 1491 hours 30 minutes.

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Ron Provost – No 31 Squadron pilot

Norm Tritton – No 31 Squadron pilot

John White – No 31 Squadron navigator

Herbert Plenty – Course 26A and No 2 Squadron pilot

Harold Adams – Catalina flight engineer

Jeffrey Love – No 1 Photo Reconnaissance Unit pilot, Coomalie Creek

Lost Without Trace

Tina Conroy – daughter of Jim Sutherland (Course 26A and No 2 Squadron pilot)

Dorothee Crowther – niece of Wilbur Wackett

Philip Crowther

Perry Morey – son of Constable Ted Morey

Julie Parsons – daughter of Peggie Wackett

Arlette Perkins (née Wackett) – sister of Wilbur

Barton Perkins

Roger Perkins – nephew of Wilbur Wackett

Pat Rayson – wife of Russell Rayson (Course 26A and 2 Squadron pilot)

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