

MALAYAN

BUFFALOES



Mark Postlethwaite's superb painting showing the exploits of Flt Lt Doug Vanderfield of 435 Squadron. While flying Buffalo I AN185 with the undercarriage stuck in the 'down' position Vanderfield shot down three Japanese bombers near Butterworth on December 13, 1941. MARK POSTLETHWAITE © 2017

MARK POSTLETHWAITE '09

ANDREW THOMAS PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE ALLIED SQUADRONS FLYING OUTCLASSSED BREWSTER FIGHTERS DURING THE JAPANESE INVASION OF MALAYA

As tensions with Japan in the Far East increased in 1941, several new fighter squadrons were established to bolster defences for the strategic Royal Navy base in Singapore. Largely manned by Australian and New Zealand pilots fresh from flying training, they were equipped with the Brewster Buffalo, a type deemed unsuitable for use in Europe but appropriate for an area that, although uneasy, remained at peace.

First to form were 67 and 243 RAF Squadrons at Kallang in mid-March – joined, as more aircraft became available, in late August by the Royal Australian Air Force's 453 Squadron. Also working up was 21 Squadron RAAF, its pilots using Buffaloes alongside its CAC Wirraways.

In October, 67 Squadron moved to Burma for the defence of Rangoon and was replaced in Singapore by 488

Squadron, Royal New Zealand Air Force. The Buffaloes bequeathed by 67 to the New Zealanders were found to be in a poor state and there was a lack of tools, spares and other equipment.

As war with Japan loomed, in mid-November 21 Squadron moved up to Sungei Patani in Malaya, close to the border with Siam, to support III Indian Corps.

SAVAGE BLOODING

The Japanese invasion force approached the northeast coast of Malaya on the night of December 7, 1941 and the invasion began. An early target was the airfield at Kota Bharu from where, at 06:30 on the 8th, two Buffaloes of a small 243 Squadron detachment, flown by Fg Off 'Blondie' Holder (AN196) and Plt Off R S Shields (W8221), took off and strafed landing barges on the Kelantan River.

Holder was hit by ground fire and had to return, with further damage caused when his aircraft hit a damaged Lockheed Hudson. Thirty minutes later Shields had the first encounter between an RAF Buffalo and the Japanese when he spotted a formation of Mitsubishi Ki-21 *Sally* bombers. After a brief burst his guns jammed – an experience that became all too familiar



over subsequent weeks. The enemy captured Kota Bharu soon afterwards.

About the same time, on the opposite side of the peninsula, 21 Squadron was warned as five Ki-21s appeared, two Buffaloes managing to get off as the bombs fell. Frustratingly they suffered similar gun failures to Shields, and the airfield was considerably damaged.

Another raid mid-morning, when permission for the Buffaloes

Above

Alf Clare was the first Allied pilot to achieve five victories on the Buffalo. A CAC Boomerang is visible behind. RAAF

Left

Three Buffaloes burning at Kallang after a Japanese raid. RNZAF

"We let them have the works and definitely shot down two in the first attack. Vanderfield was credited with two Ki-48s and a Ki-51 destroyed, a feat he had achieved with his undercarriage stuck down!"



SCORING 'ZERO'

Under the Japanese Navy Air Force numerical designation system, the Type 99 was followed by the Type 0 (i.e. zero). The 'Navy 0' encountered by Buffaloes on January 17, 1942 (see the main narrative) *could* have been any of several JNAF types, but only one stands out as really likely.

Designated as Type 0 were: Aichi E13A1 and Yokosuka E14Y1s, both reconnaissance monoplane seaplanes; the Mitsubishi F1M1 biplane observation seaplane; the very rare Kawanishi K8K1 trainer; the licence-built Douglas DC-3 (L2D1); and the Mitsubishi L4M1 twin-engined transport.

The most famous Type 0 was the superb Mitsubishi A6M carrier-borne fighter. Given the Allied code name *Zeke*, because of its Type 0 designation it became much more widely known as the 'Zero'.



Buffaloes from 243 Squadron, flown by Flt Lt Mowbray Garden and Sgt Geoff Fiskin, were immediately scrambled. Flt Lt Tim Vigors led ten aircraft of 453 Squadron into the fray. Garden and Fiskin arrived first, in time to see the bows of one of the great ships sticking out of the sea. Both had been sunk.

LAST STAND

With the Japanese gaining ground in the north on December 13, the Buffaloes of 453 Squadron were ordered to Ipoh, while three left to reinforce Butterworth at 06:00 with others to follow. No sooner had they landed than they were ordered off to intercept a raid on Penang harbour by Kawasaki Ki-48 *Lilys*

“Bounced in the climb, the Buffaloes engaged in a desperate fight for survival, with four pilots reported missing. Meanwhile, Sgt Mac Read collided with a Ki-43 and was killed.”

Above right
Flt Lt Doug Vanderfield achieved five victories flying Buffaloes.
G SCRIMGEOUR

Right
Fg Off Maurice 'Blondie' Holder became one of just four pilots to achieve five victories on the Buffalo. VIA B CULL

Below
Battered Buffalo I AN196 of 243 Squadron is inspected by a Japanese soldier after capture at Kota Bharu.
F G SWANBOROUGH

to scramble was refused, left just four undamaged. With that, 21 Squadron was ordered to withdraw to Butterworth, but it too had been heavily attacked.

On the morning of December 9 only two pairs of aircraft could be mustered by 21 Squadron and, during its first combat with enemy fighters one Buffalo was shot down and the other crash-landed. The other two were also engaged and Fg Off 'Monty' Montefiore claimed a Nakajima Ki-27 *Nate* fighter shot down – the type's first victory.

The moment was short-lived as Montefiore was shot down and his wingman, also hit, had to force-land. In a first bloody encounter with the nimble Ki-27s, gun stoppages were again a contributory factor.

With Butterworth in ruins, that evening all surviving aircraft were evacuated south to Ipoh.

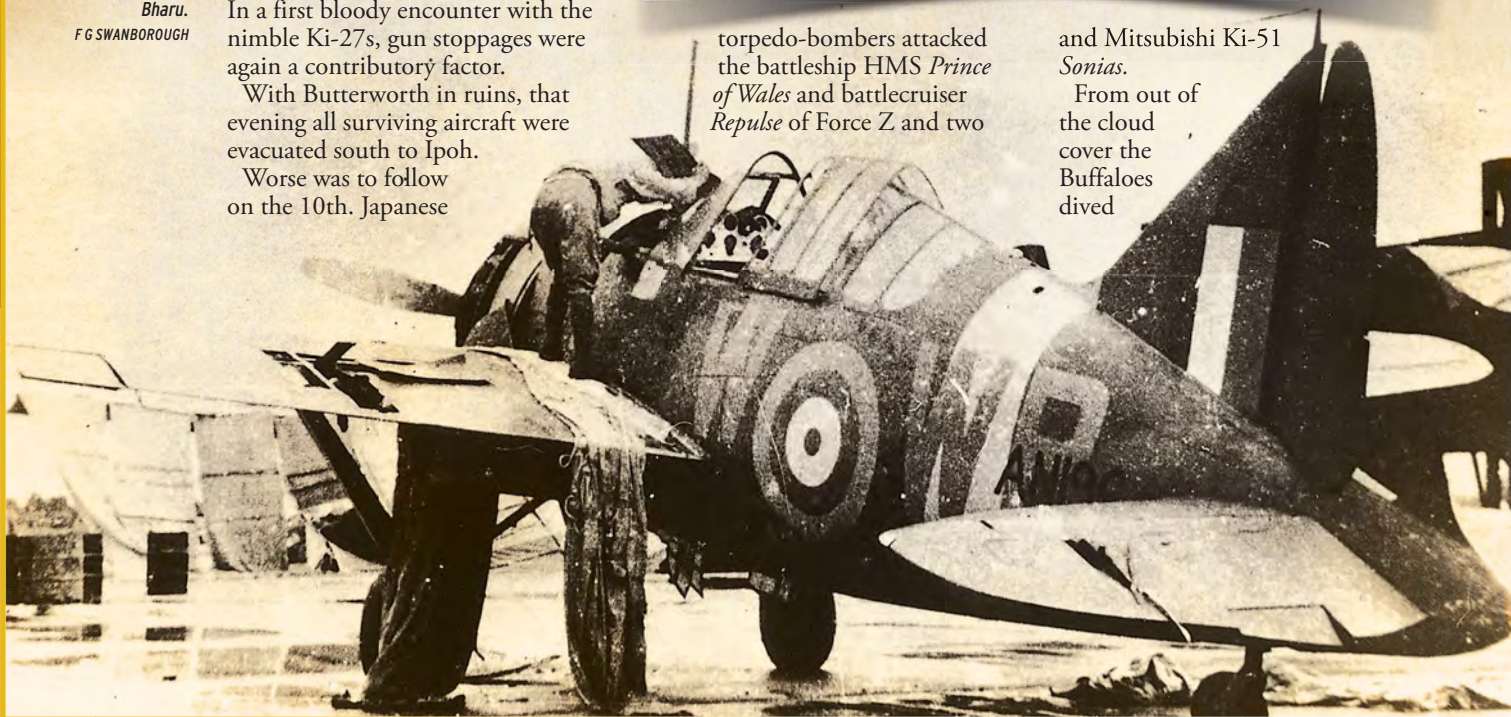
Worse was to follow on the 10th. Japanese



torpedo-bombers attacked the battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* of Force Z and two

and Mitsubishi Ki-51 *Sonias*.

From out of the cloud cover the Buffaloes dived





on the bombers, as Flt Lt Doug Vanderfield described: "We let them have the works and definitely shot down two in the first attack." Short of fuel the Buffaloes had to land almost immediately, but Vanderfield headed directly back to Ipoh where he was credited with two Ki-48s and a Ki-51 destroyed, a feat he had achieved with his undercarriage stuck down! Sgts Read and Collyer also claimed three Ki-51s.

As others landed at Butterworth they were engaged by Ki-27s. Vigors was hit in the fuel tank and had to bale out, badly burned; he was fired on by the Japanese while parachuting. Although his Buffalo was damaged, Flt Lt Grace managed to down a

Ki-27 before landing back at Ipoh. Sgt Oelrich was shot down and killed and another two crash-landed.

Penang had to be evacuated. As 453's final formation was heading for Ipoh it hit bad weather, three Buffaloes crashing and two force-landing. Diving on a Ki-21 and probably destroying it, New Zealander Geoff Fiskien of 243 Squadron became the most successful Commonwealth pilot against the Japanese.

As enemy air attacks in Malaya intensified, the lack of a warning system forced the Buffalo units to fly standing patrols; and when three Nakajima Ki-43 *Oscar* fighters swept in over Ipoh, Sgt Alf Clare of 453

dived and shot one down for his first victory. Ipoh, however, soon became untenable, forcing withdrawal to Kuala Lumpur.

From there Vanderfield led a dozen Buffaloes against a large Japanese formation, including "Me 109s" that were actually Ki-43s of the 64th Sentai led by Major Tateo Kato. The action was described in the 453 Squadron diary as "the Buffaloes' last stand in Malaya".

Bounced in the climb, the Brewsters engaged in a desperate fight for survival, with four pilots reported missing. Meanwhile, Sgt Mac Read collided with a Ki-43 and was killed. Sgt Harry Griffiths was credited with two Ki-27s destroyed, Vanderfield probably accounted for two more and Sgt Greg Board shared a Ki-48 before being forced to bale out. Clare claimed three victories.

These were the Buffaloes' last victories of 1941 over Malaya. The battle saw the virtual decimation of 453 Squadron and the surviving aircraft were ordered back to Singapore where, on Christmas Day, 453 amalgamated with 21 Squadron. ➔

Above
Heading a line-up of Buffaloes of 21 Sqn RAAF is AN180, flown on January 17, 1942 by Sgt Alf Clare when he shot down a Ki-27 and shared a Ki-43. RAAF

Left
Flying Buffalo I AN185, Flt Lt Doug Vanderfield of 435 Squadron shot down three Japanese bombers near Butterworth on December 13, 1941. RAAF





Above
Buffalo I AN213 of 453
Squadron RAAF.
STEVE NICHOLLS © 2017

SINGAPORE BLITZ

Other than an occasional reconnaissance, Singapore had escaped attack, although there was some night activity. The Buffalo squadrons covered the arrival of the first reinforcement convoy on January 3, 1942 – low cloud and rainstorms helping hide the ships from the enemy.

Sgts Bert Wipiti and Charlie Kronk of 243 Squadron engaged a Mitsubishi Ki-46 *Dinah* twin-engined reconnaissance aircraft of the 81st Independent Chutai on January 10. Wipiti sighted the *Dinah* and dived, firing a long burst which struck one of the engines and slowed it down before Kronk attacked, and the pair followed it until it fell into the jungle. It was 243's first victory.

Kronk recalled the first of his six claims in a Buffalo in a newspaper interview: "I fired my guns and emptied everything I had into her. She was burning all the way to the ground, an enormous sheet of flame shot up and she disappeared into the treetops."

Two days later the sustained Japanese blitz on Singapore finally began when 72 Ki-27s swept over the island. Led by Flt Lt John Mackenzie, 488 Squadron scrambled but its pilots were soon fighting for their lives, losing two Buffaloes with five damaged.

Close behind the fighters came 30 bombers with escorts. Against them, 243 and the combined Australian 21/453 Squadron scrambled too late and failed to engage. In the early afternoon 243 was in combat with Ki-27s when Garden attacked one group head-on in misty conditions. He was credited with two destroyed; one came so close that its aerial dented the wing of his aircraft.

Another pair of Ki-27s was shot down by Holder. Fisker claimed another *Nate*, commenting: "One turned towards me and I went down and we both kept firing at one another. I pulled up and he went

DUTCH 'BUFFALOES'

The Netherlands East Indies Air Force operated the Brewster B-339D, which was similar to the RAF's Buffalo. Three Brewster squadrons were available in Borneo on the eve of the Japanese assault. They first saw action on December 19, 1941 when a flight from Singawang intercepted three Mitsubishi G3M *Nells*, one of which was forced to ditch.

A dozen B-339Ds, led by Captain Jacob van Helsdingen, flew to Kallang ready for the expected Singapore blitz on January 13, 1942 and three Dutch aircraft scrambled with 488 Squadron. Nine Nakajima Ki-27 *Nates* were engaged and Lt August Diebel in B-3110 claimed two of them before being hit and baling out. Van Helsdingen and Sgt Gerardus Bruggink also downed a *Nate* each.

Dutch B-339Ds were scrambled again on the 15th and fought with Mitsubishi A6M *Zekes*; Ens Swarts was shot down and killed. Surviving Dutch Brewsters returned to Java on the 17th. In the East Indies the B-339Ds had seen sporadic action against the Japanese, making some claims but suffering heavy losses. On January 24, 1942, B-339Ds shot down two A6Ms, Capt Andrias van Rest and Lt Benjamins getting one each.

As in Malaya, the Dutch units were soon overwhelmed and on February 9 the enemy raided Tjililian – of the five Brewsters that took off, three were shot down although the others did claim a *Zeke*. Of the six left on the ground only one survived.

Ten days later eight Brewsters took off from Semplak to intercept a raid escorted by at least 20 A6Ms. Four Dutchmen were shot down, while Lt Deibel had a ten-minute fight with a *Zeke* before being wounded; he landed safely.

By March 7 only four Brewsters remained. In a conflict with A6Ms Diebel was hit and managed to get down at Andir shortly before Lt Scheffer who was credited with a Ki-43 destroyed. Jacob van Helsdingen in B-396 and Lt Bruggink in B-3107 were attacked by more A6Ms and in a one-sided fight van Helsdingen claimed one shot down before he fell; Bruggink managed to escape into a cloud and recover to Andir. The Dutch surrendered soon afterwards.



Brewster B-339D B-3110 of the Netherlands East Indies Army Air Corps was flown by Lt August Deibel.
VIA B CULL

downwards. He blew up underneath me."

The next convoy arrived in Singapore on January 13, bringing with it a batch of Hurricanes. In the late morning Flt Lt John Hutcheson

led an intercept of 30 Mitsubishi G3M *Nells* intent on hitting the arriving ships. By attacking the bombers from astern the Buffaloes suffered heavily from return fire, and five were written off with another



damaged. But the raid was disrupted and the vessels docked safely.

Later in the day, light bombers escorted by Ki-43s appeared and were engaged in heavy rain and thick cloud by 243 Squadron, led by Sqn Ldr Frank Howell. Coming out of cloud Flt Lt Garden found a fighter ahead: "He went into a tight turn and with a long burst I crippled him. He dived into the ground." Another fell to the guns of Plt Off Noel Sharp who was detached from 488 Squadron.

INCREASING SCORE

Bad weather again frustrated the enemy on January 14, 1942 although Fiskien was successful when he shot down a Mitsubishi A6M *Zeke*. The next day 27 Japanese Navy Mitsubishi G4M *Betty* bombers struck at Tengah airfield and one of the escorting *Zekes* was shot down by 243 Squadron, although Sgt Oliver was killed in the engagement.

Sgt Eddie Kuhn finally broke 488 Squadron's 'duck' during another raid on Singapore, bringing down a Ki-27. He recalled: "I attacked head-on. It went down into cloud and although I never saw it crash, it landed alongside an army base and was duly confirmed." Kuhn

was then on the receiving end – and saved by Sharp who, in an act of cool courage, had taken off in an unarmed aircraft!

Meanwhile, from Sembawang, Vanderfield and Flt Lt 'Congo' Kinninmont led 21/453 Squadron to 20,000ft (6,096m) to intercept a formation of Ki-48s. Each of the section leaders shot one down, Kinninmont recalling: "I picked off one of them and gave him a packet at zero range. Smoke poured from his port engine and I pulled out to watch him go down."

The Japanese returned in strength on the morning of the 16th when a formation of *Nells* hit Seletar airfield without interception. Later, two Mitsubishi C5M *Babs* flew a

reconnaissance and Howell, flying W8193, led a section and caught one over Johore. He reported: "I let him have one good burst. The enemy immediately went straight down bursting into flames as he went, and before he crashed one wing came off altogether."

The Buffalo units also flew bomber escorts and ground strafes against the inexorable Japanese advance down the Malay Peninsula. Early on January 17, six Australian Brewsters escorted Vickers Vildebeest biplanes attacking the mainland. Near the

Above
Buffalo I W8144 of 67 Squadron based at Kallang, mid-1941.
STEVE NICHOLLS © 2017

Left
The wreckage of the first victory for 243 Squadron, a Ki-46, brought down on January 10, 1942. It was shared by Sgts Charlie Kronk (right) and Bert Wipiti (left) who are flanking their CO, Sqn Ldr Frank Howell. VIA C F SHORES

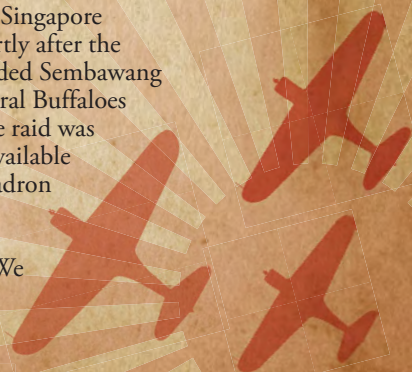


Left
Among the Buffaloes flown by Sgt Geoff Fiskien was W8134.
G B FISKIEN

Muar River they encountered two Ki-27s and a 'Navy 0' and in a brief fight Clare shot down one of the Ki-27s and then shared the 'Navy 0' with Vanderfield. The latter was probably an *Oscar* flown by Lt Rokuz Kato, who was killed in the fierce engagement.

The fighting over Singapore intensified and shortly after the Australians had landed Sembawang was raided and several Buffaloes were destroyed. The raid was intercepted by all available aircraft of 243 Squadron and Holder and Fiskien got stuck in.

Fiskien recalled: "We had a lovely time. There was only ➡





Above
Fg Off 'Congo' Kinninmont, one of 21 Squadron's most successful Buffalo pilots. RAAF



Above right
Plt Off Noel Sharp of 488 Squadron had a Chinese dragon painted on his Buffalo. RNZAF

Bottom right
Most of the victories claimed by Plt Off Noel Sharp of 488 Squadron were made flying W8138. RNZAF

NAUTICAL 'BUFFALOES'

The Fleet Air Arm (FAA) was another user of the Brewster Buffalo, albeit on a smaller scale than the RAF, though with similarly mixed results.

The bulk of the FAA order came from a consignment destined for Belgium that was diverted following the fall of that country in 1940. A total of 15 Buffaloes were taken on FAA strength, and given serial numbers AS412-AS427. Eleven more from the same contract were allocated AX810-AX820, with a solitary Buffalo of unknown origin being serialised BB450.

Despite being tested alongside the more capable Grumman Martlet (the FAA labelling of the F4F Wildcat), the Buffalo was delivered to 805 Squadron, although 759, 760, 761 and 804 Squadrons also received aircraft for evaluation purposes – as did the A&AEE at Boscombe Down, Wiltshire.

Like their RAF counterparts, the 805 Squadron Buffaloes met with little success, being sent to the Middle East, before moving to Crete in time for the German invasion of the island in March 1941. Fighting alongside similarly outmoded types, such as the Gloster Gladiator and Fairey Fulmar during the Cretan campaign, many of the Buffaloes became wrecks, with 805 Squadron converting to Martlets in August 1941.

By October 1943, the remaining FAA Buffaloes had all been withdrawn from use or downgraded to ground instruction airframes. The last flying survivor was AX815, which was written off in a forced landing at Patanwadi, near Lahore in what is now Pakistan on October 24, 1943.

"The ground crews were ordered to remain and fight as infantry. The last Buffalo flew out from Singapore on February 10"

Blondie Holder and I. We dived down and went straight through them, firing all the way, and then came up underneath them again."

Plt Off Gordon 'Snowy' Bonham also shot down a G3M although he had to force land at Seletar with damage from return fire.

UNRELENTING PRESSURE

Offensive sorties still continued and, on January 18, four Buffaloes from the combined 21/453 Squadron escorted six Bristol Blenheims on a raid – during which Fg Off Daryl Sproule shot down what was recorded as an 'Army 97' fighter.

Over Singapore 488 Squadron was also soon in action, and Hutcheson claimed a Zeke as did Kuhn. The Buffaloes of 243 also had another day of heavy fighting during which Sharp, still on loan from 488, was

credited with an A6M. In return he had most of his rudder shot away but was able to land the crippled Brewster. Also successful was Sgt 'Ginger' Baldwin with another A6M.

Another raid approached from the north a couple of hours later and a combined formation from 243 and 488 scrambled, but they were hit as they climbed. Plt Off Cox of 488 was killed and five other Buffaloes returned damaged. Sharp made his second emergency landing of the day while Bonham had his knee shattered but, despite great pain, managed to return for a crash landing at Kallang.

The following day, action concentrated around Muar where the defenders were in desperate straits. At first light a pair led by Kinninmont flew a recce south of Malacca where he claimed a Ki-51

light bomber shot down.

Shortly before 07:00, eight more Australian Buffaloes escorted Wirraways and Dutch Martin 139s to Muar. Over the target they encountered three Ki-51s of the 27th Sentai led by 2nd Lt Haruo Matsuura, one of which was immediately shot down by Flt Lt Kirkman.

Sgt Gorringer and Flt Lt Vanderfield chased the others and each brought one down. But Ki-43s of the 59th Sentai intervened and Sgt Parsons was shot down and killed.

Later, five more Buffaloes from 21/453 led by Sqn Ldr Harper flew back to Muar with 488 providing top cover, but Ki-43s bounced them and shot down two of 488's Buffaloes on their first pass. 'Congo' Kinninmont countered and despatched a Ki-43 near Bahu Patat.

The 20th saw Singapore suffer its heaviest raid to date when, mid-morning, 80 bombers appeared. The Buffaloes of 243 and 488 Squadrons along with a number of Hurricanes scrambled but failed to intercept. Later, 243 and 488 engaged six Ki-48s that had attacked Batu Pahat – Kronk and Sharp each claiming one destroyed.

Early next morning Garden led a sweep of six aircraft over the mainland where a section strafed barges. Up at 22,000ft the other section was attacked by Ki-43s, Wipiti destroying one of them – both wings came off, confirming the Maori pilot's success.

The Japanese Navy Air Force appeared again later over Singapore when a mixed force of more than 50 *Nell* and *Betty* bombers attacked Keppel Harbour. Along with some Hurricanes, all available Buffaloes scrambled from Kallang but they were too late and struggled to get to the enemy's height. Nonetheless the aggressive 'Ginger' Baldwin shot down a G4M.

Near Bakri, Fisker sent a Zeke

down but the bombers hit Tengah and Singapore City causing further carnage and misery. By the end of the day 243 and 488 Squadrons could muster just ten aircraft between them.

BELEAGUERED TROOPS

Singapore was struck again on January 22, 1942 by 50-plus bombers from the Genzan and Kanoya Kokutais. Bombs from the former's G3Ms fell on Kallang as four 488 Squadron Buffaloes prepared to take off. Flt Lt John Mackenzie remarked: "It's a frightening thing when the airfield blows up almost in front of you."

Soon afterwards some of 243's Brewsters took off to join Hurricanes to go after the bombers. Sgt Wipiti managed to shoot one down but it was the only success that day for the Buffalo units. The escorting Zekes intervened and Sgts Vin Arthur and 'Ginger' Baldwin were killed. With all these losses, morale among the fighter units began to suffer.

The next few days involved supporting the beleaguered troops on the mainland. When the Japanese began landing on the east coast at Endau on the 26th, only Vildebeests and RAAF Hudsons were available to try to counter the move.

The first wave departed Singapore shortly before 14:00 with a hurriedly assembled escort, including the

Buffaloes of 243 Squadron and others from 21/453 covering the Hudsons. As they approached in fairly clear weather they sighted the Japanese ships and landing craft just as the covering Ki-27s arrived.

One of the Ki-27s quickly damaged Flt Lt Garden's aircraft, but he managed to bring one down before struggling back to Kallang. Others from his section managed to strafe the barges, and Plt Off Cranstone claimed an A6M and Bert Wipiti a Ki-27 to record 243's final victories with the Buffalo. Despite the best efforts of the fighter cover, the obsolete Vildebeests suffered crippling losses.

Early next day Wipiti and Kronk flew an uneventful reconnaissance, while at Kallang more Brewsters were destroyed in air raids.

Disbanding on January 30, the battered 243 Squadron transferred its surviving aircraft to 453 while 488 re-equipped with Hurricanes and the remnants of 21 Sqn embarked for Australia, leaving 453 as the sole Buffalo squadron on Singapore.

BITTER DEFEAT

The unit covered the arrival of another convoy on January 28, 1942 but the sense of isolation increased when the causeway linking to Singapore to the mainland was blown up on the 31st. The Buffaloes of 453 Squadron were in action again on February 1 when Sgt Geoff

Fisken was among those who dived on a Japanese formation.

He described the combat: "Pushing my nose over and picking up speed, I hurtled myself at the swarm of 'Zeros' below. I picked one out and gave him a three-second burst. With no protective armour, it burst into flames and cartwheeled down."

"Two of his friends latched onto me and I tried to shake them; I got a bit of cannon shell in the leg and a bullet in the arm." Fisken's Buffalo was severely damaged but despite his wounds he managed to crash-land at Kallang before being evacuated.

This sixth victory made Sgt Geoff Fisken the most successful Allied Buffalo pilot. It was also the type's last victory over the doomed island.

A few desultory sorties followed over the next few days but conditions on the island were now virtually untenable and, by the 6th, four surviving Brewsters had evacuated to Palembang. The ground crews were ordered to remain and fight as infantry. The last Buffalo flew out from Singapore on February 10.

Distinguished Flying Crosses were awarded Flt Lts Mowbray Garden, John Hutcheson, Fg Off Gordon Bonham and Plt Off Noel Sharp. Sgts Bert Wipiti and Eddie Kuhn received DFMs.

Singapore surrendered on February 15, 1943 – the bitterest defeat in British military history. ●

