

DEFENDING SINGAPORE

The Royal New Zealand Air Force made a significant contribution to the Allied cause during the Second World War with more than 55,000 New Zealanders joining the RNZAF. While the exploits of those squadrons that served alongside the RAF are relatively well known, much less has been written of those which saw action in the Far East. Andrew Thomas profiles a young New Zealand fighter pilot who fought against the Japanese over Malaya and Singapore.



ABOVE: On the day that 488 RNZAF Squadron's Pilot Officer Noel Callan Sharp undertook his first scramble, 13 December 1941, Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield of 453 Squadron RAAF had his first taste of combat over Penang. During the aerial combats that morning, Vanderfield was credited with shooting down three Japanese aircraft – all of which were achieved, as this painting by Mark Postlethwaite GVA illustrates, with his aircraft's undercarriage stuck down. (Courtesy of Mark Postlethwaite: www.posart.com)

MARK POSTLETHWAITE 09



The lynchpin of British defences in the Far East was the great naval base and "fortress" of Singapore. During the late 1930s steps were underway to improve the inadequate defences in the area and by 1941 fighter defences were at least allocated, albeit in the form of the portly and obsolescent Brewster Buffalo that was totally unsuitable for service in Britain or the Middle East.

The first Buffalo squadrons, 67 and 243 RAF, began forming in March 1941 at Kallang. Located in south-eastern Singapore, RAF Kallang, a former civilian airfield, was the principal Allied fighter base in the colony. They were followed in August by 453 Squadron RAAF at Sembawang which was in the north of Singapore. By December 1941, approximately 150 Buffalo B-339E aircraft made up the bulk of the British

fighter defences of Burma, Malaya and Singapore.

In October 1941, 67 Squadron was transferred to Burma, being replaced in Singapore by 488 Squadron RNZAF. Having assembled in New Zealand during September, 488 began forming at Kallang in early October. Like the other units, the bulk of the pilots were Australians and New Zealanders who had come direct from training schools. However, its Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader Wilf Clouston DFC, a Battle of France and Battle of Britain veteran with nine "kills" to his credit. The flight commanders were Flight Lieutenant John Mackenzie DFC (who had ten victories) and Flight Lieutenant John Hutcheson; the latter described the obsolescent Buffalo as a "nice old gentleman's aeroplane" – hardly a ringing endorsement for a front line fighter!

Among 488's inexperienced new pilots was a 19-year-old former bank clerk from Auckland, New Zealander Pilot Officer Noel Callan Sharp. Like his colleagues, after basic flying training in New Zealand, Sharp had

ABOVE: Following his posting to 488 Squadron at Singapore, Noel Sharp joined 'B' Flight which was commanded by Flight Lieutenant John Hutcheson – seen here in the cockpit of one of the squadron's Buffaloes. (All images courtesy of the RNZAF unless stated otherwise)

RIGHT: Pilot Officer Noel Callan Sharp. (via C.F. Shores)

BELOW LEFT: Flight Lieutenant John Mackenzie DFC, a Battle of Britain Ace and grandson of a former Prime Minister of New Zealand, commanded 488 Squadron's 'A' Flight.

BELOW RIGHT: A line-up of Brewster Buffaloes at Sembawang in November 1941. The aircraft nearest the camera, 453 Squadron's Mk.II AN185, TD-V, was that flown by Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield on 13 December 1941 – it is the aircraft depicted on page 55.





undertaken a short conversion course on North American Harvards at 1 Service Flying Training School at Wigram before sailing for Singapore aboard the Dutch steamer SS *Tasman*.

Sharp joined Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson's 'B' Flight, though he and other recent arrivals were initially sent to a recently-formed operational training unit at Kluang on the Malay Peninsula. Here they were to gain further experience on the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Wirraway – an Australian-built training and general-purpose aircraft – before converting on to the Buffalo.

The Buffaloes that had been handed over to 488 Squadron by 67 Squadron on its departure were in a generally poor condition. Although designed to carry four .5-inch guns, to save weight and improve performance these were

replaced by .303-inch Browning machine-guns. Initially there was also a dearth of spares and the ground crews lacked tool kits, so it took much effort to keep the aircraft serviceable. This, in turn, restricted the amount of flying time available to the young pilots. Poor weather also affected the training programme and it was not until 25 November that live firing practice commenced, followed by mock attacks and some limited air combat (i.e. dogfighting) training.

Against this backdrop there was a series of relatively minor accidents. One, on 22 October 1941, involved Noel Sharp. The squadron's Operations Record Book reveals what happened: "P/O Sharp in a valiant effort to save a machine he had landed too fast, ground looped and wrote off a wing tip and tailplane. The fault was not all his; so far, B Flight leads A Flight in the effort to get rid of aircraft!"

Throughout this period tension with Japan continued to mount. Finally, on 1 December 1941, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Shenton Thomas, declared a state of emergency. With the threat of bombing attacks on Singapore dramatically increased, the training of Sharp and his colleagues took on a new urgency, whilst the more experienced pilots increased the patrols undertaken. Even so, 488 Squadron was barely operational when the Japanese invaded northern Malaya seven days later.

ABOVE LEFT: Noel Sharp rests on his Buffalo, W8138 NF-O, whilst admiring the distinctive green dragon that it had been decorated with.

ABOVE RIGHT: Buffalo Mk.I W8186, NF-X, was sometimes flown by 488 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant John Mackenzie who was attacked when flying it on one occasion, the aircraft being damaged. Sergeant Rod MacMillan was forced to bale out of this Buffalo on 12 January 1941.

BELOW: A group of pilots from 488 Squadron pictured in Singapore during December 1941. Noel Sharp's Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant John Hutcheson, is second from left.

The first Japanese bombs fell on Singapore in the early hours of 8 December. The force of seventeen Japanese bombers had been detected by a radar station in Malaya, though the duty flight of three Buffaloes from 453 Squadron RAAF was denied permission to take off to intercept. Over the coming days this situation changed.

On the 13th, for example, all of 488 Squadron's available aircraft, including one flown by Noel Sharp, were scrambled to counter another attack. Though they were up in a creditable six minutes, two of the aircraft had taken off without ammunition. Fortunately the raid was a false alarm. However, on mainland Malaya the situation was increasingly grim with Allied troops being steadily forced into





retreat, reeling from the suddenness and ferocity of the Japanese invasion.

On the same day as 488's false alarm, additional fighters were sent up to cover the harbour on the island of Penang. Thus at 06.00 hours on the 13th the first three of sixteen Buffaloes of 453 Squadron left Ipoh for RAF Butterworth, the latter being situated on the mainland adjacent to Penang. Leading the trio in AN185, coded TD-V, was 27-year-old Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield, who had served briefly in the UK flying Hurricanes before being posted to Singapore. With him were Sergeant Bill Collyer and Sergeant Mal Read.

Almost immediately after they had landed at Butterworth the three pilots were ordered to take off again to intercept a raid on Penang. Over the island were eighteen Ki-48 *Lily* twin-engine bombers of the 75th and 90th *Sentais* (squadrons), which the Australians

identified as "Mitsubishis", and a trio of Ki-51 *Sonias* of the 59th *Sentai* had begun attacking shipping in the harbour. With their fixed, spatted undercarriage, the latter were reported as "Stukas".

The Buffaloes initially climbed towards some cloud cover before diving down on the intruders. With his leader ahead of him, Collyer noted that Vanderfield was having problems with his undercarriage: "His wheels were still down. Read and I were in line astern. At about 7,000 feet Vanderfield led an attack on a *Betty* [sic]. The port engine caught fire and the aircraft dived into the sea. No-one baled out."

"We immediately took off and intercepted three Japanese bombers," Vanderfield himself would subsequently recall. "We attacked these bombers and five or six dive bombers came out of the clouds and attacked us. We let them have the works and definitely shot down two

in the first attack. A Sergeant Pilot in my flight fired on a dive bomber, which was trying to sit on my tail, and it rolled over and disappeared. Another went out to sea in a long dive."

For their part, Collyer and Read shared in the destruction of one of the Ki-51s, whilst Read was also credited with two more of them destroyed. Ground observers reported that three of the enemy had come down and that a fourth had staggered away pouring black smoke.

It was not until they were short of fuel that the three Buffalo pilots disengaged. With Butterworth under sustained attack, Vanderfield headed directly back to Ipoh while his wingmen landed briefly at Butterworth to refuel before joining him. Vanderfield was subsequently credited with destroying three of the attackers – a remarkable achievement considering his undercarriage had remained stuck down. He claimed two further victories during the campaign and later flew Kittyhawks and Spitfires in the New Guinea campaign. Vanderfield survived the war and later received the DFC.

Whilst 488 Squadron initially saw little action, the other Buffalo squadrons were heavily engaged. With a number of other pilots, the youthful Noel Sharp had been attached to 243 Squadron for operations. He took with him his own Buffalo, W8138 NF-O, which had been decorated with an exotic dragon marking on the fuselage.

It was whilst flying this aircraft in the early afternoon of 12 January 1942, with others from 243 Squadron, that he engaged a formation of Nakajima Ki-27 *Nate* fighters in company with some Brewster 339s from a Dutch squadron. On his second scramble of the afternoon Sharp was in action again and claimed one of the nimble Japanese fighters probably destroyed – the first of his five air combat claims. However, his own squadron, 488 had suffered several losses in their first action.

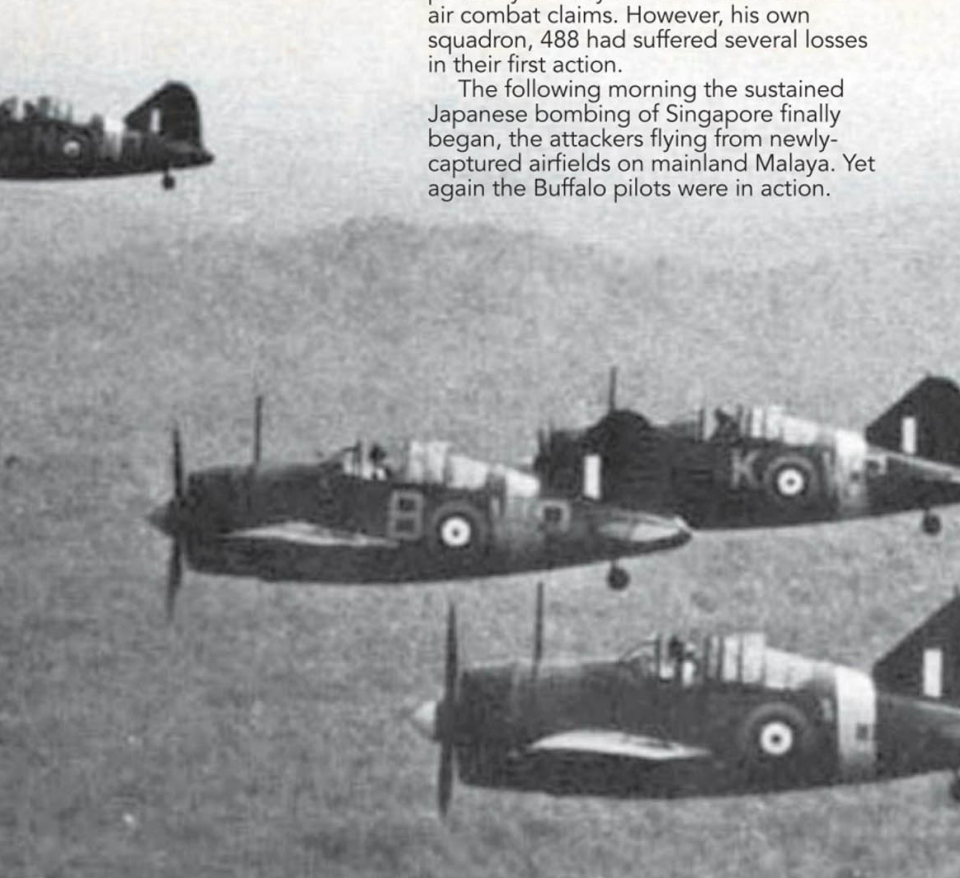
The following morning the sustained Japanese bombing of Singapore finally began, the attackers flying from newly-captured airfields on mainland Malaya. Yet again the Buffalo pilots were in action.

MAIN PICTURE: Twelve Brewster Buffalo Mk.IIs of 243 Squadron RAF, based at Kallang, Singapore, in flight over the Malayan jungle in formations of three, accompanied by a Bristol Blenheim Mk.IV of 34 Squadron RAF (lower right), based at Tengah. (HMP)

ABOVE LEFT: Aircraft and vehicles burn during a raid on Kallang. By January 1942, Kallang was the only operational fighter airfield in Singapore as the other bases (Tengah, Seletar and Sembawang) were within range of Japanese artillery on the Malay Peninsula.

ABOVE RIGHT: Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield

ABOVE FAR RIGHT: Flying this Buffalo, W8138, Pilot Officer Noel Sharp was credited with two Japanese fighters shot down and another probably destroyed. However, on 18 January 1942, having shot down a Zero, it was damaged and written off.





Among those who were successful was Noel Sharp, still flying with 243 Squadron, who shot down a *Nate*. Bad weather then frustrated further enemy attacks, though, on the 15th, during another attack, 488 "broke its duck" when Sergeant Eddie Kuhn, flying W8150, also brought down a Ki-27.

"I came out of a layer of cloud and saw two enemy aircraft, one of which I attacked head on," he recalled. "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 attacked and his aircraft damaged – he stated that he was saved by his fellow Kiwi, Noel Sharp, who in an act of cool courage had taken off in an unarmed aircraft.



The Japanese raids continued in intensity. Despite bad weather, on the 18th, Imperial Japanese Navy G3M *Nell* and G4M *Betty* bombers raided Singapore Naval Base. This was the only time in the whole bombing campaign against Singapore that the intercepting



Buffaloes, a composite formation from 243 and 488 squadrons, had sufficient warning to climb and gain a height advantage over the escort.

The day's first scramble was led by Noel's erstwhile flight commander, Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson of 488. There was extensive layered cloud with gaps of perhaps 2,000 feet between layers. Diving down from 18,000 feet into the unsuspecting Japanese, Sharp sent a Zero down to destruction for his second confirmed victory. His victim was one of two confirmed by enemy records. Sergeant Killick claimed the other, both of which were seen to fall in flames.

One of the Allied pilots involved wrote: "We made a head on attack on those below us before the top cover arrived. After the first attack, it was a real mix-up. Everywhere one looked there was an enemy aircraft."

During the twisting, swirling fight Sharp's W8138 was badly damaged by the Zeroes that had quickly turned on the Buffaloes. Amidst other damage, most of his rudder had been shot away and it was only by some skilful flying that Sharp managed to return to Kallang and land safely. Here, W8138 was written off.

The frenetic nature of the aerial fighting over Singapore did not let up. Shortly before midday a mixed Flight from both squadrons, again led by Hutcheson and including Sharp in a new aircraft, was scrambled. This time the Buffaloes did not gain a height advantage and in a one-

sided action Noel's new mount was one of four Buffaloes badly damaged.

He was forced to make his second emergency landing in a matter of hours, his Buffalo only just controllable by use of the trim tabs. This one was also deemed irreparable and written off.

The promising Pilot Officer "Snowy" Bonham was also involved in a dogfight and had his knee shattered. In great pain he managed to coax his Buffalo back to a crash landing at Kallang; he subsequently received one of the few DFCs awarded in Malaya.

Another pilot wrote of this fight: "Eighteen 'Type 0's' appeared over our 'drome at about 18,000 feet. We were sent off to intercept. The enemy kept their height until we were about 2,000 feet below before attacking. This was a very uncomfortable position for us to be in. Our losses were heavy."

The situation continued to rapidly deteriorate. Two days later Sharp was flying one of six Buffaloes that were escorting two Albacores of 36 Squadron over the Muar area. Whilst en route they encountered six Ki-48 *Lily* bombers; four of the Buffaloes attacked them. One of the bombers was shot down and two others badly damaged – one of them by fire from Noel Sharp. It was his final combat in the unwieldy Buffalo, an aircraft he had flown with some distinction against the odds.

Noel Sharp then returned to 488 but on 24 January 1942, with the squadron down to just two serviceable Buffaloes





it began re-equipping with Hawker Hurricanes that had been assembled at Seletar. However, during the morning of the 27th, two dozen G4M Bettys, with a Zero escort, attacked Kallang whilst 488's Hurricanes were refuelling. Two were destroyed and most of the others damaged. It was just about the end.

By the 31st Malaya had been evacuated and 488, now commanded by Squadron Leader John Mackenzie, was ordered to prepare to evacuate Singapore. On 2 February, Noel Sharp, by now promoted to Flying Officer, in company with Pilot Officer White, Pilot Officer Greenhalgh and Sergeant Eddie Kuhn, flew four Hurricanes to Palembang in Sumatra. They did not remain long before moving across to Tjililitan on Java.

However, the Dutch East Indies was also targeted by the Japanese, particularly the vital oilfields at Palembang, and they began landings there on the 14th. That morning, Hutcheson led nine Hurricanes, including one flown by Noel Sharp, back to Palembang. Whilst approaching their destination the 488 Squadron pilots spotted what they initially thought were Hudsons – in fact they were Kawasaki Ki-56 transports that were dropping paratroops ahead of the Japanese seaborne landings.

With limited fuel remaining, the Hurricane pilots were forced to scatter as the escorting Ki-43 Oscars intervened. Both Hutcheson and Sharp managed to force land safely and, with others, made their perilous way back to Java.

There it was decided to concentrate the remaining Hurricanes into two squadrons. Consequently, on 16 February Noel Sharp joined a reconstituted 605 Squadron along with several other 488 veterans; the remainder of the latter

squadron was evacuated to Australia.

There was little respite as the enemy appeared over western Java in force on 24 February 1942, when, during the afternoon, Japanese bombers raided Tjililitan. They were intercepted by seven Hurricanes of 605 and four from 242 Squadron led by Squadron Leader Ricky Wright. In the ensuing dogfights, the Allied pilots made a number of claims, including a Zero which fell to Noel Sharp. However, his aircraft was also hit and he was obliged to bale out, landing in a canal and almost drowning before being rescued by a couple of local Javanese. He was subsequently returned safely to base.

The following day saw the Japanese mount a heavy attack which was countered by Hurricanes of both squadrons. Pilot Officer Red Campbell, Noel's colleague in 605 Squadron, recorded: "A Zero took on the Hurricane in front of me and I went after that one. This guy was kind of dumb. He's doing things like half rolls and a couple of slow rolls in front of me. Finally I nailed him. He went up in a steep climb, the wing came away and I watched him go spinning down." Almost immediately Campbell's aircraft was hit and he too had to bale out.

Over the next few days, there were sporadic contacts in the air as the enemy prepared for an invasion – the Japanese landings taking place at Bantam Bay in the early hours of 1 March 1942. Following the landings Allied aircraft made strenuous efforts to delay them

and several sections of Hurricanes from 605 Squadron, one led by Noel Sharp, attacked the transports near Indramaju twice during the morning. However, whilst strafing the Japanese near Cheribon (now Cirebon), a port city on the north coast of Java, Sharp's Hurricane was hit by ground fire.

Sharp managed to belly land his Hurricane in a paddy field and was seen to climb out of the cockpit. He waved to his No.2 before setting fire to the aircraft. However, this talented and promising young New Zealander was never seen again, almost certainly killed by the advancing Japanese troops.

It would be nearly four years before Sharp's courage over Singapore and Java was officially recognised, his award of the Distinguished Flying Cross being promulgated on 17 December 1946. Flying Officer Noel Callan Sharp DFC has no known grave and he is duly commemorated on the Singapore Memorial. ■

ABOVE LEFT: This Hurricane IIb was delivered to Singapore by convoy DM2 (the DM standing for Durban to Malaya) on 13 January 1942, and was subsequently flown by 488 Squadron. The damage to the airfield buildings is readily apparent in the background.

ABOVE RIGHT: Because of the effectiveness of Japanese air strikes, the ground crew of 488 Squadron was forced to do much of its servicing under the trees at Kallang.

BELOW: The burnt-out wreckage of this Buffalo bears mute testimony to the effectiveness of Japanese attacks on Kallang. By time Singapore had surrendered, more than sixty Brewster Buffaloes had been shot down in combat, forty destroyed on the ground, and approximately twenty more destroyed in accidents. Only about twenty Buffaloes survived to reach India or the Dutch East Indies.

