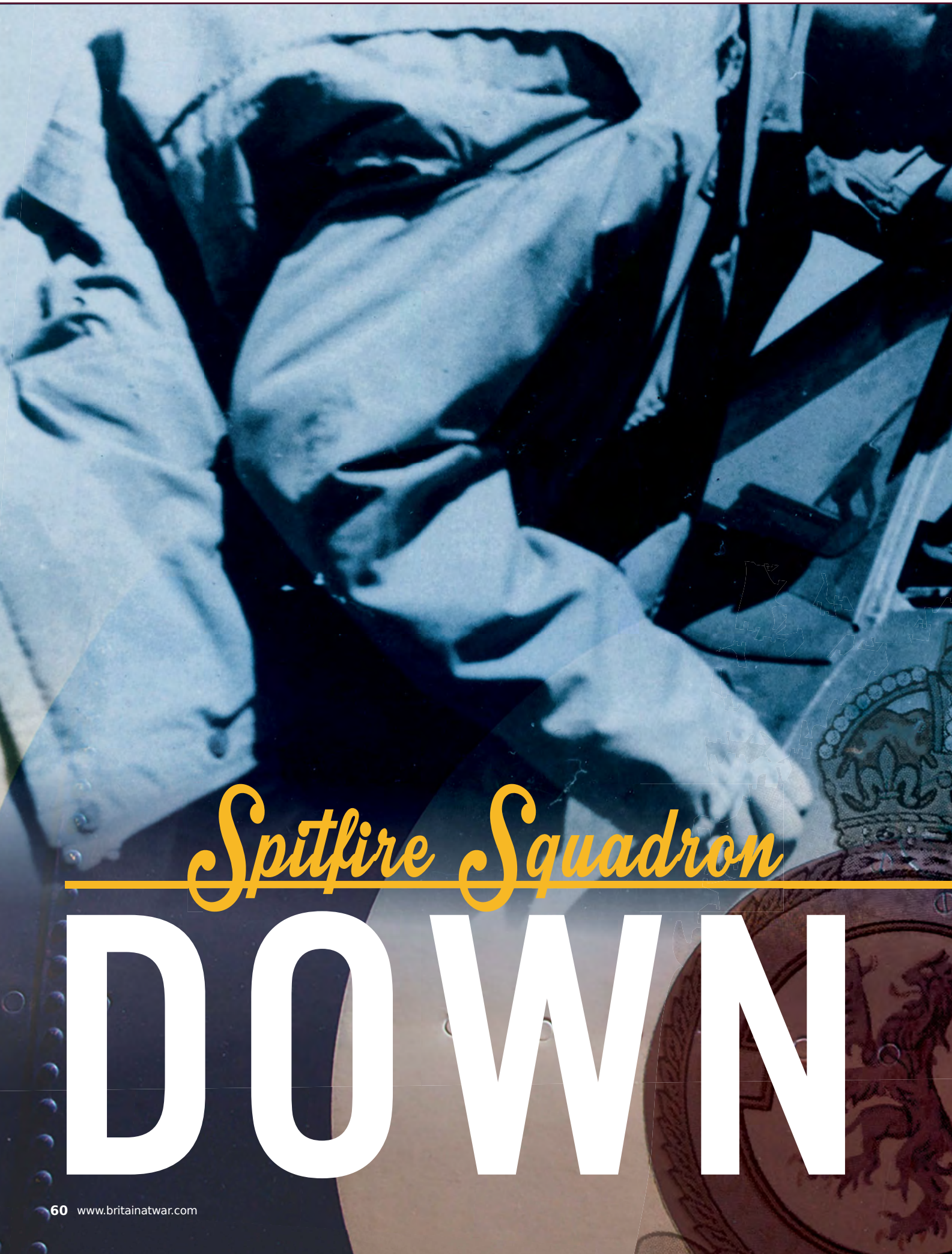


**SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER**  
The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia



*Spitfire Squadron*

**DOWN**



SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO AN RAF SPITFIRE SQUADRON  
HELPED DEFEND AUSTRALIA FROM JAPANESE AIR  
ATTACK AS *Andrew Thomas* DESCRIBES >>

**IMAGE:** Sgt Sid Laundry straps into his Spitfire. He shot down a Zero on 20 June and ten days later a Betty though was himself wounded and forced to bale out. (B HICKS)

# UNDER

# SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER

## The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia

**RIGHT:**

The first pilot to destroy a Japanese aircraft when flying a Spitfire was Flt Lt Bob Foster of 54 Sqn who was flying the usual aircraft of Fg Off John Lenagen (R W FOSTER)

**BELOW:**

Leader of the 'Churchill Wing' was the RAAF's leading ace, Wg Cdr Clive Caldwell who at that stage had around 20 victories. (RAAF)

**BOTTOM:**

Pilots flying these Spitfire VCs of 54 Sqn were all to claim victories. Nearest is BS164/K in which Sqn Ldr Gibbs claimed all his victories; next is BR544/A in which Flt Lt Norwood shot down a Zero and behind is BR539 in which Flt Lt Foster made most of his claims. (R W FOSTER)

**O**n 19 February 1942 188 Japanese aircraft raided the port of Darwin in northern Australia sinking eight ships in the harbour, the first of sixty-four raids on the town and the surrounding area over the next 20 months. With the seemingly invincible Japanese sweeping all before them there was a genuine fear of a landing in northern Australia itself, something compounded by a devastating attack on the harbour at Broome in early March. With the paucity of fighter defences the Australian Government requested the return of two RAAF Spitfire squadrons from England. Churchill recognised the importance of honouring this request and directed that a Wing of Spitfires be sent to Australia with all haste, as the deployment was a matter of faith for the Australian Government.

In Britain, the two RAAF Spitfire squadrons, 452 and 457, were ordered to move. In addition, an RAF unit, No 54 Sqn under Squadron Leader Eric Gibbs, was also ordered to Australia. These squadrons began their long voyage on 21 June, arriving

in Melbourne on 13 August, though their original complement of Spitfires had been commandeered in transit in the Middle East – much to Churchill's irritation! No 54's began assembling at Richmond on 7 September and eventually the tropicalised Spitfire Vcs finally arrived in early October to form No 1 Fighter Wing commanded by Group Captain Alan 'Wally' Walters with the leading RAAF ace, Wing Commander Clive Caldwell as Wing Leader. In mid January 1943, 54 Sqn began moving to Darwin followed by the Australian units. There, the oppressive humidity, thunderstorms and resulting mud made life difficult for both men and machines.

No 54's first, albeit uneventful, scramble came on 26 January but the Spitfire's first action in Australia was not long in coming. Flight Lieutenant Bob Foster vividly described the events of 6 February:



## SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia



"I had been on standby against another possible Jap raid and was scrambled from our base at Darwin with my No 2 and ordered out to the north-west over the sea after an unidentified 'plot'. After what seemed an interminable number of changes in direction, not helped by my aircraft suffering from radio problems, I spotted a lone aircraft and positioned us for a stern attack on what we thought was a Dinah recon job – and this it indeed proved to be so. When I eventually opened fire, although I could see my cannon hitting the port engine, there was no apparent effect – and neither did my next burst. Having closed in somewhat, my third burst struck both engines and the fuselage and soon after I opened up again I saw flames shooting out of one of the engines which rapidly spread to the rest of the aircraft and we watched as it dived away in a smoky arc until it hit the water, still burning furiously."

The Japanese aircraft came down near Bathurst Island at 1250 hours was a Ki 46 Dinah of the 10<sup>th</sup> Sentai's 70<sup>th</sup> Chutai flown by Lieutenants Kurasaki Setaguti and Fumio Morio, flying the unit's first reconnaissance to Darwin from their base in Timor. It was first Japanese aircraft to fall to the guns of a Spitfire – and 'The Churchill Wing' had been blooded. Intelligence suggested that further raids from Timor were imminent.

### *Spitfires announced*

Tuesday 2 March 1943 dawned fine over Northern Australia with scattered cloud and fair, if hazy, visibility. On the island of Timor at 10.30 am (local time) Lieutenant Commander Takahide Aioi led off 21 A6M Zero fighters of the Imperial Japanese Navy's 202<sup>nd</sup> Kokutai to escort to nine G4M Betty bombers of the 753<sup>rd</sup> Ku led by Lieutenant Koshiro Yokomizo on the 52<sup>nd</sup> raid on Australia. That morning Wing Commander Caldwell was scrambled with 54 Sqn followed by 457 Sqn but it was only the section

led by Caldwell that made contact. Although concerned about their fuel state he led them into the enemy fighters 20 miles off the coast for the first major clash by the Spitfire with the Japanese. Caldwell claimed two destroyed while Squadron Leader Eric Gibbs dived on what he thought were three single engined bombers with a pair of escorting Zeros: "I fired a short burst at one of the larger E/A without observing any result then pulled up and to port. I felt strikes on my A/C and tightened my climb, assuming a vertical position, and fired a 1-sec burst at almost point blank range, observing hits on the cockpit of the E/A. I then stalled, turned off and followed the E/A down to 6,000 feet observing him hit the water." Gibbs then nursed his damaged aircraft home, landing with just 5 gallons of fuel remaining. His wingman Pilot Officer Ashby also claimed a *Kate* damaged.

There was considerable over-claiming by both sides and the explosions seen on the sea probably being from jettisoned long range tanks. Furthermore, although claims were made against *Kates*, none were present so they were clearly misidentified *Zeros*. A few days later the Australian Prime Minister announced that: "...the famous British Spitfire fighters were being used in the South West Pacific Area and that they had already engaged Japanese planes in combat over Darwin." Winston Churchill also expressed his satisfaction, though their delight made the Wing something of a hostage to fortune.

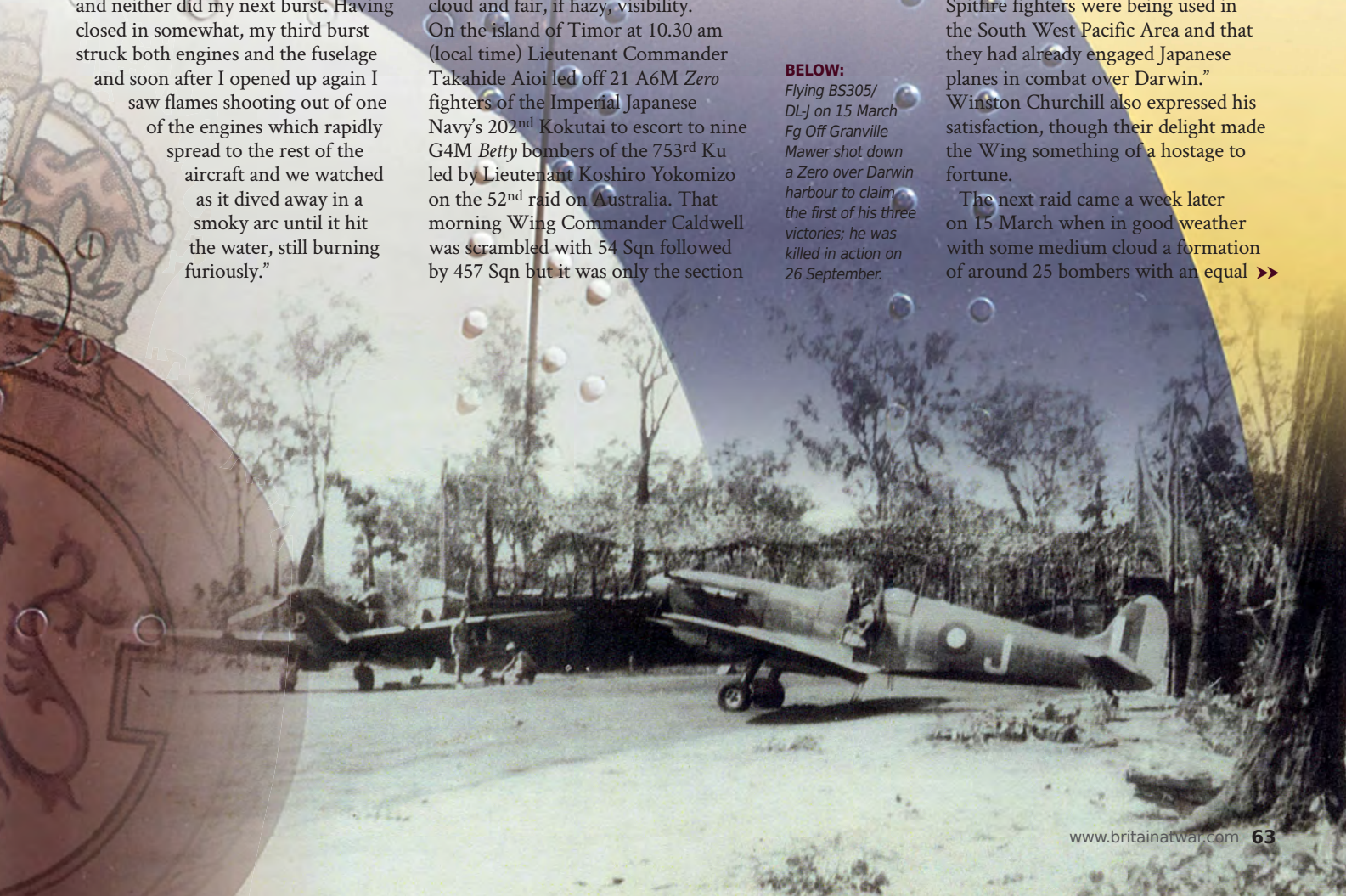
The next raid came a week later on 15 March when in good weather with some medium cloud a formation of around 25 bombers with an equal ➤

#### **ABOVE:**

*Scrambling from Darwin in BS164/DL-K is Sqn Ldr Bill Gibbs of 54 Sqn who was flying it during the 2 March raid when he shot down a Zero. (OFFICIAL VIA A PRICE)*

#### **BELOW:**

*Flying BS305/DL-J on 15 March Fg Off Granville Mawer shot down a Zero over Darwin harbour to claim the first of his three victories; he was killed in action on 26 September.*



# SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER

## The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia



**ABOVE:**  
The unidentified remains of one of the Spitfires shot down on 15 March is examined, though fortunately the pilot had baled out. (54 SQN RECORDS)

**RIGHT:**  
This Spitfire sitting under camouflage netting against prying Japanese reconnaissance aircraft is believed to be BS220 in which Fg Off E S Taylor damaged a Zero on 15 March. (S MACKENZIE)

**BELOW:**  
The forlorn sight of Spitfire Vc BR536/ DL-H named Butch II of 54 Sqn RAF, piloted by F/Sgt G Spencer, made a forced landing into the water just off West Point, in Darwin Harbour on 2 May having run out of fuel after a dog fight. (R W FOSTER)

overhead. Dogfights ranged from about 25,000 feet down to almost ground level with some of the Spits going straight at the bombers. Planes wheeling, milling, planes on fire, pilots baling out – it's hard to imagine this happened in Australia."

Bob Foster bagged his second Japanese when he shot down a *Betty* while Flight Lieutenant Norwood and Flying Officer Granville Mawer each claimed a Zero destroyed, the former encountering a Zero coming head on and fired a short cannon burst, though they then jammed! However, 54 lost F/Sgt Varney who died of his wounds and Sgt Albert Cooper, a recent arrival, who was killed. Foster's philosophy was simple: "You go in, hit hard, you get out. You don't hang out. You can't relax at all. If you relaxed and didn't keep sharp you might die."

The next raid developed on 2 May when some fifty aircraft – equally split between G4M *Betty* bombers and A6M Zero fighters – led by Lieutenant Commander Suzuki Minoru headed for Darwin and 33 Spitfires rose in response. Caldwell

elected to try for height advantage and by the time this was achieved at 32,000 feet the enemy bombing had begun, but nonetheless, 457 and 452 went for the bombers with 54 engaging the escort. In a lengthy 25 minute engagement a number victories were claimed, but 15 Spitfires were lost, though only five to enemy action, the rest were due to lack of fuel. Going after the fighters 54 claimed two of the Zeros destroyed, one of them by Eric Gibbs: "The *Zeke* I took apparently had no knowledge of what happened to him, and he turned to starboard and went straight down smoking." His wingman, Flying Officer Wall said: "I saw incendiary 20mm strike behind the cockpit of this *Zeke*." However, his final sentence highlighted the problem many of the pilots faced: "I pulled away to port and to rear and finding I had only 22 gallons of fuel returned to base, landing with two gallons." Most landed having been airborne for almost two hours. Fg Off Farries engaged the raiders and was credited with a Zero shot down plus another probable and a third damaged, however, he too was hit and forced to bale out off Perin Island but after five hours in his dinghy, was rescued by a *Walrus* amphibian.

Bob Foster also commented on the effect the presence of Zeros had on tactics: "As far as the Zero was concerned the Mark V had the advantage of speed and could outclimb and outdive it. However, as with any other Allied aircraft it could not match it for manoeuvrability; one didn't try to 'mix it' with the Zero. The escorting Zeros were always a menace and meant that at



least one Squadron had to be detached to deal with them leaving fewer to attack the bombers, hence their losses were not as high as they might have been."

It had been a chastening experience for the Wing.

## Best day

Further Japanese reconnaissance flights presaged a further raid when on the hot and cloudless morning of Sunday the 20 June 21 Ki 21 *Sallys* from the 61<sup>st</sup> Sentai escorted by Ki 43 Oscars of the 59<sup>th</sup> Sentai headed south. 46 Spitfires took off and claimed nine bombers and five fighters shot down in the most successful encounter by the RAAF over Darwin.

First to sight the enemy formation over Bathurst Island was 54 Sqn led by Bob Foster that attacked as they turned south for Darwin. Over Shoal Bay they slowly overhauled them, Foster attacking the leader of the starboard formation of the bombers, sending it down in flames. He then engaged one of the escorts: "One Zeke broke towards me and I gave him two bursts of two and three secs, one ahead and one underneath as he turned, seeing on the second burst my de Wilde ammo striking his port wing." Thus did the 23 year old achieve his fifth success – two of which were over the *Luftwaffe*. Another who claimed was one of his fledglings, Sergeant David Wheeler from Nottinghamshire, the son of a Rector who was nicknamed "The Flying Bishop", who recalled: "My big day came! I got one bomber which was a *Betty* confirmed but my aircraft had plenty of Jap bullets but managed to return to base. Glad



we could outdive the fighters." In concentrating on his victim he had overflown another bomber and almost paid the price as the nose and dorsal gunners each opened up on him. EE605/DL-C, Sgt Sid Laundry also shot down a 'silvery grey Zero with a red band encircling the fuselage just forward of the fin.' Also successful with 54 was Flying Officer Michael Hughes who destroyed a pair of the bombers at 10.30 am: "I attacked one in the middle of the formation, closing from 500 to 50 yards dead astern and below, coming up. No strikes were seen but the middle part of the fuselage round the gun position burst into flames, and E/A took a gentle dive out of position burning fiercely in the middle. I then turned to the A/C on the port side of the formation and gave a two sec burst from a similar position to that used before. No strikes were seen, but the port engine and middle of the fuselage of the E/A burst into flames and E/A took a gentle

**ABOVE:** Sqn Ldr Bill Gibbs (right) and Flt Lt Bob Foster (left) discuss their success with a couple of the groundcrew in front of the CO's aircraft (R W FOSTER)

dive out of formation. As I broke away I looked up and saw him still going down burning." However, he then suffered an engine failure and force landed on a beach near Lee Point. Two of the *Sallys* lost were those flown by Lieutenants Katsuhiko and Matsuhara.

## Activity increases

As June drew to a close, Japanese activity increased and on the 30<sup>th</sup> a force of 27 *Bettys* with an escort of 20 Zeros attacked Fenton, home of the USAAF's 380<sup>th</sup> BG, and 38 Spitfires and the interception took place some 20 miles due west of Batchelor. The laurels went to 54 Sqn which claimed five destroyed two of which fell to the CO who also shared a third with a pilot from 457 Sqn to thus become an ace and also the second Spitfire pilot to destroy five Japanese aircraft over Australia. Flight Lieutenant Bob Foster also destroyed a *Betty* as did F/Sgt Sid Laundry who: "...attacked the extreme starboard bomber of the starboard vic. >>>

**BELOW:** No 54 Sqn used beer glasses to indicate victories as shown on Sqn Ldr Bill Gibbs, personal mount after he had claimed his second victory when he shot down another Zero on 2 May. (OFFICIAL VIA A PRICE)



# SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER

## The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia

### OVERLEAF

On 20 June Fg Off Mike Hughes shot down two Ki 48 Lily bombers near Cape Gambier though then had to force land his Spitfire on a beach, though it was recovered.  
(R W FOSTER)

### RIGHT:

A clip of gun camera film shows the demise of a *Dinah* to the guns of a Spitfire over northern Australia.  
(S MACKENZIE)



### BELOW:

The wingtip of a Zero, still bearing its hinomaru provided an appropriate canvas for No 54 Sqn's scoreboard. Standing left to right are: Flt Lt Don Begbie the padre, Sqn Ldr Bill Gibbs and Fg Offs Tony Brook and Bob Ashby. The total shows 47 and three shares.  
(B HICKS)

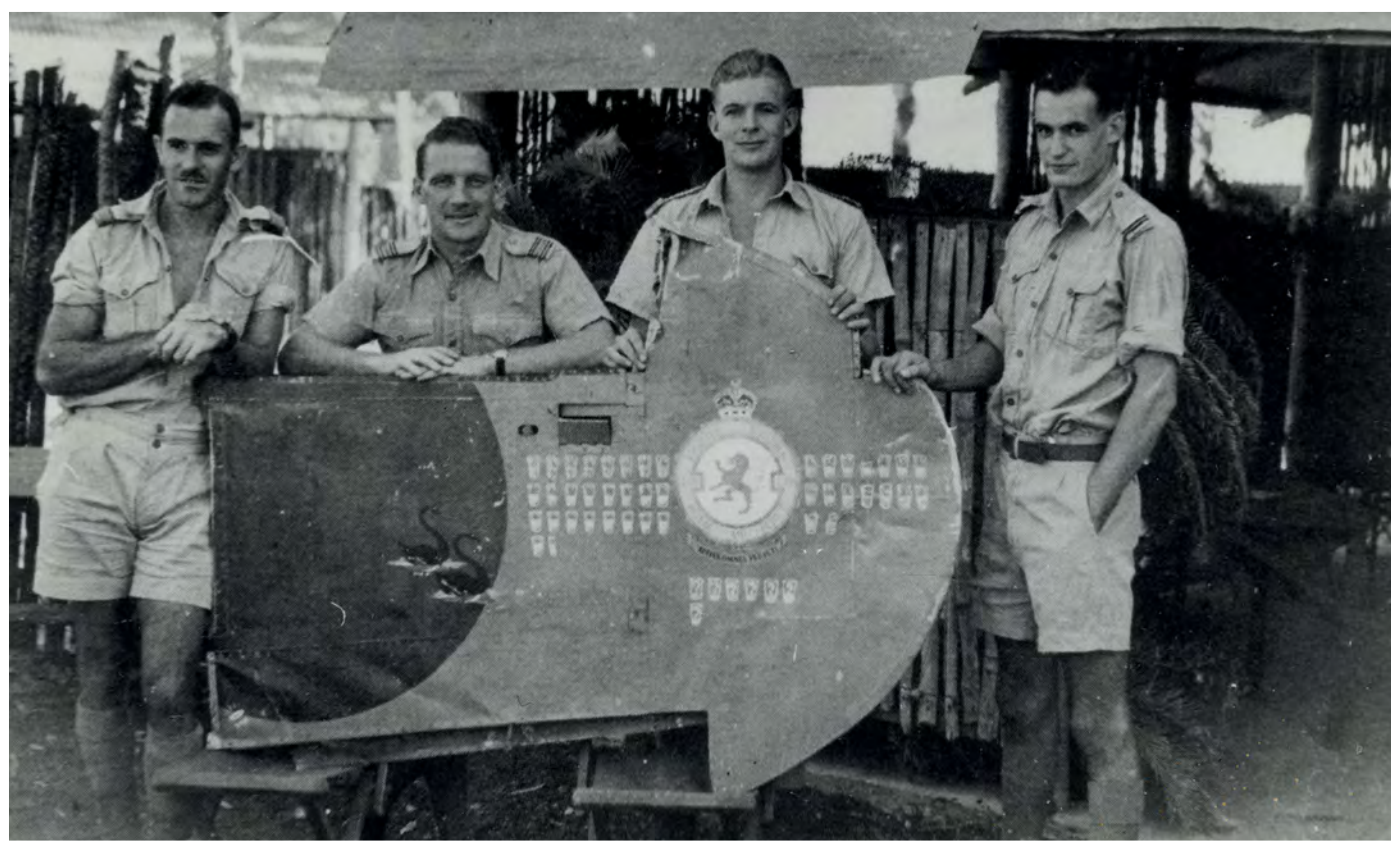
Attack made from beam as before, closing to 150 yards, and the starboard engine and the leading edge of the mainplanes of the E/A burst into flames and burned brightly. This A/C is claimed as destroyed." However, having sustained damage he had to abandon his aircraft near the Adelaide River near Darwin. Further on the debit side Plt Off J C Wellsman was killed, whilst after his engagement over Anson Bay, Sgt Holmes had to crash land and Sgt Harker's aircraft (BR537) was also heavily damaged.

The lengthy logistics chain for spares and other support was having its effects on serviceability – with engine problems being especially prevalent as Bob Foster commented: "As the months went by, aircraft serviceability became a problem. Although plenty of aircraft were arriving in Australia, none of them reached Darwin except as replacements for combat losses. For my last action on 6<sup>th</sup> July we had seven serviceable aircraft." Even so, June had been 'The Churchill Wing's' most successful month and there was a corresponding rise in morale.

Although they had suffered significant losses, reconnaissance flights by the 70<sup>th</sup> Independent Chutai's *Dinahs* early in July proved to be the harbingers of a further air attack on the Darwin area. This materialised on the 6<sup>th</sup> when a force

of 26 bombers and 21 fighters in three formations headed south once more. No 54 led by Squadron Leader Gibbs was ordered to climb to 32,000 feet and on sighting the enemy bombers he ordered Foster's section to attack followed by the remainder and in the subsequent fight the squadron was credited with four Bettys destroyed, one probable and two damaged.

Eric Gibbs described his last victories: "I closed in and brought my fire head on I saw strikes apparently of cannon rake the port engine, nose and across the starboard side of the fuselage to the starboard engine. Thick black smoke came from the port engine of the E/A which started to drop back out of position." He then broke downwards under defensive force before evading a fighter and closing on the bombers once more. Once again, Eric Gibbs landed with little fuel – just seven gallons – but his persistence was rewarded as he was credited with a *Betty* destroyed and a second damaged, despite again suffering from cannon stoppages. Flight Lieutenant Bob Foster also made his final claim: "I first sighted the formation crossing over Cape Ford at one o'clock to us. In my first attack I opened fire at the leading aircraft of the starboard formation of nine plus aircraft. Heavy return fire was experienced from the blisters; it bore a resemblance to large white



flashes and I am of the opinion that it was either 20mm or 12.7mm cannon. Breaking away to port underneath the bombers I commenced to climb into sun and when up about one mile from the bomber formation I observed a lone bomber flying NW about 18-20,00 feet in the opposite direction to the bomber formation. I dived after him and delivered a stern attack, opening up a one second burst from 300 yards. This bomber broke down. I eventually saw it crash on land, burning fiercely. As my petrol position was rather serious I returned to base." He was subsequently credited with one of the *Bettys* destroyed and another damaged so he thus became the third Spitfire pilot to claim five over Australia; the award of a DFC was announced six weeks later.

### *The Last Raids*

After the successes against the recce aircraft the night raid on the 20<sup>th</sup> was something of an anti-climax and although five Spitfires of 457 and five of 54 scrambled there were no intercepts in the hazy, half-moon conditions. The earlier large scale daylight raids had drawn the comment from Bob Foster that they were: "Reminiscent of the Battle of Britain, the squadron acted as top cover and engaged mainly with Zeros."

And, like the *Luftwaffe* in the face of heavy losses began flying night raids. Recces still continued by

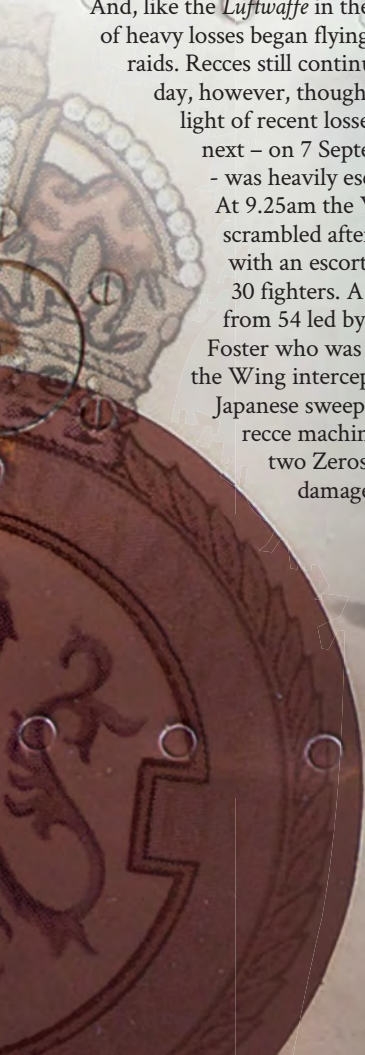
day, however, though in the light of recent losses the

next - on 7 September - was heavily escorted.

At 9.25am the Wing scrambled after a *Dinah* with an escort of some 30 fighters. A section

from 54 led by Bob Foster who was leading the Wing intercepted a

Japanese sweep and a recce machine with two Zeros being damaged, >>





## SPITFIRE SQUADRON DOWN UNDER

### The 'Churchill Wing' in Australia

#### RIGHT:

The last Japanese aircraft shot down over Australia was a *Dinah* brought down by Flt Lts Gossland (centre) and Meakin (right) on 20 July 1944. Sadly Fred Meakin was killed in an accident soon afterwards. (B HICKS)



one by Flying Officer H O Leonard and the other by Flying Officer Appleton. Sadly, flying EF558 Warrant Officer Hinds was shot down and killed by the fighters near Pioneer Creek and is thought to have been the last Spitfire shot down over Australia.

At the end of the month Bob Foster left the Squadron – and celebrated with a lively Mess party! A few days later Eric Gibbs was told of his award of a well deserved DFC and the following night the Japanese launched the 64<sup>th</sup> and final air raid on Darwin when nine *Bettys* conducted a night raid. Six aircraft from 54 were launched but had no joy, though 457 creditably shot down two.

With the change in Japanese priorities in the face of Allied successes elsewhere in the Pacific, this marked the final bombing raid on the Australian mainland, though occasional recce sorties continued. In

nine months the Spitfires of 1 Wing had been credited with 65 aircraft destroyed for the loss of 15 pilots. Although standby was maintained, the war had now largely moved away.

### *Frustrations in Darwin*

Although the last raid on Darwin happened in November 1943 there were still occasional encounters between the Spitfires of No 1 Fighter Wing and reconnaissance aircraft over Darwin into 1944. In part to relieve the monotony, on 18 April Spitfires from all three squadrons – 54, 452 and 457 – combined with Beaufighters from 31 Sqn, to attack a radio station on Babar Island in the Banda Sea. Shortly afterwards two notionally RAF-manned squadrons, 548 and 549, were formed and replaced the RAAF units in 1 Wing.

At 7.30am on 20 July 1944 Lieutenant Kiyoshi Izuka and his observer Lieutenant Hisao Itoh lifted their *Dinah* off from Koepang and headed for the Australian mainland. Just over an hour later the radar station at Cape Leveque detected the intruder and at 8.45am three Spitfires from 54 Sqn scrambled and Flight Lieutenant Gossland led Flight Lieutenant Meakin and Flight Sergeant Knapp and eventually they intercepted the Japanese aircraft at 27,000 feet. Gossland's first attack hit both engines, the port wing and fuselage. It then dived away towards the sea followed by Fred Meakin whose fire resulted in the starboard wing detaching. Gossland recalled: "I saw a *Dinah* approaching from 3 o'clock about 1,500 ft above, so I tallyhoed and turned port, which positioned me 7-800 ft astern and below the *Dinah*. I gave a short burst and saw strikes on the port engine along the fuselage and the starboard engine. The *Dinah* started burning and went into a very steep dive, with smoke pouring from both engines, right in front of Red 1 who followed him down, firing at his belly. I saw strikes from his burst on the port wing which went up in a sheet of flame and shortly after fell off outboard of the port engine. The *Dinah* went into a flat spin burning furiously. I saw a disturbance in the sea off shore. The port wing was still airborne, it settled about half a mile from the main crash."

This was the last of almost 160 Japanese aircraft downed over Australia during the war and was the air combat swansong for 'The Churchill Wing'. ☉

#### BELOW:

Later re-equipped with the superb Spitfire VIII, 54 Sqn remained part of No 1 Wing at Darwin, one of its aircraft used in late 1944 being A58-500/DL-R. (54 SQN RECORDS)

