

TURNING THE TABLES

By the autumn of 1943, one of the longer-serving RAF fighter units in southeast Asia was 136 Squadron, known as the 'Woodpeckers'. The men of 136 were a close-knit bunch. Out in the Middle East, a pilot might expect to stay with a squadron for a tour of perhaps six months and in Britain a little longer. But having travelled all the way to India, he tended to remain where he was for a more extended period.

This made sense; after all it took a while to get them there in the first place. Also, during the summer months, at the height of the monsoon, there was little combat flying over the Burma front, so there was a chance to recuperate to a certain extent.

Most of the Woodpeckers had been together a good while. They flew together, ate together, messed together, shared rooms in rough bamboo huts called 'bashas' and, when stood down at the end of each day, drank,





IN THE SKIES OVER BURMA, THE JAPANESE SEEMED TO ALWAYS BE ONE STEP AHEAD AND BETTER EQUIPPED THAN THE ALLIES. AS JAMES HOLLAND EXPLAINS, THIS ALL CHANGED WITH THE ARRIVAL OF SPITFIRES

played cards and otherwise amused themselves together. And despite being on top of each other pretty much all the time, as a unit they all got along just fine. Firm friendships were made amongst the Woodpeckers.

FLIES LIKE A BIRD

In October 1943, the squadron had been based at Baigachi, near Calcutta – one of the more basic airfields. Theirs was a tough lifestyle, just as it was for anyone in

the theatre. Living conditions were primitive, the diet was terrible and the weather often wet.

Pilots and ground crew alike suffered from the region's endemic illnesses just as the army personnel did. A mass outbreak of diarrhoea further sapped spirits; it became so bad almost 40 of the ground crew had to be posted away to drier, healthier parts of India.

Then came the arrival of brand new Spitfires, the first to reach

India. Much to the delight of all the Woodpeckers, they were among the first three squadrons, alongside 605 and 615, to be re-equipped.

"Sweetest little thing in the world," Flt Sgt Doug 'Barney' Barnett had noted in his diary after his first flight in one of these prized machines on October 15, adding: "Flies like a bird." Like all the other pilots, he was stunned by the enormous difference in power between these Spitfire Vs and the battered old

Below
Flt Lt Gordon Conway's Spitfire Vc JL319 dives down to attack a squadron of Japanese Mitsubishi Ki-21 'Sally' bombers. ADAM 1008Y-2016





Above
The Mitsubishi Ki-21 'Sally' was used by the Japanese in Burma, but despite its speed it proved to be no match for 136 Squadron's Spitfires. This rare image shows a downed Ki-21-II of the 58th Hiko Sentai. NICK MILLMAN

Right
Supremely manoeuvrable and effective, the Nakajima Ki-43 'Oscar' was widely used in Burma. This image, taken at Mingaladon, shows a 3rd Chutai, 64th Hiko Sentai aircraft taxiing out before a sortie. NICK MILLMAN

Hurricane IIs they had been flying.

Barnett was a 23-year-old English-born Australian from Richmond in northwest Queensland. Lean and fair-haired with striking good looks, he had joined 136 the previous November and found himself flying almost daily during the previous Arakan offensive. Every time they were scrambled, he and his fellow Woodpeckers would dash for their Hurricanes then slowly – painfully slowly – claw their way into the sky, usually to find they were too late to intercept the Japanese bombers.

Barnett had been shot down at the end of February, and only after a long and arduous journey along rivers and through jungle had he managed to make it back. He had been lucky to survive.

The hard truth was that the RAF, for all its considerable efforts, had been making little progress in the war against Japan. Control of the skies was proving a key ingredient of the changing fortunes in the war against Nazi Germany, yet in this theatre it had been unable to wrest a decisive advantage. Nor would the RAF win that critically important edge while its men were expected to fly cast-offs from the west.

What was needed were modern aircraft that were better than anything the Japanese could muster. They certainly existed and Britain was producing more of them than any country in the world other than the USA. It was just a question of getting new variants out east, across continents and over thousands of miles. For Britain to have any chance of success, that challenge had to be overcome.



BACK TO SCHOOL

In the autumn of 1943, prayers for new fighters were soon to be answered. There were only enough for three squadrons – the Hurricanes would have to keep going for a bit longer – but more had been promised, and it was definitely a start.

The arrival of the Spitfires, however, was not enough. It was absolutely essential to ensure that those who flew them had the best possible training, even for experienced men such as those in the three chosen units. As a result, early in November 1943, the Woodpeckers headed south of Calcutta to Amarda Road, where Wg Cdr Frank Carey ran the Air Fighting Training School.

Carey, 31, was a tough, battle-hardened 'ace' with 25 victories to his name – a particularly impressive number considering all had been scored on the outmoded Hurricane. A veteran of the Battle for France and the Battle of Britain, as well as a squadron commander over Burma, he had been awarded the DFC no fewer than three times, as well as a DSM. In other words, he knew a

thing or two about air combat.

The Woodpeckers were put through three weeks of intensive training, which included lectures and theory as well as plenty of gunnery and combat practice. In his diary Barnett noted: "Further lectures and film assessments. Quite pleased with mine." That same day, November 8, he also went up in an American B-24 Liberator bomber to observe dummy attacks by Spitfires. He added: "Very interesting, actually."

ADDING A YEAR

Another pilot who thought this special training would pay dividends was Ft Lt Gordon 'Connie' Conway. Still only 21, with a mass of dark hair and a trim moustache, Conway was one of the 136 Squadron originals. A Londoner, he had been only 17 in 1940, and too young to join up during the Battle of Britain. Instead, he became an air raid warden and joined his local Home Guard.

Fed up with waiting, in November 1940 he added a year to his age. When it came to his interview, Conway's public school, cricketing and boxing skills and his stint in the Home Guard all worked in his favour and he was in.

By August 1941 he was a pilot officer with wings on his chest and was sent straight to Kirton-in-Lindsey in Lincolnshire where



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136 Squadron was being formed. Posted with the rest of the unit to the Middle East in November, 136 had been hurriedly sent on to India instead as crisis had struck with the Japanese assault on Singapore and Malaya.

Two years on and, despite his youth, Conway was one of the Woodpeckers' longest-serving pilots, and a flight commander as well. On November 18, his standing within the unit

rose just a little higher. That day, mail had arrived, and after the CO, Sqn Ldr Noel

Constantine, had quickly looked through, with a smile he passed a brief note written in pencil over to Conway. It was a copy of a signal from the Air Officer Commanding, Bengal, congratulating Johnny Rudling, one of the sergeant pilots, on the award of the DFM and Conway on being given a DFC.

These were the first two awards given to 136 Squadron pilots, despite the large amount of action they had been in since first arriving in India. The medals underlined just how far away the Burma front was from the centre of Britain's war effort.

MORE THAN SPITFIRES

The Woodpeckers returned to Baigachi with morale sky-high and all the pilots feeling supremely confident in both their new aircraft and their improved skills. Hurricanes could just about hold their own against the principal Japanese army fighter, the Nakajima Ki-43, or *Oscar*, but never had a marked superiority. Nor

were they a match for the *Dinah*, the Mitsubishi Ki-46, which was the main enemy reconnaissance type. This sleek twin could fly both faster and higher than the Hurricane and photograph British positions and movements at will.

Spitfire Vs, however, most certainly were superior to the *Oscar* and *Dinah* and any other Japanese army – or navy – fighter. They were faster, had a greater rate of climb, were more robust and were considerably more powerfully armed. The simple truth was this: if the Allies could clear the skies of Japanese aircraft – or at the very least, gain air superiority over the battlefield – that would make operations on the ground considerably easier.

The new machines alone were not enough. Other improvements were needed: more airfields, better supply dumps of fuel and ammunition and, crucially, enhanced means of ensuring that once in the air the Spitfires were successfully directed, or 'vectored', onto targets. ➔

Above left
A profile of Conway's Spitfire Vc, JL319.
STEVE NICHOLS

Below
Fit. Lt Gordon Conway sits in his Spitfire Vc, JL319, coded HM-B, in this view taken during February 1944.
WENDY CONWAY



Right
Hard-working in the often difficult conditions, the squadron's armourers are seen during the Burma campaign. NIGEL BASTON

Below
Fg Off Derek Fuge, who was killed in action on January 15, 1944. WENDY CONWAY

Back in March 1942, there had not been a single radar station in all of India, even though the early warning system had been such a key part of Britain's air defence during the Battle of Britain. By the start of 1943, however, 52 radar stations and filter rooms had been set up along the front, where information was gathered, swiftly analysed and then sent to the operations rooms that were also hurriedly coming into being.

Wireless Observer Units had also been established, stationed at 20-mile intervals along the Arakan border and into the Chin Hills beyond. For the men manning these posts, it was a lonely and largely monotonous existence, yet their work was invaluable. Radar, observers, filter and operations rooms and ground controllers collectively added up to more than the sum of their individual parts. They ensured that squadrons such as the Woodpeckers would be brought to bear effectively against the enemy.



Putting this all into place and working smoothly took time, which was why the monsoon had been such a godsend. It had given the Allied air forces the chance to ring the changes and bring in new aircraft to the theatre, build more airfields and get ready. It meant the squadrons had been given time to train and prepare.

Now that the monsoon was over, the Japanese Army Air Force was also returning to frontline operations. While they were still using exactly the same aircraft as when the monsoon had begun half a year earlier, the RAF and their American allies had grown and improved considerably.

'SHAMBLES'

It was not the Woodpeckers but the pilots of 615 Squadron who made the first Spitfire 'kills', shooting down three *Dinabs* that November. This was significant because of the impunity with which these aircraft had been operating. Heavily dependent on photographic reconnaissance, without it the Japanese were effectively blind to the British build-up.

New airfields, roads, and ships arriving into Calcutta or even more aircraft would increasingly

remain hidden from their prying eyes. And in the build-up to General Slim's new offensive, that was the kind of edge that could make all the difference.

'Bill' Slim, the 14th Army commander, and his superior, the Supreme Allied Commander, Lord Louis Mountbatten, had realised that the Japanese speed of manoeuvre was, to a large extent, achieved by feeding off the spoils of war. This being so, the key clearly was to deny them that charge. If that could be done, they would soon run out of ammunition or starve, or both. Then the defenders could counter-attack and the Japanese be beaten.

It was all very well defending a well-stocked locality, but in the treacherous jungle terrain, keeping advancing ground forces supplied relied on air power – air drops from transports. To be able to do that, the lumbering and vulnerable aircraft needed protecting, and that was why the arrival of Spitfires was so important.

The first big test came on Sunday December 5, 1943, when the Japanese bombed Calcutta. It was not the Spitfire squadrons' finest moment – inaccurate reading of radar plots and height meant they barely managed to intercept the attackers at all.

A second chance for the Woodpeckers came on Boxing Day. Again, a combination of misreading by the ground controllers and, this time, dud radios meant only two of





“Cross would walk up to the blackboard in the dispersal tent and write in chalk when he reckoned the Japanese would be over; and, lo and behold, more often than not his premonition would come true”

Above
A line-up of 136 Squadron's Spitfires following the move to the Cocos Islands. By now flying the Mk. VIII, they were transferred there in early 1945, but eventually saw little action. Conway's HM-B is nearest the camera. GRAHAM PITCHFORK/RAF MUSEUM/NIGEL BASTON

Left
The famous woodpecker motif, designed by Ian Adamson. It was eventually painted on most of the squadron's aircraft, and is seen here shortly after having been painted by Adamson on his Hurricane, prior to the arrival of the squadron's Spitfires. WENDY CONWAY

the squadrons managed to intercept. Barnett: “It was a shambles.”

The three Spitfire units shot down six of the enemy that day, but that was not enough. If they were going to have any chance of helping the army, things would have to improve – and in quick order, because control of the skies was absolutely crucial to the battle on the ground.

NEW YEAR SCRAMBLE

South of Calcutta, at Alipore airfield it had been a quiet few days. It was New Year's Eve, Friday December 31, 1943 – and, if Flt Sgt Bob Cross was right, the enemy was due at some point that day. His predictions had started earlier that year. Cross would walk up to the blackboard in the dispersal tent and write in chalk when he reckoned the Japanese would be over; and, lo and behold, more often than not his premonition would come true.

At first, the other pilots could scarcely believe how he did it. He explained it was no real mystery: he just looked at the pattern of enemy behaviour and put himself in the shoes

of the Japanese commanders.

True to form, at around 10.50am on that last day of the year, the Woodpeckers were scrambled. Both ‘Blue’ and ‘Red’ sections, of four pilots each, had been at readiness since dawn. They had been sitting at dispersal and had just been joined by the CO, Sqn Ldr Constantine, and his flight for a late breakfast when the telephone rang. They were forced to abandon all thoughts of food and dash to their aircraft.

Hurrying to his Spitfire V, Connie Conway grabbed his parachute, jumped up onto the wing root and clambered in. After quickly plugging in his oxygen and radio leads, he was soon rolling out and, with the other three in his flight, took up position to take off. Frustratingly he could hear nothing in his headset, but looking across he saw Constantine signal that all was well and all 12 aircraft thundered across the dusty airfield. The CO's section of four was in loose line astern in the centre, Flt Lt Eric Brown's Blue section was on the far side and Conway's own ‘Red’ section to the left.

It was 11:04 hours and the

Woodpeckers, callsign *Drumstick*, were vectored towards the enemy formation by 10 Operations Room at 165 Wing ‘Ops’ at Ramu, just south of Cox's Bazar in southern Bengal, close to the Burmese border.

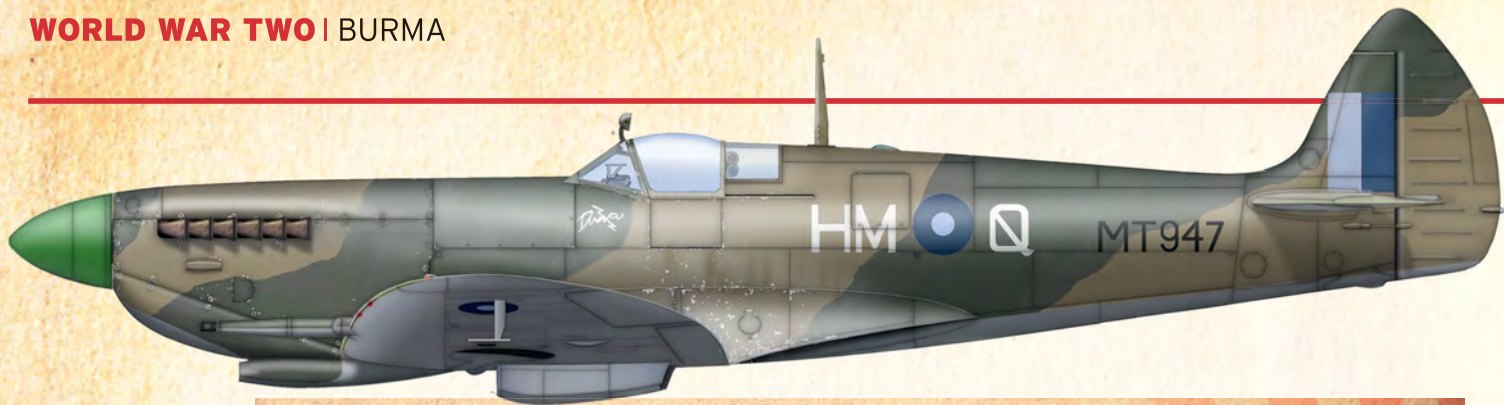
The ground controller, callsign *Yanto*, issued directions: “Nine plus ‘bogies’ 23,000ft, west-north-west of St Martin's, going north-west.” Constantine acknowledged.

FIRST VICTORY

A minute later, the ground controller reported the enemy at only 15,000ft. What Conway could see as they turned towards the coast – but the ground controller could not, and Constantine had apparently not spotted – was that the enemy bombers were diving on a group of British patrol boats. Conway could see a pattern of bomb bursts but, because his radio still appeared to be on the blink, he was unable to tell his CO.

Accelerating, Conway hurried past Constantine, wagging his wings to try and get his attention. The voice of a new controller came on: “You should be close to them now. Any joy?” Constantine replied in the





HOW THEY SHAPE UP: FIGHTERS OF THE ARAKAN

| | Hurricane IIb | Spitfire V | Spitfire VIII | Nakajima Ki-43 IIb | Mitsubishi A6M6c |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Power, hp (kW) | 1,280 (954) | 1,440 (1,074) | 1,520 (1,133) | 1,150 (859) | 1,130 (843) |
| Max speed, mph (km/h) | 342 (550) | 374 (601) | 408 (656) | 329 (530) | 346 (557) |
| Service ceiling, ft (m) | 36,500 (11,125) | 37,000 (11,277) | 43,000 (13,106) | 36,745 (11,200) | 35,105 (10,700) |
| Max range, miles (km) | 480 (772) | 470 (756) | 660 (1,062) | 1,095 (1,760) | 1,118 (1,800) |
| Cannon | | 4 x 20mm | 2 x 20mm | | 2 x 20mm |
| Machine guns | 12 x 0.303in | | 4 x 0.303in | 2 x 12.5mm | 3 x 13.2mm |

Note: Getting perfectly comparable data is always a nightmare, especially with parameters like range and maximum speed, but used as a guide, the figures show the leaps in performance bestowed by the Spitfire V and VIII as described in the feature.

Above
136 Squadron was later equipped with the Mk. VIII Spitfire, which featured a retractable tailwheel. This is MT947, which was struck off charge on September 12, 1946. The trademark green spinner of the squadron is shown to good effect.
STEVE NICHOLS

Right
Flight Lieutenant Gordon Conway. VIA JAMES HOLLAND

negative. He had discovered his cockpit door had broken and that his canopy was loose. This meant he could not risk diving.

Realising his CO was otherwise distracted, and unable to rouse him on the radio, Conway called out "Tally ho!" and turned over and dived down almost vertically, the rest of his section following him with Brown and his section close behind.

Using maximum combat revs and full throttle, Conway hurtled down on the unsuspecting Japanese: 12 Mitsubishi Ki-21 *Sally* bombers and nine *Oscars*. Approaching the *Sallys* at a very high speed from both above and behind, he aimed at the bomber on the right and pressed the gun button to fire his 20mm cannons. As the Spitfire shuddered, the enemy escort suddenly broke formation around him.

To his great surprise Conway saw cannon strikes hit the fuselage, cockpit and starboard wing of the *Sally* to the left and slightly ahead of his target. Looking around to see who else was firing he saw no-one and realised he was skidding so badly that his shots had gone over the wing of the outer bomber and hit the neighbouring *Sally* instead.

Pulling the control column tight towards him, he climbed up and away from the defending fighters, then dived down again, this time with greater control. He aimed once more at his original target. This time, the *Sally* blew apart with a huge explosion of flame and debris.

BRILLIANT EXPLOIT

The others were also wading in, and burning Japanese aircraft were quickly dropping out of the sky. Conway was still in the thick of it and while climbing saw an *Oscar* speeding towards him in a head-on attack. Both he and the Japanese pilot fired, tracer spitting across the sky, and in that brief moment he wondered whether his enemy had been taught the same drill for avoiding a head-on collision. A moment later, Conway was over him, the Japanese pilot clearly losing crucial speed in the nick of time.

Suddenly Conway saw his friend Eric Brown chasing after another bomber with two *Oscars* pursuing him in turn. Conway frantically turned to give chase, but the two Japanese fighters collided and burst into flames before spinning down into the sea below.

Nearly an hour after he had taken off, Conway touched back down at Alipore, but with less than a pint of oil in the engine after a bullet had holed his oil tank. Had he been airborne much longer, his engine would have seized – he'd been lucky. One by one the others began to land. Soon all were back, save for Eric Brown.

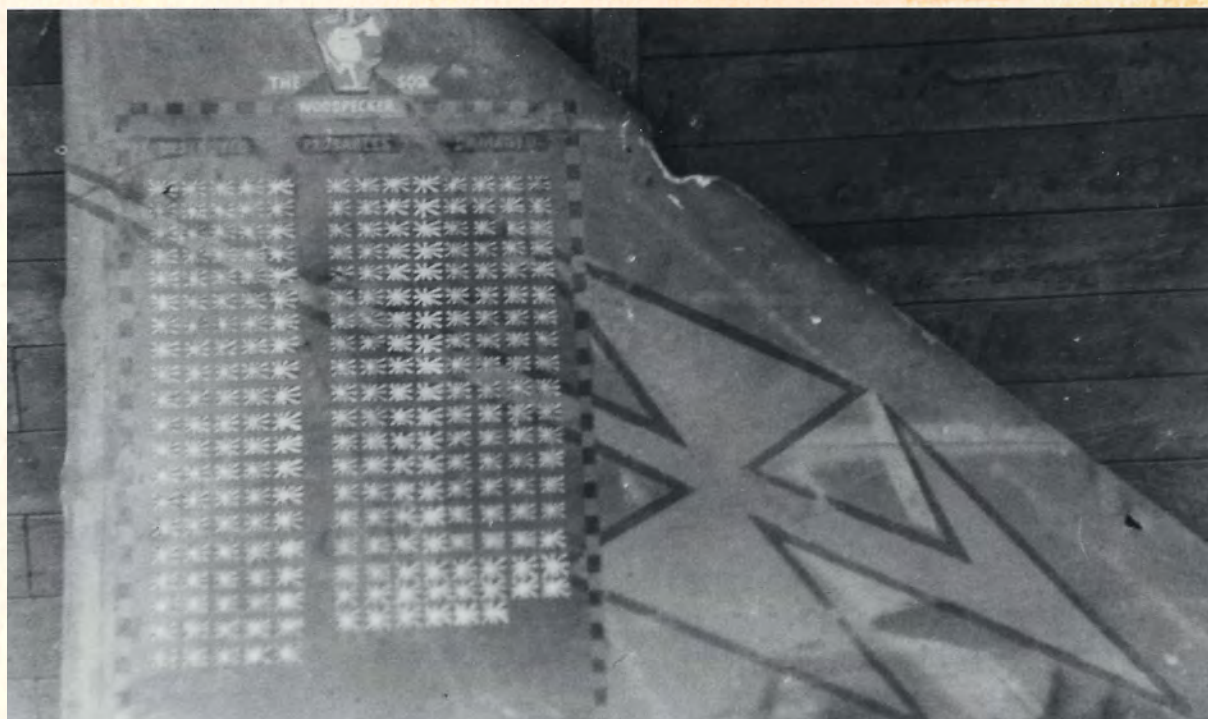
While the CO never managed to engage, all those who did made claims. Conway had shot down two *Sally* bombers and an *Oscar* and most of the Japanese force had been either destroyed or badly damaged. The combat had been more utterly one-sided than any engagement between British and Japanese air forces up to that point, and the Woodpeckers were elated.

There was even better news later in



the day. Eric Brown was safe, having crash-landed in no-man's land. After setting fire to his Spitfire, he had made a run for it and been picked up by the army and returned to Alipore unhurt. In the evening, a telegram arrived from the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill: "My congratulations and compliments on your brilliant exploit."

Conway: "It was music to our ears. That night we celebrated New Year's Eve in style." It was a good end to what had been a frustrating year for the British in their war against Imperial Japan. Now there were signs that maybe things were just starting to look up – at least in the skies over that mass of steaming jungle, hills and mountains.



Left
The 136 Squadron scoreboard, made from the tail of a Mitsubishi Ki-46 Dinah, of the 3rd Chutai, 81st Hiko Sentai. A high-speed aircraft, the Dinahs were fairly immune to attack before the advent of the Spitfires.
NIGEL BASTON

BEAUTIFUL MK.VIIIS

In early 1944, even better Spitfires started to arrive: Mk VIIIs. These were quite a step up, with outstanding manoeuvrability combined with a big surge in power. On the very first day of the year, the squadron CO, Noel Constantine, took one of these beautiful new machines for a test flight. He was not disappointed.

He managed to reach 25,000ft (7,620m) in just eight minutes, almost half the time of a Mk.I, thanks to its Merlin 64 engine and two-stage supercharger. And it took him only 12½ minutes to climb to 40,000ft, which was not only a phenomenal rate of climb but also offered a height advantage that could eclipse anything the Japanese had to offer.

As described, most Japanese weaponry had hardly improved since Pearl Harbor. Mitsubishi A6M 'Zeros' (Allied code name *Zekes*) and *Oscars* had been outstanding back in 1942, but had barely been upgraded since.

By early 1944 there were two RAF and one USAAF fighter groups operating over the Burma front. Fighter cover over the Arakan was provided by 224 Group, with six Spitfires squadrons – three equipping with Mk.VIIIs. There were still ten Hurricane units plus two with Vulture Vengeance dive-bombers and three with Beaufighters.

In theory the RAF could scramble some 230 fighters over the Arakan. Against this force, the Japanese had around 200 – and about 140 bombers and reconnaissance aircraft.

As there were comparatively few Spitfires, the ground controllers

tended not to scramble them together in case they were all caught on the ground refuelling at the same time. This policy meant the RAF was rarely able to bring its true potential to bear.

CAUGHT NAPPING

The stage was now set for the battle for air supremacy. The task of 224 Group – and the onus was really on the Spitfire squadrons – was to make the most of the RAF's increasing qualitative advantage to bring about a swift quantitative advantage too.

The Woodpeckers' victory on New Year's Eve had been a step in the right direction, but indifferent weather during the first two weeks of January had kept air fighting to a minimum. This had been a frustration, but just after 08:00 on January 15, a plot of six-plus enemy aircraft was picked up over the Kaladan Valley, heading roughly northwest at around 25,000ft. Immediately, the cannon-armed Hurricanes of 79 Squadron were scrambled, as were the Woodpeckers and 607 Squadron.

That Saturday morning, the two Spitfire units successfully made a rendezvous at 7,000ft to the south of Cox's Bazar, as news reached them that more than 20 enemy aircraft were south of Maungdaw with a further dozen heading west. Connie Conway was heading the Woodpeckers and took them up to 24,000ft.

In his sight, and providing cover, was 607 Squadron as more instructions arrived from the ground controller, who vectored them perfectly into position above the enemy formations, now 6,000ft below and slightly to

port. Manoeuvring the Woodpeckers into line abreast on a wide curve and with the bright morning sun directly behind them, Conway gave the order to attack, and they dived down, pouncing on the totally unsuspecting Japanese like hawks.

Conway hit the enemy fighter leader with a two-second burst of cannons and machine guns from a narrow angle and closing rapidly. Immediately the *Oscar* pulled up in a classic break, but pouring a thick plume of smoke. The rest broke, frantically turning into the attackers, but they had been caught napping by the perfect 'bounce'.

As the enemy scattered, Barney Barnett skidded his Spitfire to one side, found himself on the tail of an *Oscar* and opened fire. His diary recorded: "Too much speed, nevertheless, got in a long burst semi-astern, leaving him streaming blue smoke."

Pulling hard on the control column, Barnett climbed up and orbited, looking for another target, then spotted a lone enemy fighter below and dived once more. Opening fire, his prey flipped out of his sight, so Barnett climbed up again, clear of the fray, hoping for more opportunities.

Meanwhile, Conway had pulled up out of his first engagement and clear of the enemy, while keeping half an eye on his victim, who plunged down and hit the coast with a violent explosion that could be clearly seen from 25,000ft up. Checking the sky was clear, he made a careful pinpoint of the crash, "because confirmed kills over the jungle or the sea are very hard to get".



GOOD TALLY

Below
The move to the Cocos Islands was a welcome respite after the hard fighting above Burma.

Members of the squadron pose with a Mk.VIII Spitfire during this period. Initially the airstrip was labelled 'RAF Brown' due to reasons of secrecy, and was newly created.

NIGEL BASTON

Barnett had spotted a further *Oscar*, and dived down a third time. Catching his enemy unawares and lining up perfectly behind him, Barnett pressed the gun button only for nothing to happen. He'd run out of ammunition so he continued diving and headed back to Ramu.

He was down to about 1,200ft and approaching base when he glanced in his mirror and saw a Japanese fighter on his tail about 400 yards (365m) behind. Barnett urgently turned sharply to starboard and realised his pursuer must have dived down on him because there was no other way an *Oscar* could catch a Spitfire V in level flight.

A misted windscreen from the sudden drop in height was not helping, and there were streams of smoke from tracer rounds hurtling past him. Gradually his attacker fell behind and eventually gave up and Barnett got away with only one strike on his engine cowling. He'd been lucky: another 4in back or forward and the enemy would have hit him in the cockpit or the supercharger.

While 607 Squadron had also then piled into the melee, Conway and the rest of the Woodpeckers headed back to Ramu. One man was missing, Derek 'Fuggy' Fuge, who had only just returned from hospital after a take-off crash the previous autumn. He had been a close friend of Conway's and was later discovered dead in the wreck of his Spitfire.

Another Spitfire had been badly shot up, but the 136 Squadron pilots had nonetheless claimed five confirmed enemy destroyed, one 'probable' and three damaged. Their

partners, 607 Squadron, shot down one destroyed, two probable and six damaged. It had been a good tally, and while they were going through debrief, the Woodpeckers heard 607 scramble and roar off again.

While tucking into a late breakfast, 136 was scrambled again, this time to intercept an enemy plot developing south of Buthidaung. Climbing to 19,000ft they were again vectored successfully onto the enemy.

Conway noticed the Japanese were operating in smaller formations of four or five, sweeping up and down the front line, carrying out ground attacks. He managed to hit at least two enemy and was not the only one to score; 607 had a similar success. There were no losses on either unit.

Turning and pirouetting around the sky, going through constant changes of height and air pressure, feeling the surge of adrenalin and the physical and mental demands of combat were utterly exhausting. Connie reckoned these airborne scraps took place over four hours, of which he had been airborne 2½. That was a lot in one morning.

ONE-SIDED MASSACRE

Their efforts were not unappreciated. The dogfights had raged directly over the front line and had been watched by those on the ground. It was a great fillip to see the already iconic elliptical wings of the Spitfire – and mostly Japanese aircraft plunging earthwards with trails of flame and smoke.

In all, the Spitfires claimed 16 of the enemy that day as well as a further five probables and 18 damaged, of which were confirmed by those on the ground.

It had been an impressive haul – a one-sided massacre that proved for all to see that Spitfires, when properly co-ordinated and successfully brought to bear on the enemy, were manifestly superior to the Japanese aircraft.

This was a great breakthrough. Until that point in the war in Burma, it had always seemed the enemy was one step ahead, better trained and better equipped. In the skies over the Arakan, that myth had been palpably disproved.

At the beginning of February 1944, the Japanese launched a surprise attack in the Arakan, catching the British off-guard and entirely surrounding the 7th Indian Division and its administrative area, soon renamed the 'Admin Box'. This was the first proper test of 'stand and fight' tactics and over 18 days of very bitter and brutal fighting, British and Indian troops not only held their ground but fought back and won a great victory.

Key to this was air supply. Just one Allied transport was shot down during the entire battle as both those defending the Admin Box and other outposts were efficiently and effectively resupplied throughout.

During that period from New Year's Eve until the end of the battle on February 22, some 50 Japanese aircraft were confirmed destroyed with a further 116 probables and damaged. It was a blow from which the Japanese Army Air Force did not recover. While the sieges of Imphal and Kohima were still to come, the triumph at the Admin Box marked the first major blow against the Japanese on the ground and a major turning point in the reconquest of Burma. In that change of fortunes, the Spitfires had played a crucial role. ●

