

# BOMBS, MINES

and

ANDREW THOMAS DESCRIBES HOW BRISTOL BEAUFORT OPERATIONS SPA

# TORPEDOES



The aerial torpedo was a devastatingly effective weapon against ships, but it needed to be launched from an aircraft that could drop it accurately from a straight approach at low level, and at relatively close range. The tactics required lengthy training as it took constant practice to accurately judge the range to, and speed of, the target vessel.

When war broke out, the RAF had four torpedo bomber squadrons – No.22 and 42 in Britain and 36 and 100 in Singapore – but all were flying antiquated Vickers Vildebeest biplanes. However, in September 1935 the Air Ministry had issued Specification M15/35, later updated as M10/36, for a twin-engined



## CROSSED THE GLOBE FROM NORWAY TO NEW GUINEA IN WORLD WAR TWO



torpedo bomber. Bristol offered its Type 152.

The design, substantially based on the Blenheim, was accepted and named

Beaufort. The

Bristol Taurus-engined prototype

first flew on October 15, 1938. Rapidly ordered into production, the Beaufort was also selected for manufacture

in Australia. Development

was protracted, due in part to the unreliable Taurus engine, something that would plague the type throughout most of its career.

No.22 Squadron's first Beauforts arrived at Thorney Island in West Sussex on November 15, 1939, but in mid-December the unit opted to use four Vildebeests when it escorted King George VI's ship as he crossed to France – the monarch's thoughts on the sight of the ancient

biplanes were not recorded. Training on Beauforts, meanwhile, was not without incident and three were lost through engine failure in January 1940.

### BOMBS, MINES AND TORPEDOES

Having moved to North Coates on the Lincolnshire coast, 22 Squadron was declared operational on the Beaufort in April 1940. Owing to a lack of torpedoes, its initial activities were mine-laying and bombing.

The first Beaufort 'op' was on the night of April 15/16 when nine aircraft successfully laid mines off the German naval base at Wilhelmshaven – though L4465 'OA-G', manned by Fg Off Fordham's crew, became the first to be lost to enemy fire. During that month, 42 Squadron also began converting to Beauforts but it was still training when the German assault against France and the Low Countries began on May 10.

No.22 conducted more mine-laying on May 11th, and the following day five Beauforts bombed Waalhaven airfield in Holland following its

capture by German paratroopers. A few days later the squadron attacked oil storage tanks in Rotterdam and covered retreating Allied forces. The squadron's CO and his crew aboard L4450 'OA-F' were lost off Heligoland on the 25th.

On May 29 the unit targeted E-Boats in IJmuiden harbour and, following action off Dunkirk during the evacuation in June, it sent a detachment to Wick, Scotland, to stage attacks on shipping near Bergen, Norway.

The Beaufort's main *raison d'être*, however, was to attack the Kriegsmarine (German Navy). On June 21, No.42 Squadron entered the fray when nine aircraft struck the enemy battleship *Scharnhorst* off the Norwegian coast. Not yet torpedo-trained, the crews had to strike early in the afternoon with ineffective 500lb armour-piercing bombs.

Led by Sqn Ldr Smith they attacked in the face of heavy fire, and though some bombs were seen to hit their target they apparently bounced off the armour. As the Beauforts departed they were

#### Top

Three Bristol Beaufort Is of 22 Squadron at Thorney Island in January 1940, with L4458 'I-OA' nearest the camera. 22 SQUADRON RECORDS

#### Above

Beaufort AW243 was the last Mk.I to be built. It was lost on December 12, 1941 while being flown by Plt Off Oliver Philpot. R H LOVIETT VIA ROGER HAYWARD

#### Far left

To improve defence, 22 Squadron fitted additional guns to fire from the fuselage hatches. VIA J HALLEY







**"Campbell... went in at low level, releasing his torpedo before the Beaufort succumbed to a devastating barrage of flak. It plunged into the harbour taking with it Campbell and his gallant crew..."**

**Above**  
Beaufort 1 L9878 'MW-R'  
of 217 Squadron in 1941.  
VIA ANDY THOMAS

**Below right**  
In torpedo-carrying  
Beauforts, the weapon  
was semi-recessed  
within the bomb bay.  
HMP

attacked by Messerschmitt Bf 109s of II/JG 77 and three RAF machines were shot down – a terrible blow for the squadron on its first operation.

The next day all Beauforts were grounded for modifications to their troublesome Taurus engines – operations not resuming until the end of August by which time bombing invasion barges in the Channel ports had become a priority.

The first RAF torpedo attack of the war came on September 11 when Flt Lt Beauman led five aircraft of 22 Squadron in a strike off Ostend. Three weapons failed to release. Six days later the unit achieved the first sinking by torpedo when the *Johann Blumenthal* was destroyed in Cherbourg harbour. The following night Sgt Norman Hearn-Phillips (known as 'HP') in L4508 'OA-K' hit a transport vessel in Den Helder, Holland, in 22's first torpedo night attack.

No.42 Squadron had also begun torpedo 'ops', and its first highlighted the difficulties and dangers involved. Flt Lt Hibberd and Fg Off Rooney

targeted shipping off Boulogne on the evening of October 10. Both dropped their weapons, with Hibberd's exploding short of the target. They were then set on by four Bf 109s. Rooney was wounded and his aircraft (L4491) had its hydraulics and turret put out of action.

Hibberd's aggressive flying drove the attackers off while Rooney handed over to his co-pilot, Fg Off A H 'Junior' Simmonds – himself wounded – and they eventually crash-landed at Thorney Island.

Beauforts from 22 Squadron sunk the oil tanker *Havborg* and damaged the merchant ship *Patagonia* off Cuxhaven, Germany, on November 27. Losses in the anti-shipping role, however, were heavy with Flt Lt Dick Beauman, who had led 22's first torpedo attack, lost over Wilhelmshaven on December 5.

The three squadrons lost seven more crews before the end of the year: it was little wonder that 217 Squadron adopted the motto *Woe to the Unwary*.







Despite bad weather, Sqn Ldr 'Fanny' Francis of 22 Squadron led a torpedo attack on the minesweeper *Sperrbrecher 17* off Texel on the 27th, seriously damaging it, but at the cost of his crew's lives.

### HUNTING THE KRIEGSMARINE

Bad weather in early 1941 severely limited operations, but March was more productive, 22 Squadron sinking 16,500 tons of enemy shipping. Among successful crews was Fg Off Ken Campbell's, which sank the 2,600-ton *Wirma* on March 13 and hit the 7,000-ton *Mar del Plata* cargo ship on the 26th.

By this time the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* had berthed at the French port of Brest. Largely ineffective bombing raids were mounted against them, but after one attack an unexploded bomb in the dry dock forced the Germans to move the *Gneisenau* to

the outer harbour where she became vulnerable to torpedo strikes.

Six Beauforts of 22 Squadron from St Eval were detailed to attack her on April 6, some with torpedoes. The weather over Brest was appalling and only two aircraft arrived over the target. Campbell, in N1016 'OA-X', went in at low level, releasing his torpedo before the Beaufort succumbed to a devastating barrage of flak. It plunged into the harbour taking with it Campbell and his gallant crew of Sgts Scott, Mullins and Hillman.

The torpedo, however, ran true and hit the ship, causing immense damage. Many months passed before *Gneisenau* was fit to sail again. For his gallantry and devotion to duty, Kenneth Campbell was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Beauforts' next major success came after the heavy cruiser *Lützow* and an escort of destroyers were spotted off Norway on the night



of June 12 and 13. Beauforts from 22 and 42 Squadrons attacked and at 02:18 on the 13th, F/Sgt Ray Loviett in L9939 'AW-W' took the *Lützow* by surprise. He recalled the events that followed: "We came down to a few hundred feet above the sea. I put the nose of the aircraft round and saw the battleship in my sight. I pressed a button on the throttle which released the torpedo and away it went. I made a sharp turn to port and opened my engines flat out. The rear gunner shouted: 'You've hit it!' I flew round in a circle, and sure enough there was plenty of smoke and a patch of foam on the ship's track."

The torpedo had hit the vessel's port side, severely damaging the engine room and dislodging both its engines. The crew of the *Lützow* carried out emergency repairs that enabled her to limp back to Germany.

Soon afterwards 86 Squadron at North Coates began re-equipping with Beauforts, though it was some months until it registered its first anti-shipping success. During

#### Top

Torpedo-armed Beauforts from 42 Squadron heading for Norwegian waters on February 8, 1942. VIA R C B ASHWORTH

#### Above left

Beaufort I W6537 'OA-F' of 22 Squadron flying over the North Sea. It was damaged in action on December 30, 1941. MoD

#### Above

At one stage, 42 Squadron gave its aircraft names based on the individual code letters. 42 SQUADRON RECORDS



**Top**  
After an eventful fight off Kristiansund on September 10, 1941, F/Sgt Jennings crash-landed X8930 'J-OA' at Leuchars. The aircraft was found to have more than 300 bullet holes in it. 22 SQUADRON RECORDS

**Above**  
Churchill-themed nose art is applied to a 42 Squadron Beaufort in October 1941. 42 SQUADRON RECORDS

August, 489 Squadron Royal New Zealand Air Force and 415 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force formed, but Beaufort deliveries were so slow that eventually they became operational with other types.

The established units, however, remained active, and Sgt Norman Morison of 42 Squadron received an immediate Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) for sinking the 370-ton *Vestkyst* off Mandal, Norway, at dawn on July 25.

On September 10, during a shipping attack off Kristiansand, Sgt Jennings had a traumatic time at the controls of X8930 during a 20-minute fight with a Bf 109 flown by Lt Widowicz. Two of the Beaufort's crew were wounded and the aircraft sustained 309 cannon and machine gun hits. Jennings

nevertheless managed to carry out a wheels-up landing at Leuchars.

In its last success over northern waters – on December 9, 1941 – 217 Squadron's Plt Off Arthur Aldridge was awarded an immediate Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for a torpedo attack that sank the 8,700-ton *Madrid*. During the engagement, a portion of his port wingtip was sheared off when it struck the vessel. Two days later, a 42 Squadron Beaufort flown by Plt Off Oliver Philpot was shot down.

As a PoW, he was later involved in the dramatic 'Wooden Horse' escape from Stalag Luft III and made a 'home run' back to Britain.

With the outbreak of war in the Far East and the desperate need to counter enemy shipping in the Mediterranean, there was a marked reduction in UK Beaufort activity from 1942 onwards. In January No.22 prepared to move overseas having been credited with sinking around 111,000 tons of shipping – but with 154 aircrew lost.



## "Through intense flak the Beauforts dropped their weapons and hit the pride of the Italian merchant navy, the 13,000-ton *Victoria*. The crippled vessel was finished off by Fleet Air Arm Fairey Albacores..."

The final major 'op' to feature Beauforts before they moved to other campaigns was an attack on the German heavy cruiser *Prinz Eügen* off Trondheim on May 16. A dozen aircraft from 42 Squadron participated but three were shot down by defensive fire before they could launch their torpedoes. Although credited with two hits at the time, the nine weapons launched all actually missed. Numbers 42 and 217 Squadrons then began moving to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) while 86 Squadron's crews in the Mediterranean were later absorbed by local units.

### OVER THE MED

The first Beauforts to arrive in Egypt joined 39 Squadron's Martin Marylands in August 1941 and

spent the next few months on maritime patrols before beginning torpedo training. The unit made its first strike on January 23, 1942 when three aircraft joined an attack on a large convoy. Through intense flak the Beauforts dropped their weapons and hit the pride of the Italian merchant navy, the 13,000-ton *Victoria*. The crippled vessel was finished off by Fleet Air Arm Fairey Albacores later in the day.

It was early June before 39 claimed another victim, sinking the cargo ship *Reginaldo Giuliani*. By this time, the unit had been reinforced by 217 Squadron, which had flown to Malta en route to Ceylon.

During the early hours of the 15th, nine of 217's Beauforts left Luqa to attack Italian warships detected leaving Taranto. Fg Off Arthur Aldridge surprised the cruiser *Trento* and his torpedo struck home; the disabled ship was finished off by a submarine soon afterwards.

Over the next week 217's crews sank or damaged two transports, each of around 7,000 tons. A month later, its Beauforts destroyed the *Delphi*, the squadron's final success before it left for Ceylon. It was replaced by aircraft and crews from 86 Squadron, which made their mark in August, hitting several ships before being absorbed into 39 Squadron.

The tankers *Rosalino Pilo*, *Pozarica* and *San Andrea* were also sunk or damaged during June, the attack on the latter being the last operation for Wg Cdr Pat Gibbs, under whose leadership 39 Squadron had prospered. The Beauforts continued their quest over the next six months, roaming the central Mediterranean

and inflicting significant damage on Axis shipping.

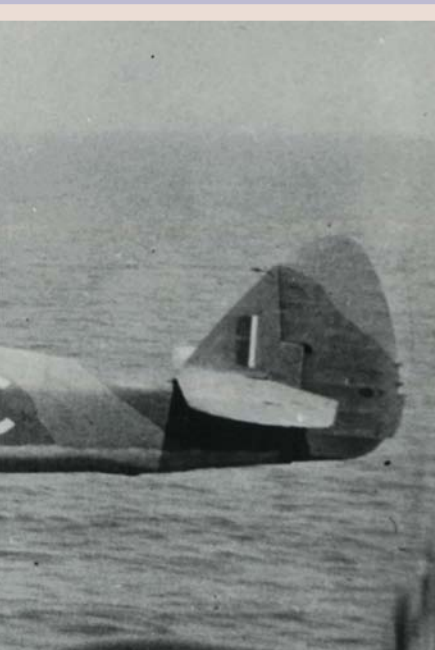
In July, 47 Squadron took on additional aircraft, including the Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp-engined Beaufort II. The unit made its mark on October 26, partnering Blenheims from 15 Squadron South African Air Force in an attack on the tanker *Prosperina*, which was laden with vital fuel for the German land forces fighting in North Africa. The Blenheims engaged the vessel first, followed by the Beauforts. Flt Lt Ralph Manning recorded the events in the unit diary: "The explosion of [my] torpedo was followed by a much larger one and the entire ship disintegrated."

The action in the area continued for the two Beaufort units for the rest of the year and into 1943, though 47 Squadron tended to concentrate on anti-submarine patrols. No.39 gaining its first success of 1943 on January 14 when a Beaufort disabled the Italian submarine *Narvalo* southeast of Malta. The squadron's torpedoes also hit the tanker *Thorsheimer* on February 21 and the 10,600-ton transport *Sterpope* off the Sicilian coast on March 12. In June, after a very successful, albeit costly, period 39 converted to Beaufighters.

Further south, the SAAF had received 18 Beauforts in early 1942 to protect the Cape of Good Hope shipping route off the South African coast. But in May both Beaufort Flights (36 and 37) were ordered to support the Allied occupation of Vichy-French-controlled Madagascar. Amalgamated into 20 Squadron, which in September was renumbered 16, the Beauforts conducted bombing attacks on

**Below left**  
Beaufort IIA DD906 of 39 Squadron flying over the Mediterranean. Note the underwing ASV radar aerial. W H ARMSTRONG

**Bottom**  
Sgt Nichols' crew from 42 Squadron prepare for take-off from Leuchars to search for the German warship 'Lützow'. W H SHEARSMITH





**Above**  
Beaufort VIII A9-296  
'KT-S' of 7 Squadron  
RAAF being refuelled at  
Horn Island on June 18,  
1943. RAAF



**Right**  
RAAF Beauforts,  
including this 7  
Squadron aircraft,  
dropped supplies to  
troops in the jungle  
of New Guinea on  
November 20, 1944.  
RAAF

airfields and troops concentrations until the Vichy surrender on November 6. The unit then re-equipped with Blenheims and moved to North Africa. In June 1943 it once again operated Beauforts, this time in anti-submarine duties.

### AGAINST THE RISING SUN

Australian production of the Beaufort began with an order for 180, the first 90 of which were delivered to the RAF to re-equip 36 and 100 Squadrons in Singapore. All were powered by Twin Wasps as Beaufort IIs.

The first production aircraft made its maiden flight on October 15, 1941 and the first six were delivered to Singapore for operational training on December 5. Three days later the Japanese landed in Malaya and T9543, piloted by Flt Lt Mitchell, flew a recce and located the landing fleet off Singora.

Despite it being damaged by enemy fire, he landed the Beaufort at Kota Bharu where it was destroyed on the ground. Lacking armament, the surviving machines were returned to Australia as 'Q' Flight, 100 Squadron RAAF. It then became the nucleus of 100 Squadron RAAF at Richmond on February 28, 1942, the first Australian Beaufort unit.

The Beaufort made its operational debut with the RAAF on June 25 when a Japanese landing ship was reported heading for Lae in New Guinea. Taking off from Port Moresby that night, Wg Cdr John Balmer led five aircraft on their first bombing 'op', intercepting the ship in the Huon



Gulf. Finding his bomb release gear faulty, Balmer made three low-level attack runs in the face of increasingly heavy anti-aircraft fire, scoring two hits. Others also successfully bombed the vessel, leaving it on fire and apparently sinking.

Two Beauforts made a diversionary attack on Salamaua, though T9604 did not return, becoming the RAAF's first operational loss of the type.

The squadron's first confirmed success came off the New Guinea coast near Buna on November 24 when the crew of A9-29 torpedoed and sank the destroyer *Hayashio*, which had earlier been damaged by a USAAF Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. Another Beaufort hit and severely damaged the torpedo boat *Hiyodori* on the same day.

A week later, Sgt Green's crew in

A9-38 were shadowing a Japanese destroyer force when they were attacked by three Mitsubishi A6M 'Zeros'. Despite the odds, in the resulting battle the Australians claimed a 'probable' and damaged another.

By the end of the year, both 7 and 14 Squadrons had converted to Beauforts and begun long-range patrols over the Arafura Sea and Coral Sea, occasionally encountering enemy aircraft.

On June 18, 1943, a 7 Squadron Beaufort from Horn Island flown by Fg Off Peter Hopton was on an anti-submarine patrol 70 miles north of Wessel Island when the crew spotted an Aichi E13A *Jake* floatplane through a gap in the clouds. Hopton turned and closed beneath the *Jake's* tail at 4,000 feet and fired a five-second burst from his fixed guns, as





did observer Fg Off Basil Walters with his nose guns. The Japanese aircraft's starboard wing root caught fire and it crashed into the sea leaving just a float on the surface. The Beaufort crew had scored the type's first victory of the Pacific war.

The enemy and unpredictable weather were not the only hazards, Beaufort VII A9-225 of 100 Squadron becoming a victim of 'friendly fire' near Rabaul on July 13. It was shot down by a US Navy Consolidated B-24 with the loss of Fg Off John Davis and his crew.

The potential for a Japanese thrust into the Aleutian Islands in the north Pacific called for a torpedo-bombing capability in western Canada. In October 1942, No.149 Squadron RCAF was formed with Beauforts on Vancouver Island but in the summer of 1943 it was re-equipped with Lockheed Venturas and served as a patrol unit.

Meanwhile, in April 1943, No.32 Squadron RAAF received Beauforts for patrols from Australia – and, following an attack on a convoy, Plt Off Harrison's crew claimed to have damaged a Japanese submarine, possibly the I-174 (although they may in fact have sunk the I-178). During August, No.6 Squadron became operational on Beauforts at Milne Bay. No.8 Squadron joined in on September 21, bombing Gasmata on the island of New Britain.

Beauforts began a series of sustained

attacks on Rabaul in October: on the 13th, 8 Squadron's CO, Wg Cdr G D Nicoll, led a dozen aircraft from Goodenough Island on a dawn raid, sinking the 6,000-ton *Keisho Maru* by torpedo. Another attack, led by Flt Lt Quinn in A9-247 on November 5/6, damaged the *Noshiro*; and in the RAAF's final successful torpedo attack the next day, a 300-ton minesweeper is believed to have been sunk.

The Australian units then concentrated on bombing. Through December and January, the Beauforts of 71 Wing flew night raids on the Japanese garrison at Rabaul. This set the tone for the rest of the year, operations including a major offensive against Wewak on the north coast of New Guinea in September.

An attack by 100 Squadron on January 20, 1945, led by Flt Lt Ted Christensen, from Tadjia was typical of those in the final months of the war. Christensen took off with his unit in a bid to strike Japanese fuel dumps near Wewak. Between them the six Beauforts dropped twelve 500lb bombs, sixteen 250-pounders, twenty-three 40lb bombs and 312 small four-pounders on the target.

Flt Lt Harry Fowler's aircraft (A9-557) sustained battle damage and landed with a live bomb hung up in its bay. It was further damaged when it careered into several Jeeps and a building. The aircraft had returned from its 103rd mission after flying a total of 146 hours and dropping

146,000lb of bombs. Having later been used as a source of spares, its hulk was recovered from New Guinea in 1974 and after restoration it was placed on display at the Australian War Memorial's museum in Canberra in memory of all who flew the Beaufort – including its last pilot, Harry Fowler, who sadly did not survive the war.

Along with the rest of his crew, he was killed on March 13, 1945 when a faulty bomb exploded as it was dropped from the Beaufort he was flying (A9-650) during a strike on the village of Milak.

In total, the Bristol-designed machine flew with 19 RAAF squadrons, prompting one historian to conclude that "its part in the defeat of the Japanese forces in the South-West Pacific was probably of greater importance than that of any other single aircraft type". Not a bad epitaph. ●



**Above**  
Beaufort VIII A9-626 of 100 Squadron leads a raid on a target near Wewak, New Guinea, on January 20, 1945. It was lost in a collision three days later. The aircraft behind is A9-557, now preserved at the Australian War Memorial museum.  
RAAF

**"its part in the defeat of the Japanese forces in the South-West Pacific was probably of greater importance than that of any other single aircraft type". Not a bad epitaph"**