

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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## A FAMILY OF 'WAR LOAN' BEAUFIGHTERS

Australia produced thousands of aircraft for the RAAF during World War II to complement those supplied by Britain and the USA. The Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation started with the Wirraway, and later expanded its production lines to include the indigenous Boomerang. De Havilland Australia produced Tiger Moths, then Mosquitoes. The Department of Aircraft Production set up its Beaufort Division to build an Australian version of Britain's Bristol Beaufort bomber, and then in 1944 put its resources into producing a more potent Bristol offspring: the heavily-armed, agile Beaufighter attack aircraft.

How did the Curtin Government pay for this massive undertaking, bearing in mind Australia's small population and the infancy of its aircraft production industry? Apart from tax-funded revenue, a large contribution came from the war loans scheme, whereby Australians were encouraged to buy war bonds which would mature with interest after the war. War loan (also known as the liberty loan and, from 1944, victory loan) drives became a part of life, with people regularly being asked to 'dig deep' to help fund the war effort.

The connection between war loans and flying was not entirely new. During World War I, a number of Australian Flying Corps 'presentation' aircraft were 'paid for' by communities and organisations, earning each group the right to have its name painted prominently on the side of the aircraft. War loans were organised to include touring aircraft crewed by prominent airmen who gave rousing speeches at each stopover. People were asked to give up some of their comforts in consideration of the men in the trenches.

During World War II, the Commonwealth War Loan Office was established to administer the scheme. Many communities had a war loans committee to ensure that its population met its quota, and to handle local administration such as publicity visits.

The Beaufighter—the 'whispering death' which had the look of potency about it—was a popular aircraft on which to focus war loan drives. In June 1945, over 20 towns had their names recorded on the nose of newly built Beaufighters, in recognition of having met or exceeded their subscription quota. One such town was Narromine, in central NSW, whose residents reportedly subscribed a record number of bonds per head of population to

purchase one of the first 'war loan' aircraft. In recognition of this, and as a publicity opportunity, a Beaufighter was flown up from its Melbourne factory for a town ceremony in October 1944.



*Beaufighter A8-19, Miss Narromine, in Dandaloo St, Narromine, October 1944*

After taxiing along the highway from Narromine Aerodrome, the aircraft (serial no A8-19) was driven down the main street under its own power, to the amazement of locals. Mayoress Mrs Tancred was called upon to christen it *Miss Narromine* with a bottle of champagne broken over its propeller hub. According to some reports, an engine overheated during the long taxi back to the aerodrome, and had to be replaced; then a tyre burst on takeoff, delaying its departure to the war zone by a couple of days. Its crew, at least, enjoyed their extra time by touring the local sights.

*Miss Narromine* was met at Coomalie Creek, Northern Territory, by Squadron Leader Rob Bowman—a No 31 Squadron pilot from Narromine who had also instructed at the RAAF flying school there. Bowman wrote to Narromine's mayor to 'thank the people of Narromine for their generous contributions to the victory loan, which made it possible for us to have an aircraft in this squadron named after the town'.

Bowman and his navigator, Flight Sergeant Johnny White, took *Miss Narromine* to Morotai from where they flew it on a number of strike missions against Japanese positions. As luck would have it, it lasted less than two months in action before suffering an undercarriage collapse on



***SQNLDR Rob Bowman, FSGT Johnny White, and ground crew with Beaufighter A8-19 Miss Narromine.***

landing at Morotai, and was converted to spare parts. The townspeople of Narromine, understandably, were not told of the ignominious fate of *Miss Narromine* until after the war, but Bowman souvenired the control wheel to bring home with him.

There is, however, a detailed record of the brief operational life of *Miss Narromine*. Squadron Leader Bowman records that it made a dozen attacks before the accident-missions reflecting the Beaufighter's versatility. Varied ordnance including 25- and 60-pound underwing rockets, 300-pound high-explosive bombs, 500-pound fragmentation bombs, and 20mm cannon were used against buildings, huts, installations, airfields, anti-aircraft batteries, jetties, stores and enemy personnel in the Celebes region. Even depth charges were carried, for use against water targets.

In January 1945, Bowman named Beaufighter A8-32 *Miss Narromine II*. Its career involved 16 strike missions, but its life was shorter than that of its sibling. On 1 February, A8-32 was bombing Tomohon in the Celebes when it was shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire. For three days extensive searches were made, but the Beaufighter was not found. Post-war, it was revealed that its navigator, Flight Sergeant Alan Lewis, died in the crash, and its pilot, Warrant Officer Bill McGuigan, survived being shot down only to be bayoneted to death by the Japanese some months later. A Navy passenger aboard, Alec Hill, was presumed to have also been executed.

That month, February 1945, was a bad month for 31 Squadron, with nine Beaufighters either lost or crash-landed. However, many missions had been successfully carried out. Claims against the enemy included seven small ships destroyed, 25 damaged, 11 buildings and two fuel dumps destroyed.

A8-32's replacement, *A8-68 Miss Narromine III*, made 26 strikes and was 'still going strong' by the time Squadron Leader Bowman left the squadron at the end of June. It, at least, survived the war, but in September suffered the same fate as its first sibling. It was crash-landed at Morotai, and converted to components.



***The fate of Miss Narromine: stripped of useful parts at Morotai.***

The story of the 'Miss Narromines' casts light on a number of aspects of the wartime RAAF in the air war against Japan. First, it tells us of the public contribution of funds for war production, and the resulting benefits for publicity and morale when an aircraft could be claimed by a community as its own. Secondly, it highlights the effectiveness of the RAAF's tactical ground attack force in 'mopping up' the enemy positions in the Celebes during the final year of the war. Lastly, we see graphically how dangerous those operations were, with one of these three aircraft shot down and a second written off in a crashlanding.

*In the second century of manned flight, airpower may well be the transforming piece of the jointness puzzle—the instrument through which ground and naval forces could be integrated.*

- Stephen Fought & Col O. Scott Key, USAF, 2003



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