

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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75 SQUADRON IN THE DEFENCE OF PORT MORESBY

The air battle for Port Moresby, conducted by No 75 Squadron from 21 March to 8 May 1942, stands as one of the more remarkable feats in RAAF history. Seventeen days after forming at Townsville, Queensland, and converting to an all-new aircraft type, the unit deployed to mount a gallant defence of Port Moresby lasting 48 days that thwarted Japanese plans to capture this crucial allied base and take control of its strategically vital airfields and harbour facilities. For nearly all of its six weeks on the front line 75 Squadron was the sole fighter unit in the area, being joined by American units only during its final week at Moresby. The epic effort by the squadron demonstrated what could be achieved through a carefully balanced campaign of defensive and offensive action.

When 75 Squadron was raised on 4 March, its prospects of success probably looked good despite the rush and improvisation surrounding its formation. Its first

Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader Peter Jeffrey, who had outstanding experience in the Middle East flying the Curtiss P-40E Kittyhawk with which the new unit was equipped. These American aircraft were capable of speeds up to 582 km/h (365 mph) and were the best fighters then available to Australia. On 19 March, however, Jeffrey handed over command to Squadron Leader John Jackson (another pilot with Kittyhawk experience in the Middle East) and moved to raise a sister unit, No 76 Squadron. When 75 Squadron's deployment to Papua took place two days later, the unit's younger pilots had an average of nine days training on the Kittyhawks and had fired their guns only once.

The hasty formation and deployment of 75 Squadron was driven by the dire situation facing Australia in early 1942. By February of that year, the Japanese expansion into the

South-West Pacific had reached as far as Lae, on the north coast of New Guinea, and appeared to be edging towards Australia. As if in preparation for an advance further south, on 3 February Japanese aircraft began to conduct damaging raids on the army garrison and defences of Port Moresby. These raids were particularly successful due to the lack of any allied fighter aircraft opposition in the area. In order to provide some measure of air defence for the beleaguered garrison, the RAAF decided to deploy a fighter squadron at Port Moresby as soon as aircraft and



Flying Officer Peter Masters and his P-40 Kittyhawk on route to Papua in 1942. Flying Officer Masters shot down two Zeros during the defence of Port Moresby.

pilots were available. On 17 March 1942 the first ground elements of 75 Squadron began moving north from Townsville. By 21 March the squadron's aircraft landed at Seven Mile Airfield, just north of Port Moresby. Within hours of arrival two pilots successfully intercepted and destroyed an enemy reconnaissance aircraft over the town.

Before the RAAF presence was known to the Japanese, Squadron

Leader Jackson decided to launch an attack on the Japanese airfield at Lae early on 22 March. This raid was an outstanding success, with three bombers and nine fighters claimed destroyed on the ground and another two fighters claimed destroyed in the air. Two of the nine Kittyhawks taking part in the raid were downed, with Flying Officer Bruce Anderson killed and Flying Officer Wilbur Wackett having to embark on a 320-kilometre trek in order to get back to Port Moresby.

Over the following weeks 75 Squadron aircraft were almost constantly in the air during daylight hours. Standing patrols, anti-strafting patrols and airfield cover patrols were conducted. The squadron also scrambled to intercept 32 incoming raids that varied in size and nature. Some consisted of bombers escorted by Zero fighters, while others were strafing attacks by fighters alone.

No 75 Squadron also conducted reconnaissance and strafing attacks on enemy positions at Lae, escorted United States Army Air Force (USAAF) aircraft on bombing raids and on one occasion attacked a submarine. In short, the unit conducted both defensive and offensive missions to best defend Port Moresby. Importantly, control of the air was always contested and never totally lost to the adversary, though the cost to the unit was very high: 12 pilots were killed in combat and 17 aircraft lost to enemy action.

On 30 April, 75 Squadron was joined by the Airacobra aircraft of the USAAF's 8th Pursuit Group. The arrival of the Americans was timely, as aircraft availability in 75 Squadron had become critical and was getting worse. By that time, despite an around-the-clock maintenance effort, only three Kittyhawks were serviceable. The last operational sortie of the squadron's Moresby deployment—an interception of a bomber raid on 3 May—was undertaken jointly with the American Airacobras and consisted of 75 Squadron's sole serviceable aircraft. On 7 May the unit was ordered back to Australia for replenishment and a well-earned rest.



Lae airfield as seen from the air after an attack in 1942

The heroic action of 75 Squadron had significant impact on the air war over Port Moresby. Prior to their arrival, the Japanese faced no threat from allied fighters. No 75 Squadron's raid on the Lae airfield on 22 March demonstrated the need for the Japanese to dedicate more aircraft to defensive patrols rather than in support of raids on Port Moresby, while also increasing the requirement to provide escorts to their bomber formations. The losses they suffered further

reduced the Japanese ability to conduct offensive operations.

One less noticeable effect, and one more difficult to quantify, is the impact that was generated by 75 Squadron on Japanese planning for the amphibious assault on Port Moresby. The presence of a persistent and effective allied fighter force meant that the Japanese needed the capacity to maintain control of the air over any invasion force launched against the allies. The Japanese amphibious fleet that threatened Port Moresby during the first week of May included the auxiliary aircraft carrier *Shoho* to provide air cover to the attacking troops. When the *Shoho* was sunk by US naval aircraft during the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese were forced to cancel the amphibious landings due to the aggregated threats of the air and maritime forces arrayed against them.

No 75 Squadron's achievements during their first operational deployment are truly remarkable. To have formed and deployed within 17 days is an accomplishment that has few equals. To have gone into action so quickly, and sustained such a high tempo of operations for so long, is outstanding. During its epic six weeks in the front line, the squadron claimed 35 enemy aircraft destroyed, four probably destroyed and 54 damaged. The squadron demonstrated that one small, highly professional unit can generate effects beyond the tactical environment and influence adversary operations and planning.

- *Control of the Air can be achieved through a carefully balanced campaign of defensive and offensive action.*
- *Freedom of manoeuvre to surface forces is denied without effective control of the air, and incurs penalties of complexity and friction.*

“Never abandon the possibility of attack. Attack even from a position of inferiority, to disrupt the enemy's plans. This often results in improving one's own position.”

General Adolf Galland, Luftwaffe



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