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THE RAAF IN THE BURMA CAMPAIGN

The Burma Campaign of World War II was one of the largest and longest campaigns of the war, yet it is also one of the least known in historical terms. That a significant number of Australian airmen fought in this area has also largely escaped public attention, so that the contribution of these men of the Royal Australian Air Force to the ultimate defeat of Japan is now barely remembered.

In part, the problem stems from the secondary status accorded to the strategic objectives underpinning the operations undertaken in Burma. When Japanese forces invaded Burma in December 1941, their goal was not to seize vital natural resources but merely to secure the flank of more important operations underway in Malaya, while also severing the overland lines of communications across Burma which the Allies used to support the Chinese Nationalists resisting Japanese occupation in northern China.

For the next two years Japanese forces were content to occupy central and southern Burma essentially for the disruption and complication this posed for the Allies.

Not until March 1944 did the Japanese launch a concerted effort to drive the British out of the rest of Burma, and pose a direct threat to British control of India with attacks against Assam. The battles of Imphal and Kohima have been described as the 'Stalingrad of the East', due to the close-quarter fighting that took place during the four-month siege, and the decisive nature of the defeat inflicted on the Japanese. Although the Japanese remained in Burma until the very end of the Pacific War in August 1945, their forces there remained deprived of valuable resources and reinforcements.

Air power was an integral and critical part of Allied efforts to strike at the occupying Japanese, both with offensive operations in the Arakan region and the Hukawng Valley and through support of long-range raids mounted by Chindit columns. These operations placed heavy demands on air transport resources in particular, drawing in aircraft from other theatres. On the Japanese side, air power was

the main means of maintaining a threat against India, with Japanese bombers striking as far west as Calcutta.

British air superiority was one of the deciding factors of the campaign. In early 1943 there were some 40 air squadrons in India to contain the Japanese threat on the Eastern frontier, and two years later this had grown to more than 60. Although none of these squadrons were formed RAAF units, there were many Australian airmen in theatre— mostly members of the RAAF who had been enlisted under the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) to bolster the RAF. Their numbers rose from 330 in April 1943 to a peak of 1091 in July 1944, before falling back to 923 six months later.

Dispersed though the RAAF contingent was, its members saw plenty of hard fighting against the Japanese. No fewer than five RAAF pilots regarded as fighter 'aces'

received the Distinguished Flying Cross while serving on the India-Burma front. One of these men was Flying Officer C.A. Crombie, who already had the destruction of six enemy aircraft to his credit when he joined No 176 Squadron, RAF, from the Middle East in October 1942. He doubled his tally in India, and received the Distinguished Service Order to add to the DFC awarded for his earlier exploits.

The factor of dispersion of the Australian presence undoubtedly contributed to the lack of recognition of the RAAF members in India and Burma. It was rare for any one squadron to have large numbers of RAAF pilots on its strength, but there were exceptions. For example, No 11 Squadron, RAF (a Blenheim bomber unit) had around 90 per cent of its aircrews made up of Australians in 1943. It became known, as a result, as the 'Australian squadron in the RAF', but this unique distinction disappeared later that same year when the unit converted to single-seater Hurricane fighters and crews were posted to other bomber units.



The number of Australian airmen serving in India led to the establishment of a RAAF Liaison Office in New Delhi, especially to administer them. In March 1944 the head of the Liaison Office, Wing Commander George Pape, tried to consolidate the Australians in the theatre into just two squadrons which could then be designated as distinctly 'RAAF'—as allowed under Article XV of the EATS Agreement. By January 1945 Pape was forced to concede that 'dominionisation' was not going to happen, because the tempo of operations had reached a stage where reorganizing these men into RAAF squadrons would have been too disruptive to be allowed.



RAAF members of No 62 Sqn RAF on a Dakota at Akyab, Burma, April 1945

Due to the large number of squadrons to which RAAF personnel in the India-Burma Theatre were posted, the pilots flew an equally large variety of aircraft, including Spitfires, Hurricanes, Vengeances, Blenheims and Beaufighters. Apart from combat types, many RAAF men flew Dakota transports. Some transport units—for example, No 62 Squadron—contained a large number of Australians. Given an inadequate road network across Burma and monsoonal weather conditions, resupply of the British Fourteenth Army was frequently impossible by ground means and had to be accomplished by air.

Not all the Australians in the Burma campaign were aircrew. Squadron Leader George Arnold was serving with the newly-created RAF Regiment, the equivalent of the RAAF's aerodrome defence squadrons. A veteran of the Australian Imperial Force in World War I, Arnold commanded 2944 Field Squadron in the defence of Imphal airfield from enemy ground attacks and air raids, ensuring that the RAF could continue to use both the airfield and its aircraft to attack the Japanese.

With the end of the war in Europe, the Australian Government moved to recall RAAF personnel serving with the RAF. Overseas Headquarters in London signalled Pape

on 28 May 1945 to advise that all RAAF aircrew serving in Southeast Asia were to be replaced by RAF personnel as soon as possible, and would be either discharged or redeployed in the South-West Pacific Area depending on their length of service. Due to the Japanese surrender within a few months, the men were gradually sent home.

Although victory in Burma took a long time to achieve, that success—when it came—was overwhelming. The Japanese were forced to divert vital resources to shoring up their presence in Burma, which prevented these

resources from being applied to other areas where they may have made a substantial difference. The sizeable RAAF presence in the theatre played a significant part in bringing about the Japanese defeat, so that the Burma Campaign deserves to be remembered as one of the more important fronts of World War II.

- *Over 1000 members of the RAAF served on the India-Burma front in World War II, spread among more than 60 RAF squadrons*
- *No formed RAAF squadrons were committed to the Burma Campaign, but some RAF units were heavily Australian in composition*
- *Because Australian airmen were not concentrated in a few squadrons, there was a significant loss of heritage to the RAAF*

'When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today.'

Inscription on Kohima War Memorial, Nagaland State, India



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