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# FLIGHTLINE

Volume 22 No. 4

## Next Branch Meetings

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> November 2022  
(Monthly Meeting)  
1000 Hours  
Bolton Clarke Community Centre, Rowes Bay

## Next Branch Events

Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022  
Heritage Tea Rooms, Hervey Range

Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2022  
Christmas Lunch  
Mercure Townsville

★ “Look back and be grateful. Look ahead and be hopeful. Look around and be helpful.” ★

# ★ HAPPY ★ BIRTHDAY!

On behalf of all Branch members, we wish those members below who celebrate their day of birth in September, October and November, a very Happy Birthday

Wayne Dixon  
Bruce Hurst  
Lindsay Gordon  
Ted Mildren  
Lisa Power  
Allan O'Connor  
Brent Villiers  
Phillip Johnson  
Chris Wootten  
Gary Lane  
Doug Bower  
Gary Young  
Bill Mildren



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## MEMBER PROFILE

If you have not already appeared in the "Member Profile" section, all you have to do is answer the questions below and send them, with a smiling headshot, on an email to [tvlsec@raafaqld.org](mailto:tvlsec@raafaqld.org).

Welcome to our latest member -

### Martin Mayes



*Where were you born?*

*Where did you go to school?*

**Trinity College Gawler - Adelaide**

*What are your interests/hobbies?*

**Caravanning (Travel), 4x4ing, fishing, Motorbike riding**

*Do you have a favourite book/movie/song?*

**I enjoy reading educational books such as barefoot investor etc. Battle of Britain, Hunters and collectors Holy Grail.**

*When did you join the military?*

**24<sup>th</sup> January 2006**

*Where was your favourite posting?*

**Townsville - location to Far North Queensland**

*What is on top of your bucket list?*

**Still trying to narrow this down definitely getting to Canada to see Niagara Falls**

*What do you like about Townsville?*

**Has most things you get in a big city but isn't a rat race like a city and is a perfect central spot to access FNQ and central Queensland.**

## PILGRIMAGE TO THE BELGIAN GARDENS WAR CEMETERY

On Sunday, 28<sup>th</sup> August, the branch conducted a pilgrimage to the War Cemetery at Belgian Gardens to reflect on the loss of lives by those allied men & women who enlisted to protect our country during WWII, and to all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in all wars and conflicts.

The pilgrimage was attended by the RAAF Association State President, Branch Executives and members, representatives from the RAAF and the RAN, the local Federal Member and the Deputy Mayor as well as representatives from Townsville based Ex-Service Organisations.

Throughout the Second World War, 1939-1945, Townsville was an important shipping port and air base. The Royal Australian Air Force maintained a base here for its own aircraft as well as for American heavy bombers and reconnaissance aircraft used by the Allies in their Pacific campaigns, notably the Battle of the Coral Sea.

In 1941, to ensure naval and air co-operation in North-Eastern Australia, Townsville became the base of operation for an Area Combined Headquarters and was the largest Allied Air Base in the Southwest Pacific Operational Area as well as a very important place for the gathering of Signal Intelligence that provided information from intercepted and decoded Japanese radio message vital to the Allied war effort.



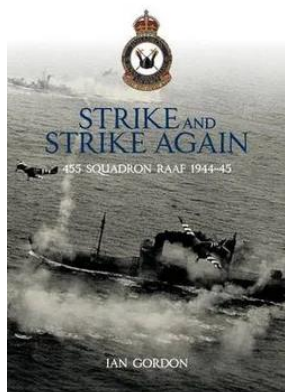
Because of the significant role that Townsville played in WWII and in recognition of the ultimate sacrifice made by service personnel during war service in the region, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission constructed this war cemetery which is maintained on their behalf by the Office of Australian War Graves.

222 defence personnel lay at rest here, of which 106 were members of the RAAF, 105 Australian Army, 9 RAN, 1 Royal Navy and 1 British Army



(continued on page 3)

## A BOOK IN REVIEW

**Author**

Ian Gordon

**ISBN**

9780994355881

**Published**

01/11/2015

**Binding**

Hardback &  
Paperback

**Pages ?****Angus & Robertson Price:**

Hardback \$51.07 Paperback \$39.84

455 Squadron RAAF was the sole Australian strike squadron in RAF Coastal Command, and flew the formidable Bristol Beaufighter, armed with 20 mm cannon, bombs and rockets. A salvo of eight of these rockets could smash through a large merchant ship and send it to the bottom.

As part of the devastating strike wings of Coastal Command, 455 SQN attacked German shipping off Holland and Denmark, and in Norwegian fiords. Here some of the fiercest battles were fought, the strike squadrons diving into concentrated automatic flak, among defending Focke-Wulfs and over merciless freezing waters. The deep fiords, with precipitous rocky sides, were unforgiving; precise flying was necessary for survival.

455 SQN, 'the Viking Boys', mastered some of the most demanding and perilous operational flying of the war. This history describes the men who flew, the ground crews who gave unstinting support, and includes full appendices of personnel, aircraft on strength and operations. 'The type of work carried out by this Squadron is akin to that of the Viking - short sharp swoops across the sea by a compact, well armed force... The spirit of the Australians is like that of the Vikings, adventurous and free.' 455 SQN Commanding Officer, Jack Davenport

*Have you read a good book lately that you think other members may enjoy? Then write a brief review and send it in for inclusion in our newsletter*

## LEGACY WEEK

As we have done in previous years, Branch members, supported by personnel from the RAAF Base, manned a stall at The Avenues shopping centre selling merchandise for Legacy Week.

The fundraiser ran each day from 0830hrs to 1630hrs commencing on Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> August through to Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

This year, Legacy were able to run 16 stalls in Townsville at a variety of shopping centres (10 Army and 5 RAAF). Our Branch is the only, and continues to be, the sole non-ADF stall – something we should be proud of.

A big thank you to David O'Sullivan, Lindsay Gordon, Trevor Beams, Dave Cowie, Paul Gallagher, Ted Mildren, Pam Gebran and Bas Nelson who volunteered their time to assist in this worthwhile event.

### *Pilgrimage continued*

The ceremony included some of our guests and members of the Branch laying poppies on all the headstones as we followed our Branch Chaplain who blessed the graves. Each grave was marked with the flag associated with their service – the Australian Navy Ensign, the Australian Flag for the Australian Army, the RAAF Ensign plus the Union Jack and Royal Navy Ensign for the British servicemen.

Those not laying poppies were encouraged to follow along the rows and to take a moment to read the names and the ages of our departed veterans. Many were very young. Particular mention was made of FLTLT V.P. Brennan DFC, DFM who rests in the cemetery. This 23 year old young man, after having fought over Europe before returning to Australia, lost his life while transiting through Townsville to PNG in defence of the advancing Japanese Imperial Forces. He crashed his Spitfire during landing.

An explanation of the significance of the red poppies that were laid on each headstone was given to those attending the commemoration. During the First World War, red poppies were among the first plants to spring up in the devastated battlefields of northern France and Belgium. In military folklore, the vivid red of the poppy came from the blood of their comrades soaking the ground and symbolised the sacrifice of that shed blood. We wear the Red Poppy for three reasons. Firstly, in memory of the sacred dead, secondly, to keep alive the memories of the sacred cause for which they laid down their lives; and thirdly, as a bond of esteem and affection between the service personnel of all Allied nations





## AVIATION HUMOUR



### **Branch 32<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary**



Following the Pilgrimage, members and guests moved to the Bolton Clarke Community Centre to celebrate the Branch's birthday.

Those who attended were treated to a roast lunch and dessert followed by a brief presentation by SADFO, WGCDR Naomi Gill, on the future of RAAF Townsville.



## UPCOMING BRANCH EVENTS

### **Heritage Tea Rooms, Harvey Range**

On **Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> November** the Branch will be holding brunch at the Heritage Tea Rooms, Harvey Range. This has proved to be a popular outing in the past and well supported. An email will be sent with further details and with a request for names of those intending to attend.

### **Christmas Lunch**



**When – Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> December.**

Our annual Christmas Lunch is being held in the Celsius Restaurant at the Mercure Townsville. The Branch is subsidising each member and 1 guest who attends the lunch to the value of \$10 per person. Members are requested to advise their attendance and their meal selections as soon as possible as per the email sent out recently.

Our usual raffle will be conducted so each member is requested to bring along a "gift" to the value of \$10 to be offered as prizes.

Do you have a story to tell, a joke to make us smile, a poem, an event you want to tell us about or anything else you think our readership would be interested in? Then send it to [tvlsec@raafaqlld.org](mailto:tvlsec@raafaqlld.org) with the subject line "NEWSLETTER ARTICLE"



**Heroism Amid Hopelessness**  
**RAAF No24 Squadron and the Defence of Rabaul 1942**

**By Rev Dr Wayne Melrose OAM**

During 1941, prompted by Japanese sabre-rattling, Australia decided to send small garrisons to fortify what it saw were key islands for Australia's forward defence. This policy resulted in *Sparrow Force* being sent to Timor, *Gull Force* to Ambon, and *Lark Force* to Rabaul on the Island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea.

The 1400 men of Lark Force were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Scanlan and included 716 soldiers from the 2/22nd Battalion AIF (including the Battalion Band which was entirely recruited from the Salvation Army), a coastal defence battery, an anti-aircraft battery, an anti-tank battery and a detachment of the 2/10th Field Ambulance. The force was further bolstered by a local unit of New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.

Despite the obvious attraction that Rabaul's magnificent Simpson Harbour might have for the Japanese Navy, and the almost certainty of an aerial attack followed by an invasion, the air defences provided for Rabaul were hopelessly and woefully inadequate. The only anti-aircraft artillery supplied was a pair of World War One vintage guns that lacked any predictor or height finder and were aimed manually with a ring sight. They were in such poor condition that any live-firing practice was banned and the gunners trained by making make-believe attacks on the weekly mail plane! The two coastal defence guns supplied were equally decrepit and one was found to have a crack in the barrel meaning that it could only be fired with a low charge, and then with some danger to the gunners. Lark Force included an anti-tank detachment, but they had only been supplied with twenty rounds per gun. To make matters worse, all the ammunition was solid-shot – useful for target practice but useless when fired against tanks, which after all, was the main reason for the detachment's existence! Despite numerous requests no replacement ammunition was forthcoming, but by way of compensation, they were sent frozen turkeys for Christmas dinner!

The Australian government's provision of airpower was equally woeful and displayed an abysmal grasp of the seriousness of the situation facing New Guinea in general, and Rabaul in particular. *No24 Squadron RAAF* moved from Townsville to Vunakanau airfield in Rabaul on December 8, 1941, with four Lockheed Hudson light bomber aircraft. The facilities at Vunakanau were terribly inadequate. The runway was dirt that turned into mud when it rained. The "hangar" was a corrugated iron roof mounted on four poles, and there were only a few dilapidated huts for accommodation. Even more alarming there were no dispersal areas or revetments for the aircraft which were parked together alongside the runway presenting prime targets for an enemy air attack.

The squadron was in action almost immediately. On 9 December a Japanese reconnaissance plane was sighted over the island by a patrolling Hudson which gave chase but failed to catch the intruder. A week later a Hudson piloted by Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Erwin was tasked with photographing a suspected enemy staging base on Kapingamarangi atoll four hundred miles Northeast of Rabaul. On arrival they found some shore installations, barges and a merchant ship. Erwin and his crew immediately returned to Rabaul to report their findings and then led two other Hudsons back to the atoll to mount an attack. The Australians found the merchantman, and by dropping the first bomb, Flight Lieutenant John Murphy became the first Australian pilot, and 24 Squadron the first RAAF unit, to engage the Japanese in the Southwest Pacific Operational Area. Unfortunately, due to lack of bombing practice, virtually useless bomb aiming equipment, and the need to bomb from high altitude because of the instantaneous fuses in the bombs, the Japanese ship remained unscathed.

The Commanding Officer of 24 Squadron, Squadron Leader (may have been Temporary Wing Commander) John Lerew arrived a day after the attack and was immediately handed a signal from Sir Charles Burnett, the Australian Chief of Air Staff. Rather than congratulating the squadron for using their initiative in mounting the attack, Sir Charles gave them a "rocket" describing their performance as dismal and threatening to replace them unless better results were achieved. The squadron also received a severe reprimand from Wing Commander "Bull" Garing, the Senior Air Officer in Townsville who described the performance as "disappointing" and an "utter failure." Garing concluded with a final goad: "The Empire expects much from a few." If he thought this Churchill-like phrase would inspire Lerew and his squadron to aspire to greatness he was wrong. Lerew thought it was drivell.

Kapingamarangi atoll was attacked several times during the latter part of December 1941, but results were poor. Because of the distances involved the Hudsons were only able to carry two 250 pound bombs and many of these failed to explode. The RAAF chain of command became more and more frustrated by the lack of results and ordered Lerew to provide a detailed report on the reasons for his squadron's poor performance. In a mood recorded in the official war records as "impish irreverence", he carefully itemised the challenges and problems that his squadron

faced every day: Not enough aircrew or maintenance personnel, lack of proper repair facilities and equipment, difficult weather conditions, unreliable bombs, and finally, "lack of assistance rendered by the almighty." He also made a swipe at Garing by adding "The Empire expects much, repeat much, of a few." Just to emphasise what he thought of the RAAF higher command he commented in a later signal that "he was being caused more worry by his own headquarters in the south than from the enemy in the north."

Lerew had brought with him ten Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Wirraways, a two seater aircraft designed as a trainer and completely unsuited to the fighter role. They had a top speed of only 220 miles per hour, a very slow rate of climb, and were armed with three light-calibre machine guns. Realizing that the squadron would soon be in action against the Japanese with their fleet of modern fighters such as the renowned "Zero", he requested that specialized fighter aircraft be sent urgently. His request was ignored. Australia did not have any fighter aircraft to send!

The first Japanese air raid on Rabaul occurred on 4 January. The aged anti-aircraft guns blazed away without effect, and two Wirraways were scrambled but were unable climb fast enough to reach the Japanese bombers. On this occasion the bombing was inaccurate and very little damage was done to the Australian facilities. Over the next few days the Japanese mounted several more raids which caused major damage to the base infrastructure and destroyed some aircraft. On one occasion Lerew himself was nearly killed when Japanese bombs set a bomb-laden Hudson he and two others were attempting to move, on fire. Fortunately, the base doctor drove up and the four of them managed to squeeze themselves under the doctor's car before the Hudson's bombs exploded.

On 3 January Squadron Leader Arch Tindal, the Northern Area Command Armaments Officer arrived to inspect No. 24 Squadron and found himself in the middle of an enemy air attack. He immediately leapt into the nearest Wirraway to attempt an interception, which was as usual, a dismal failure. On returning to Townsville, he advised Garing that he agreed with Lerew that Wirraways were totally hopeless as a defenders and that Rabaul was wide open to air attack.

On 9 January a Hudson from 6 Squadron fitted with long range fuel tanks flew from Kavieng on New Ireland to the major Japanese base at *Truk* (now modern day Chuuk) and reported a large gathering of ships. Around the same time the Japanese increased their attacks on Rabaul and it became very obvious that a Japanese invasion was imminent. Most of the women and children had already been evacuated from New Guinea, but with the invasion expected within days, the Senior Australian Official in New Britain, Harold Page, asked for permission to evacuate any remaining civilian men, and any sick or wounded Australian servicemen on the Norwegian freighter *Herstein* which was loading copra at Rabaul after delivering a load of fuel and bombs. Page was astonished at the reply from Canberra: "No evacuees are to board *Herstein*; she is to continue to load copra and then depart." Given the carnage and loss of life that was to come, it seems ridiculous that a load of coconut was given precedence over saving human life. It should be noted that *Herstein*, whilst still loading the copra, was sunk during an air raid a few days later. If Page's request had been granted, she would have been well clear of the island and safe.

The Japanese invasion was preceded by a massive air attack on 20 January involving 109 aircraft. This was the first appearance of the famed Zero fighter over Rabaul. Two Wirraways that were already on patrol were joined by five others and they bravely attacked over one hundred of the Japanese Navy's finest aircraft, many flown by veterans of the China campaign. Within seven minutes the fight was over. Of the eight Wirraways that took part, one crashed on take-off, three were shot down in combat, three were damaged, and one returned after failing to gain enough height to engage in the enemy. Six aircrew were dead and five were wounded. There is no evidence that any of the Japanese aircraft were shot down or even damaged so it was a totally one-sided fight. The Australians showed enormous courage in taking on such a superior force and it is to Australia's shame that no awards for gallantry were made "because no Japanese aircraft were shot down and the ability of the enemy to fight was not compromised."

The Japanese raid had also destroyed all but one of the Hudsons which meant that with only two of the Wirraways in a flyable condition, 24 squadron had only three flyable aircraft. A desperate Lerew sent another signal to Townsville: "I am sending my remaining Hudson to Port Moresby with casualties. Defending with Wirraways is useless, send fighters." Townsville replied "Regret inability to supply fighters. If we had them, you would get them."

Lerew, Lark Force Chaplain John May and the squadron's Intelligence Officer, Geoffrey Lempriere, discussed the situation and came to the conclusion that 24 squadron, and Lark Force, were being abandoned and left to their fate at the hands of the on-coming Japanese. They came up with an idea that hoped would finally shock the Australian authorities into intervening before the situation became totally hopeless. The padre was well versed in Latin and

knew about the old legend that Roman Gladiators saluted the Emperor with the phrase “Hail Emperor, we who are about to die salute you.” Thus was conceived one of the most famous signals in RAAF history. At 08:45 hours on 21 January “*Morituri vos salutamus*”, “we who are about to die salute you” was transmitted by the Vunakanau airfield signals officer. If the aim of the signal was to shock the Australian military into mounting a rescue mission it was a dismal failure. A few hours later Lerew received a signal from Port Moresby ordering him to travel there immediately to take command of a “new 24 Squadron” being formed from the remnants of the existing 24 Squadron and other units. Obeying the order would mean taking the only remaining Hudson and leaving the wounded at the mercy of the invading Japanese. Lerew ignored it.

Then, in a classic case of “the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing”, Lerew received another order. This time it was from Air Group in Townsville: “Use all remaining aircraft to attack enemy shipping southwest of Kavieng.” All remaining aircraft. All three of them! Lerew knew he had no option but to carry out this order, but inspection of the remaining Wirraways showed that the external bomb racks had been removed in a pathetic attempt to try and improve their speed and usefulness as a fighter. That left the single Hudson, and just before dusk, and into an approaching storm, Squadron Leader Jack Sharp and his crew took off to attack the approaching enemy fleet – a lone bomber against forty ships including carrier-equipped fighters. It was a suicide mission. Fortunately, they failed to find the ships due to combination of failing light and increasingly bad weather and returned to the airfield.

After the Hudson had returned, Lerew advised Townsville of his intention to use it to evacuate the wounded. Air Commodore Bladin replied “Rabaul has not yet fallen, Assist army to keep airfield open and maintain communications as long as possible.” In essence, his airmen were being instructed to fight as infantry and defend the airfield. This was a ridiculous order. None of the RAAF personnel had received any infantry training, only a few of them had ever fired a rifle, and to cap it off, there were no weapons available for them anyway! Lerew consulted Lieutenant Colonel Scanlan who told him that the RAAF personnel would be more of a hindrance than a help, and gave Lerew permission to withdraw what remained of his squadron from the Rabaul area.

Lerew went to the hospital and demanded that the wounded RAAF personnel be discharged and taken to the airfield for evacuation. The senior medical officer protested that they were too sick to be moved but Lerew insisted. Leaving them at the mercy of the Japanese was not an option. At 0300 the Hudson took off, taking the wounded first to Port Moresby then on to Australia.

The remaining 24 squadron personnel rounded up all the serviceable vehicles they could find and set out for the south coast. As this was happening the signal office was preparing a signal to be sent to Port Moresby requesting that flying boats be sent to collect the men once they reached their destination. Before the signal could be sent there was a huge explosion that shattered the glass valves in the transmitter and rendered it useless. Lark force had added to the increasing chaos by blowing up the bomb dump near the airfield perimeter. The blast also killed some locals who were out in the street and had not been told to take shelter. Realising that getting the message away was vital to the evacuation plans, a radio operator, Sergeant Fred Hicks, drove as fast as he could (some reports say he rode a bicycle!) to the south coast to try and find a radio. Fortunately he found one, and the flying boats were organized.

On 23 January two huge ex QANTAS “Empire Class” flying boats from RAAF 20 Squadron in Port Moresby made contact with Lerew’s party on the south coast of New Britain and were loaded with 93 men. They were so heavy that their first take off run had to be aborted and they had to dump fuel before finally staggering into the air. The evacuees were taken to Samarai at the tip of Papua and the following morning the flying boats returned to New Britain to pick up another group. As a result of Lerew’s leadership and planning, only three of his men were captured by the Japanese. There also needs to be recognition of the tremendous courage of the crews of the slow, ungainly, very lightly armed flying boats entering an area where an encounter with enemy aircraft was a distinct possibility.

Unfortunately, there was no miracle rescue mission for the men of Lark Force. After mounting a brief, very brave, but hopeless defence against the Japanese landing parties they broke off the engagement and moved out into the jungle where they tried to evade the Japanese who were actively hunting for them or moved to the south coast in the vain hope that the RAAF flying boats would return to rescue them. Their plight was made even more desperate because of a decision that Scanlon had made when it became obvious that Rabaul was threatened by a Japanese invasion.



Some of Scanlon's officers suggested caches of food, ammunition and medical supplies be set up in the jungle so that they could be used in the event that the Australians were driven into the jungle where they would either remain to fight a guerrilla war against the invaders or wait for rescue. Scanlon, a decorated veteran of World War one, but with no training or experience in jungle warfare dismissed the idea out of hand. Had he taken the advice Lark Force might have been able to mount an effective harassing campaign like Sparrow Force did in Timor. This was not the only bizarre decision made by Scanlon. When the Japanese fleet was nearing Rabaul he ordered that none of his troops were to be informed in case they panicked but were told to prepare for a "battalion exercise" that would last three days. As a result, the soldiers had only packed enough food into their kit to last three days! Amazingly, around 400 members of Lark Force managed to return to Australia. Some found small boats and got away under their own auspices; others were picked up by larger vessels operating from New Guinea but for those left behind the outcome was grim.

The Japanese promptly executed any Australian officers that they captured, including Lieutenant Herbert Silverman, a medical officer with the artillery unit, and therefore a protected non-combatant. The Japanese dropped thousands of leaflets into the jungle promising that "the life of those who surrendered would be guaranteed and that they would be treated as prisoners of war, but those who continued to resist will be killed one and all." The dispirited and tired group of men, many of them sick with malaria, at Tol plantation on the south coast, realised that there was going to be no rescue and decided to surrender. At first it seemed a good option. The Japanese made a great show of welcoming them, provided them with a hot meal, and had their medical officers tend the sick, but things turned ugly very quickly. An order came from the Japanese Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada (obviously with the full knowledge of General Horii) to execute the prisoners, and so began one of the most brutal episodes in a very brutal war – the massacre at Tol Plantation. About 150 Australian soldiers were murdered one by one, or in small groups, mostly with the bayonet. At the nearby Waitavalo plantation around 30 more men were shot. Two stretcher-bearers pointed to their Red Cross armbands to indicate that they were non-combatants and therefore protected under international law, but a sneering Japanese officer tore the armbands off and ordered his soldiers to kill them. These "warrior sons of Nippon" turned out to be cowards who could not look into the eyes of the brave men they were killing, and the stabbing and shooting was done from behind. But the Japanese made an important error: they failed to check that all the victims were dead. Six Australians survived and managed to escape including, one medical orderly who had been stabbed eleven times, thus ensuring that the atrocities would be revealed in due course.

Captain John Gray was among the captives but he was not executed at Tol Plantation. The Japanese believed that he knew the whereabouts of Scanlon and took him back to Rabaul and subjected him to a brutal interrogation which included being tied to a tree in the hot sun for hours and having a nest of biting ants thrown over him. When they finally realised that Gray was not going to provide information, a medical officer cut open Gray's chest while he was still alive and ripped out his heart to see how long it would beat outside the body. Another Japanese officer was so sickened by the spectacle that he shot Gray through the head to release him from his misery. The sad thing is that next day Scanlon walked into a Japanese outpost and surrendered.

So closed a terrible chapter in Australia's war history. It is a chapter clearly marked by remarkable heroism. Australian pilots in slow, under-powered and under-armed Wirraways doing battle with what was arguably the finest fighter aircraft of the time, the Zero, with the full knowledge that their chances of survival were close to nil. It is a chapter also clearly marked by the outstanding leadership of John Lerew which was in stark contrast to the bumbling Royal Australian Air Force and Australian Army command chain, and an apparently uncaring government, which either did not understand the situation in Rabaul, or if they did understand it, simply abandoned 24 squadron and Lark Force to their fate. And there is the absolute barbarism of the Japanese invaders who murdered without mercy those who so gallantly fought against them.

The fall of Rabaul has been pushed off the World War 2 history stage by the events at Kokoda and Milne bay. These were of course victories of which Australia and its forces can be justifiably proud. Rabaul was a disastrous defeat, but so was Gallipoli, and we are still proud of that. Perhaps one of the reasons why the fall of Rabaul is not remembered is because we are ashamed of what happened to the young men of 24 squadron and Lark Force.

## Epilogue

Following the evacuation of Rabaul, Lerew took command of a composite squadron in Port Moresby which later became No. 32 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron. On 11 February 1942, he led a flight of three Hudsons in a raid on Gasmata harbour, making what the official history of the RAAF in World War II described as "the first mast-height



attack on enemy shipping in the New Guinea campaign". Having set two ships on fire, the Hudsons were attacked by enemy fighters and two were shot down, including Lerew's. With his aircraft in flames, he ordered his crew to bail out of the rear hatch while he parachuted from the front window. Lerew landed in the jungle and narrowly avoided capture before making his way to a Coastwatcher post and returning to Port Moresby in a schooner, nine days after having been posted missing. On 7 April, Lerew was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "outstanding courage, determination, skill and tenacity in the course of bombing raids on enemy positions in New Britain" (note: nothing was said about his earlier exploits in Rabaul). Lerew served in the RAAF until 1946 and discharged with the Rank of Group Captain. Post war he emigrated to Canada and was a senior manager in the International Civil Aviation Organization. He died of cancer in Vancouver on 24 February 1996, aged eighty-three.

After completing its training on the Vultee Vengeance in August 1943, No24 Squadron re-deployed to New Guinea where it provided support to Australian Army and United States Marine Corps units until March 1944, making it the last RAAF Squadron to use the Vultee Vengeance in action. In March 1944 they converted to B-24 Liberator aircraft and operated from bases in the Northern Territory against Japanese forces in the Netherlands East Indies until the end of the war. It was disbanded on 15 May 1946 and re-formed as a Citizens Air Force (reserve) fighter squadron with P-51 Mustang fighters and training aircraft until 1 March 1960 when it ceased operations as a flying squadron and became a non-flying RAAF Reserve squadron based at RAAF Base Edinburgh. In 2010, the squadron combined with Combat Support Unit Edinburgh to become a Permanent Air Force unit and it currently forms part of No. 96 Wing.

Most of the surviving soldiers from Lark force died when the Japanese transport "Montevideo Maru" was sunk off the north coast of Luzon by the U.S. submarine USS Sturgeon on 1 July 1942. The officers and nurses survived because they were on a different ship.

Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada committed suicide towards the close of the war, and General Horii drowned during the retreat from Kokoda thus avoided Australian justice for the terrible events after the capture of Rabaul.

Padre May served with distinction in the Church of England in Australia (later the Anglican Church of Australia) before retiring to Tasmania where he died in 2007.

#### Sources

*Bruce Gamble. Fortress Rabaul: the Battle for the Southwest Pacific. Zenith Press, 2010.*

*Australian War Memorial Canberra.*

*Various publications.*