

77 SQUADRON NOTES

by Ken Wilkinson

Five raw N.C.O. Pilots joined the squadron at Noemfoor, Dutch New Guinea in September 1944 where the squadron had moved to from Manus Island.

We were introduced to other pilots, including Peter Hooks, who lived 200 metres from me, was in same form at school and was also in Brighton A.T.C., small world. After allocation of tents we were told that Wing Commander Cresswell the C.O. wanted us to report to him in his tent at 1300 hours. We duly arrived, he was sitting in a director style chair, dressed in non-regulation clothing and black high boots [not flying boots]. He said, 'You have joined the best fighter squadron in the R.A.A.F., you have received the best training possible in a wartime situation and we have recently been equipped with the latest model Kittyhawk P40-N25 and N30, aircraft, so if any of you dare prang one of them, back home to your mother's you will go'. A great welcome.

Every fighter squadron had a Wirraway for new pilots to fly to get the feel again as we had not flown for 6 weeks, unfortunately ours was unserviceable, so we had to go straight on to the Kitty's, and guess what?

My mate Sergeant Keith Smithwick, who I had befriended at Somers and we trained at the same stations and graduated on the same course, came in to land and forgot to put his flaps down and crashed into a petrol tanker and escaped with burns to arm. We all thought that Keith would be sent home, but apparently our new C.O., Squadron Leader 'Sandy' McCulloch, was able to save Keith. So we heard. Regrettably he was shot down when 12 of us dive bombed Galela airstrip.



**"A" FLIGHT 77 SQUADRON
NOEMFOOR ISLAND, DUTCH NEW GUINEA - DECEMBER 1944**

On Wing: FlgOff Joe Mercer, Dr John Edye, FltLt Laurie Lynch, FlgOff John Brocklehurst

Centre: FltLt Geoff Angus, FltSgt Lyn Stillman, FltSgt Ken Wilkinson, SqnLdr Sandy McCulloch, PltOff Tom Lucas, FlgOff Ralph Hutley, FlgOff Keith Toupein

Kneeling: FltSgt John Moore, FltSgt Peter Hooks, PltOff Doug Helsham

In the Pacific fighter squadrons officers and N.C.O. Pilots shared the same Aircrew Mess, ground staff N.C.O.'s had separate Sergeants Mess. We were camped in a slightly cleared area and even had some Pawpaw trees, the fruit were eaten when ripe, as we did not get any fresh fruit or vegetables. We were on U.S. rations, tinned food, dehydrated potatoes and eggs even sauerkraut, not our choice. The Yanks gave us chewing gum, chocolate, toothpaste and even a pack of cigarettes each day and when pilots flew a combat mission, a shot of Bourbon Whisky was credited and saved up to have at rare parties and sing-a-longs of bawdy songs. Our Doctor would add some medical alcohol and cordial and away we would go. Beer was rare and when available two bottles per week, officers received spirits as well.

As it was a coral island good water was available from bores and did not need chlorination, we were able to have a most welcome shower each day, we were almost on the Equator and it was very hot and humid. We had to take salt and vitamin C tablets each day due to perspiration and lack of fruit and vegetables. Also had to take Atebrin tablets to protect from Malaria which made our skin turn yellow. Prickly heat and tinea were problems.

There were 24 aircraft in each squadron, 36 pilots and about 300 ground crew to support us. We held our ground crew in high regard for the great job that they did servicing our aircraft under terrible conditions. It was customary for two airmen to meet each aircraft on return to sit on wings and guide us along roadways and taxiways. One day I saw two ground crew cry when their pilot did not return, such was the camaraderie.

Some ops flights were usually 4 aircraft, but the largest were the Wing Ops when the three Squadrons were used. When we bombed Sorong Oilfield with 58 Kitty's it was a great sight led perfectly by Wing Commander Cresswell and not one aircraft was lost even though anti-aircraft fire was intense from all levels. During quiet times we had lots of training flights specialising in line astern chases which are good training for fighter pilots. If we could get transport to the beach we would go for a swim in the beautiful water. Lots of Japanese and U.S. aircraft in the shallow water.

A volley ball pitch was made so that we could keep fit, the humidity was very energy sapping so we played in the evening.

Aircrew did a 9 month tour with 2 week home leave half way through and 1 week was allowed for priority air travel. Ground crew had to do 18 months without leave and some started to go a bit "troppo". We lost several ground crew in accidents. Nine Pilots were lost during my 10 month tour.

Pilot Officer Tom 'Grumpy' Lucas was shot down at Sorong one afternoon, rescued by a United States Catalina and back with us that night with his skin stained by the sea marker dye that we carried in our Mae Wests.

One afternoon when I was on standby at the crew hut on strip, the Operations Officer gave me a copy of Squadron History to read. I was pleasantly surprised to see the name of Flying Officer Ian Kinross who was one of the original pilots and was credited with some probables. Some of you will remember him and the aircraft that he built at home. Ian was about 4 years older than me and we went to the same church, and the last time that I had seen him was early 1940, he going to work and I was going to school on the train. He said "Ken. I have just received word from R.A.A.F.



Ian Kinross 1943

that I have been successful in my application to go to R.A.A.F. College for Pilot training." I congratulated him and said that I hoped to follow him in a few years time, but of course E.A.T.S. made things easier. I met up with him in 1956 when I joined the Sandringham Club, and later had lots of social outings with our wives and friends. He told me that he had been a Flying Instructor at Geraldton, W.A. when posted to 77 Squadron at Pearce. After his 77 tour, he flew with Test and Ferry Flight at Laverton and was later posted to Kingaroy to help form the first Mosquito Squadron which arrived at Labuan late in War. He then was a Squadron Leader and one of the flight commanders.

His health deteriorated in the 1990's, he had open heart surgery and in 2001 was found dead in his car outside the Club which he had just left. A GREAT BLOKE.

In the Squadron we were given lectures on survival etc. we played big games of poker, spine bashed as we were very tired in the heat. There was always humour of some sort.

The N.C.O. Pilots were made to unload ships at anchor, mainly bombs and ammunition, we took a poor view of this, but we had to obey orders. One American seaman said one day 'Have you guys done something wrong and being punished, I see you are all wearing Wings so you must be pilots?' One of us replied "Yes, we fly P40's and we will be dropping these bombs on the Japs soon, and we are not being punished."

In any group of men there is usually a character or two, we had Warrant Officer Les Hanson who gave us lots of laughs,



Australian War Memorial

Les Hanson, centre, photographed with Max Koff and Jim Read, pilot and navigator of a Beaufighter who located him after he had been afloat in a dinghy for two days and nights near the Japanese held Talaud Island, north of Morotai.