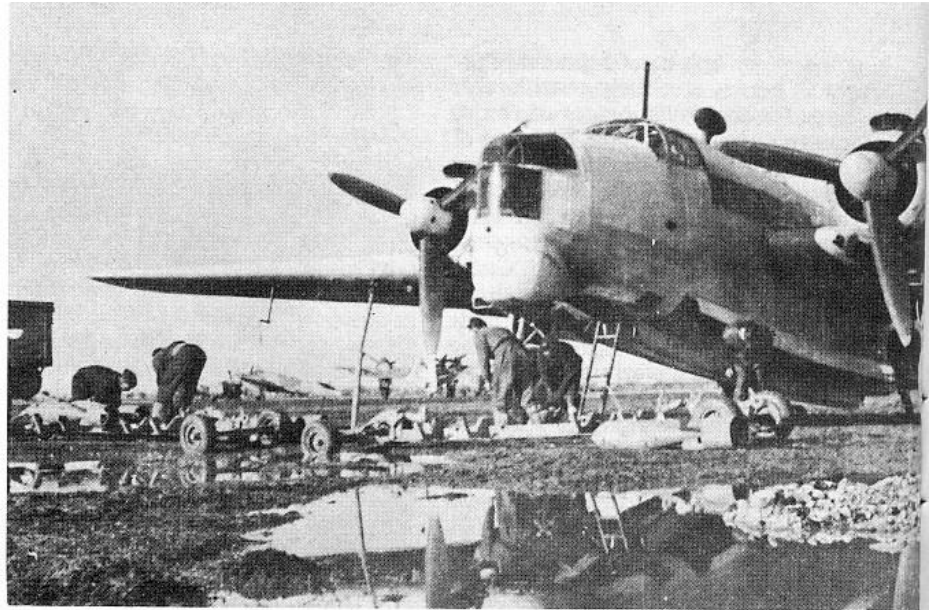


The destroyers

Story of 458 Squadron, RAAF, by HERMES II

Bombs go aboard a 458 Squadron Wellington XIV ready for a night anti-shipping strike from Foggia, Italy, in 1944. *Australian War Memorial*



"FIFTEEN years ago I was lucky enough to have No 458 Squadron under my command in North Africa. I have never been so impressed with any unit before or since. We were all engaged in finding and destroying enemy ships at a time when the enemy had begun to realise how good the opposition was . . . No 458 Squadron was one of the main reasons why my Wing was taken off operations—the enemy ran out of ships!"

So wrote Air Marshall Sir Geoffrey Tuttle, KBE, CB, DVC, DCAS of the RAF in 1958, referring to an Australian Wellington squadron which had nearly four years' service in World War II in the bomber and torpedo-bomber roles over the UK North Africa, Italy and other places, to yet remain one of the "unknowns" of the conflict.

Authorised by SAS 4597 of July 8 1941, No 458 officially formed at Williamstown, NSW, two days later when two NCOs and 37 airmen arrived. Simultaneous with their embarkation for England on August 7, RAF personnel were arriving at Holme-on-Spalding Moor, Yorkshire, to make up the rest of the squadron, and on September 1, Wg Cdr N. G. Mulholland, DFC, arrived as commanding officer.

In the next week, A and B Flights were formed under Flt Lt L. L. Johnston (later CO himself) and Sqn Ldr Mellor, an Irishman in the RAF. Initially classified as a medium bomber squadron, 458's first Wellington IVs, manned by six aircrew apiece, arrived from OTU and 105 Squadron, RAF. Powered by P & W twin-row *Wasp* engines, each was crewed by a pilot, co-pilot, W/Op,

navigator, rear gunner and a bomb aimer in the nose. Running the length of the under-belly, three bomb bays housed loads of bombs or flares.

Invariably, those who flew it referred to the type as the "Wimpy", after J. Wellington Wimpy, a cartoon character of some renown in those days.

Situated nine miles from Market Weighton, the two crossed runways at Holme were built across fields of carrot crops, and these were quickly added to the squadron's rations.

The first operation was flown on the night of October 20/21 when 10 machines, under the CO, began taking off at 18.05 to attack targets at Emden, Antwerp and Rotterdam. Other captains on this historic "first" were the newly-promoted Sqn Ldr Johnston, followed by Flg Off Leslie, Sqn Ldr Mellor, Sgts P. Mather and P. Hamilton, Sgt Hare, Flt Lt J. Sargeant, Sgt L. Laver and Flt Lt W. B. Skinner, these and their crews collectively representing England, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

In weather conditions described as "fair but cloudy with moderate visibility", eight aircraft bombed Antwerp from 11 000ft and an aerodrome flarepath, one returning with a 500 pounder "hung-up" in its racks. Another Wellington was shot down, all perishing except the rear gunner, who parachuted out to become a POW. Hare and Leslie, the two most experienced pilots, each bombed Emden with a 1 000 pounder, four 500 pounders and a 250lb bomb from 15 000ft, but not without event.

His starboard engine u/s, Leslie dived his bomber from 12 000ft down to a mere 400ft above the ground before recovering. The main aerial was shot away, and, as he made for home at thirty feet above the sea, the trailing aerial skipped across the waves.

On October 22/23, the second operation was equally exciting. Raiding Le Havre, eight Wellingtons set out with good visibility, one being fired on vigorously by AA gunners over Nottingham; another had a 500 pounder hang-up, and another became lost on the way back, to land at Squires Gate, Blackpool. One pilot, however, had the satisfaction of seeing a large warehouse blow up in the night.

Formerly a test pilot for Vickers-Armstrongs, Flt Lt Sargeant barely managed to return from France after a damaging flak burst, but managed to bale out over Farnborough with most of his crew. Trapped in his turret, the rear

Four Australians of 458 Squadron in their Wellington. *Australian War Memorial*



gunner failed to make it, and his body was later found in the wreckage of the Wellington.

Led by the CO, four aircraft attacked the Cherbourg docks on October 28/29, five others raiding Brest on the following night. Dunkirk was added to the list of targets when four Wellingtons attacked the area on the last night of the month.

Two replacement Wellingtons, Z1212 and Z1246, were received from 48 MU, Hawarden, in November, targets for the month including Mannheim, Boulogne, Dunkirk and Emden. During December, thirteen raids were made on targets at Aachen, Calais, Cologne and Dusseldorf. On December 27/28, one pilot dropped his bombs then dived low over an enemy aerodrome to come up astern of a landing Heinkel He111. Firing, the Wellington's front gunner hit the night fighter, which then careered off the runway. The same crew then machine-gunned a train and bombed a gasometer with their last bomb, ending the final raid for 1941.

Brest was the target for January 6/7 1942, with conditions so bad that accumulations of snow first had to be shovelled off the wings and upper surfaces of the "Wimpies" before taking off. Suffering from icing, the machine piloted by Plt Off H. M. Moran crashed on take-off, killing two crew members, but the rest made safe departures just before midnight to bomb the docks.

Taking a break from ops this night, the CO was in the Mess with a party which included two WAAF officers, listening to the pre-taxying radio chatter over the PA system as his Wellingtons awaited clearances. Unable to raise the tower, one Aussie pilot failed to realise that *all* could hear him, and speaking to the crew, announced: "This bloody set's u/s. Get the wireless wallahs!" According to those present, the WAAFs blushed suitably, and the wing commander had some comments of his own to offer to the skipper later on.

The final raid from the UK was made on January 28/29 when two machines bombed Boulogne, then orders were received giving the squadron's next destination as the Middle East. Wellington ICs fitted with "tropicalised" Bristol *Pegasus* engines were now received for operations under desert conditions, and these were flown out by various routes. Although one authoritative source gives the unit's code letters

for this period as "SX", 458 Squadron's diarist recorded these as being, in fact, "FU"; letters duplicated by 453 Squadron, RAAF, when its Spitfires later arrived in the UK.

Wellingtons of A Flight were coded from "FU-A" to "K", and those of B Flight from "L" to "Z". Individual aircraft letters seem to have been used mainly, however. Of interest, Sqn Ldr Johnston's "L for Leather" featured a motif of an Australian aboriginal chasing Hitler with a boomerang, and other machines bore similar Antipodean illustrations.

Depending on power settings used, the range for the Mark IC was 1 800-2 000 statute miles, and necessary for the long trip out to the Middle East. Wg Cdr Mulholland led the first four machines which set out from Stanton Harcourt to fly via Le Havre to Malta—a distance of 1 460 miles—but overshooting Malta, the CO and his crew were lost when "FU-A" was shot down by *Luftwaffe* night fighters. "B", "C" and "D" arrived at Luqa safely, and promoted again, Wg Cdr Johnston now took command of the squadron.

The next batch of Wellingtons left Portreath on February 27 1942, and arriving at Malta were serviced for the final stage of the flight. Leaving Luqa next morning at dawn, the first of the squadron's machines to arrive in the new theatre touched down at 03.00 on March 1 at *Kilo 26*, a landing ground midway between Cairo and Alexandria, in Egypt. Indicative of the flying time involved, "FU-S" left Portreath on March 5, and via Gibraltar and Malta, arrived at *Kilo 26* three nights later at 22.00, having logged 24hr 20min airborne. Personnel at Holme were then sent out to Egypt in batches, mainly travelling by sea. By March, the squadron also began to effect a changeover to the torpedo-bomber role.

Sgt I. Cameron carried out the first Middle East operation, however, when he took off from Abu Sueir at 21.00 on July 25/26 with 11x250lb and AP bombs loaded into his Wellington to hammer at the enemy in the Qutefryca area. Helped by a "bombers' moon" and excellent weather, he made two runs at 7 500ft, avoiding the attentions of a Ju88, probing searchlights and flak to make a third run with some success. Reporting on this, Ian Cameron noted that he had seen "buildings blown into the air" and that "the illumination was wizard at this

stage, and so we headed for home".

Sqn Ldr Don Saville, one of the flight commanders, had not done any of the mandatory night flying practice before leaving Moreton to ferry his Wellington out to the Middle East, thereby upsetting the station commander. Querying Saville's immediate superior, the senior one asked how many night-flying hours the pilot had. "Three thousand, sir," he was told. "I asked for night hours, not total flying," came the reply. "Yes, sir," he was told, "three thousand hours night, ten thousand hours total." The station commander then learned that Saville had been an airline pilot prior to the war!

Numerous moves followed, and by September 1942 the squadron was fully reunited at El Shallufa, carrying out low flying for torpedo work from Shallufa Main. On November 1 one crew made a seven hours' strike against enemy shipping north-west of Tobruk, and next day, during the El Alamein Battle period, two more bombed a German destroyer.

Several aircraft were detached to Gambut on November 17, but due to a lack of targets, returned after eleven days. Anti-submarine patrols and mine-laying in the Gulf of Sirte took up the remainder of the month. This was a period of detachments.

Another detachment at Berca was recalled to El Shallufa on New Year's Day 1943, and on January 17, the CO and twelve crews set out for detachment at Malta. Based at Luqa, these torpedo-armed Wellingtons, known as "Fishingtons", suffered losses, mainly due to bad weather. Flights in electrical storms had their moments, with lightning streaking the sky, propellor tips shrouded in blue flames and sparks flying off the gun barrels. Nevertheless, 635 operational hours were managed in February and 620 more in March, storms or not.

Adding to the diversity of nationalities in the squadron, Maj B. R. McKenzie, of the South African Air Force, also arrived from 38 Squadron, RAF, in this period. He would later make his mark in 458.

"FU-K" and "U" were lost on March 24/25 searching for enemy ships off Sardinia, and "E", piloted by Flt Sgt N. C. Jones, was given up for lost next night. An Italian radio broadcast was picked up at main base, however, and this indicated that Jones and his crew had been shot down, all surviving to become

prisoners.

This month, word was received that the squadron would soon move its main force to Amiriya, but this would take some time to effect.

The Malta detachment, meantime, had been very active, and one day in April 1943 it experienced an unusual incident. Working on a Wellington, two ground crew members looked up in time to see a Bf109G come gliding in for a perfect landing, and, having braked to a halt nearby, the pilot was soon relieved of his revolver. Remarking in English that he was "finished", the German was no defector, but had been brought down by a chance in a million.

Alerted by radar, the Malta defences were now given five minutes' warning of approaching enemy aircraft, upon which one AA gun would open up with a single smoke-indicator round to mark the general vicinity for waiting RAF Spitfires. On this occasion, the shell had exploded near enough to the German fighter to knock off the oil sump, leaving the pilot little alternative but to land. In the event, Malta now had one relatively serviceable Bf109 on strength!

Awarded a DSO, Johnston was posted in May to become Wing Leader (Flying) of 328 Wing, and Sqn Ldr M. Moran became his successor, by which time No 458 was now regrouping at LG91, Amiriya.

By the end of the month, the squadron had moved to Benghazi, then on to Misurata, Tripolitania. More moves came, until by June, 458 had settled in at Protville, now commanded by Maj McKenzie, SAAF, who was promoted Lt-Col on taking over. The latest CO sported a huge set of whiskers which met with official disapproval, but

when HM King George VI visited the squadron, they were given no less than the Royal assent. Having asked the King if he could retain his whiskers, McKenzie was told, "Yes, certainly. They look very handsome".

Wellington "L" was also used by this CO as a personal aircraft, and with a 20mm cannon mounted in the nose, was his pride and joy; until "pranged" by another pilot.

Wide-ranging operations were resumed, covering large areas of the Mediterranean, off Sardinia, Corsica and Sicily at the time of the Allied invasion. Apart from an American NCO pilot, 458 Squadron's strength also included 15 captured German cars for "personal" transport, plus a number of Italian POWs who were employed as servants. It was almost an independent air force.

One of six Wellingtons engaged on a shipping recce on the night of August 4 went missing, the last contact being next morning at 00.17 when Wing heard the radio message, "Returning to base. Engine trouble". No more was heard. It turned out that the port engine of this machine had cut out at 00.25, and after the one torpedo on board had been jettisoned, the Wellington had struck the sea and gone straight under.

Two crew members escaped miraculously, but after a week adrift in their dinghy, one died from exposure. The surviving NCO was later picked up by an ASR Catalina from the Tyrrhenian Sea, but Sgt Spencer and the remainder of his crew had perished.

Newly-arrived crews for the squadron were being quickly trained at Cairo West on several Wellington variants, and in August, Lt Pot-

gieter, SAAF, logged 21hr 20min by day and night. By way of an exciting climax to graduation, Potgieter was aloft on the night of August 24 searching for a downed aircraft with flares, when the wireless operator of K-King, Plt Off D. G. Bitmead, RAAF, reported, "Aircraft on fire". A flare had managed to hang-up, but after an "interesting" one hour and forty-five minutes, a safe landing was made at base.

By September, the squadron was largely based at Protville, not far from Tunis, as part of BNAF, with pilots and crews logging up to fifty operational flying hours apiece for the month, ranging over Corsica and Italy on torpedo and bombing missions.

Lifting off from Protville at 19.00 on September 13, with a single 18in torpedo aboard, Lt Potgieter was at the controls of Wellington "A", serial logged as 882, when he made a record for A Flight in distance and time. The mission covered Sardinia-Genoa-Spezia-La Rocca for a total of 10hr 20min of solid night flying on instruments. A lengthy flight for any Wellington, it must surely have also come close to the squadron record.

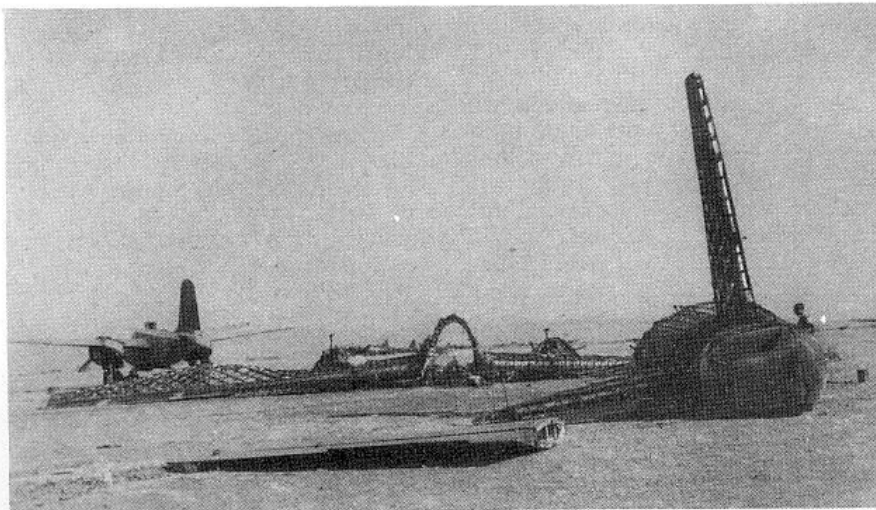
On September 26, in the course of a U-boat hunt, the Australian Wellingtons found and depth-charged one well out to sea, leaving it in a damaged condition on the surface to add to their mounting tally.

October 1943 saw the last stages of the Allied campaign on Corsica, and at 04.00 on the 4th, 458 bombed the last enemy evacuation port at Bastia, in the north, with amusing results. Unbeknown to the crews, French Corsicans had already captured the port, and as well, the CO had flown up in advance of the raid in his personal Hurricane. The raid, however, was launched in all good faith that the Germans were still resident.

As a result, the squadron's bombing efficiency was seen at first hand by Lt-Col McKenzie—at the receiving end—and as one of the pilots subsequently remarked, "We did a good job—the colonel said so!"

During the Protville stay, the badge of 458 (Torpedo-Bomber) Squadron was also adopted, albeit rejected by the College of Heralds.

Remains of Lt-Col McKenzie's Wellington "L-Love" after being burned out at Protville, Tunisia, in 1943. In the background can be seen a Douglas Boston.



Featuring a descending torpedo, the motto chosen for the badge was *Invenimus et delemus*, translating as "We find and destroy". This was certainly in keeping with the squadron's role.

Movement orders were received on October 6 which posted 458 Squadron to Bone for anti-submarine operations, the order reading, in part, "... torpedo gear to be taken with the squadron but no torpedo operations will be undertaken ...". Depth charges would now be their prime weapons.

Calling a parade on October 22—it was more of an informal gathering—Col McKenzie announced his departure from the unit, and was succeeded by Wg Cdr Jack Dowling, RAAF. In 1966, this latest in the list of squadron COs was to retire as Air Cdre J. Dowling, CBE, AFC. Under Dowling, however, anti-U-boat and ASR missions were carried out in November-December with the usual success.

Covering an Allied convoy of 53 ships on the night of December 11/12, squadron Wellingtons took part in the sinking of a U-boat. Aiding ships of the Royal Navy, the

Wellingtons, armed with eight depth charges apiece, straddled the hapless sub, keeping it submerged north of Cape Bugaruni until 14.10 on the 13th, when the enemy vessel finally surfaced after being depth-charged by a destroyer, with its batteries low and foul air inside the hull making breathing difficult. In a bloodless victory, the German commander then scuttled his vessel, rather than have it fall into Allied hands. So ended, successfully, what was known in squadron terminology as another "U-boat swamp", with congratulations flowing to all participants, including 36 and 500 Squadrons, and 458, from AVM Hugh Pughe Lloyd, AOC North-West African Coastal Air Force.

The squadron recorded 36 operational sorties for the month in 267 hours flying time, made four positive sightings and attacked two more U-boats with unknown results. It also began to receive new Mk XIV (Leigh light) Wellingtons, each fitted with a special, retractable and powerful searchlight and the latest radar gear. During the month, a detachment of 13 Wellingtons at Blida began to return, completing

the move by January 11, 1944.

With the advent of the New Year, torrential rains hit North Africa, and the aerodrome at Bone was frequently under a foot of mud and water, making arrivals and departures difficult, if not dangerous. Nonetheless, conversion training on the new aircraft was able to proceed, although the Wellington XIII ("Stickleback") was to remain in squadron service for some time to come.

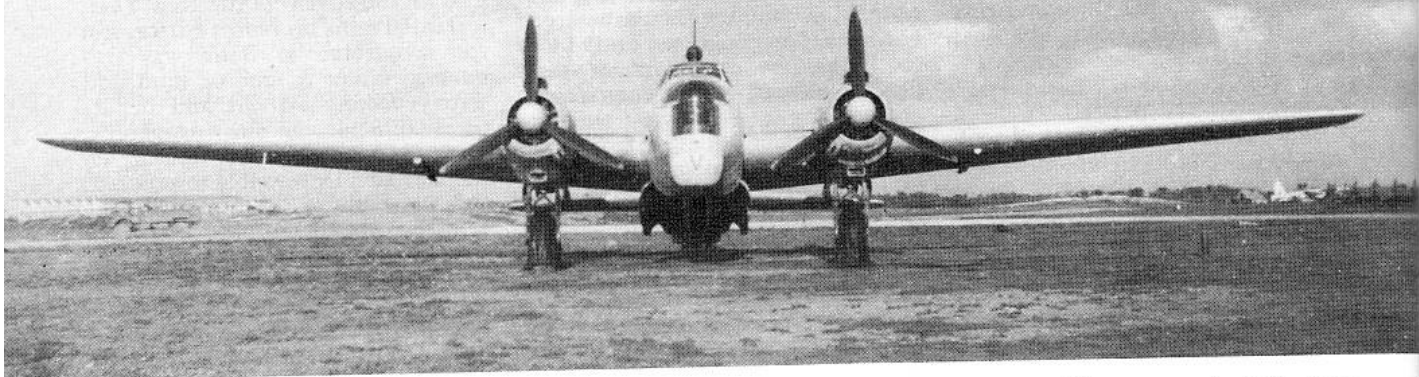
Detachments were still the rule, with one based at Grottaglie, Italy, and another at Corsica, engaged in U-boat hunts. Six Wellingtons made up the Corsican detachment, and together with 14 and 500 Squadrons, were based at Ghisonaccia, on the eastern side of Napoleon's rugged island. These detachments were discontinued by mid-April, several aircraft having been lost through ditchings.

Another Malta detachment in April resulted in the award of a George Medal to one of the navigators, Flg Off Bullen, who gallantly rescued crew members of a burning Wellington, heavily laden with depth charges, and another member was awarded the US Soldiers' Medal. Proudly, squadron veterans also began wearing the ribbon of the 1939-1943 Star—later dated to 1945—and the Africa Star ribbon appeared as well.

Left: One of the camp sites used by 458 Squadron during its stay in Algeria.

Below: Some of the squadron's Wimpey XIVs at Bone, Algeria, late in 1943. On "K1" in the foreground can be seen the fairing of the retractable ventral Leigh light and also the Mk XIV's characteristic chin-mounted ASV.





On May 23 1944, the squadron left Bone by sea and air to continue the war from Alghero, Sardinia, the majority of members travelling in the French warship *Tigre*. Near the coast, the first operation was carried out from Alghero aerodrome on June 13/14 when 10 Wellingtons searched west of the island for U-boats, but without success. The Leigh light Wellingtons not only provided illumination for the Beau-fighters of 272 Squadron, RAF, at this time, but were now fitted with Mk IX bomb-sights, making them an even more formidable threat to the enemy.

When Dowling was posted in July, he was replaced as CO by Wg Cdr R. G. Mackay, DFC. Formerly Flight Commander of both "A" and "B" Flights, Rodney Mackay was not only a squadron veteran but he now began what was to be his *third* tour of operations. In 458 Squadron it was generally the rule that once an aircrew member had completed 50 operational sorties he was posted elsewhere.

At 08.40 on July 27 the Wellington XIII captained by Lt Rubidge, SAAF, lifted off from base to conduct a search for two missing RAF Mosquitoes, finally sighting the wreckage of one off Calvi. There were no survivors. Within the week, on July 29/30, the same pilot and crew went off on an armed recce patrol to cover Spezzia and Nice, but with no sightings to report, made for the alternate target at Pietra, bombing shipyards and factories with success. Light flak and two night fighters met them over the target, but a safe arrival was made back at Alghero after 5hr 40min aloft.

From the time of commencing their Mediterranean operations in October 1942, up to August 1944,

records showed that squadron crews and aircraft had completed 1 765 sorties in 141 020 flying hours, with three ships sunk, one merchantman and a U-boat "probably" sunk, and, on the "damaged" list, two cruisers, two destroyers, one E-boat and 15 merchant ships. These figures exclude the squadron's service earlier on when based in Yorkshire, at Holme-on-Spalding Moor, but are indicative of part of the service rendered by an "unknown" unit.

Lt Rubidge was chosen for a special operation on August 7/8, taking off from base at 19.50 in "B", a Mk IV Wellington of A Flight, for France. Crossing the southern French coast between Sete and Beziers, he headed inland for 45 miles to fly a "square" of 10 miles and drop a flare at the turning point. His wireless operator-gunner, Flg Off Don Bitmead, then reported a "probable enemy fighter", but no clash resulted and the Wellington then set course from Sete to Savonna with no sightings. Finally, the alternative target of Vada Ligure was attacked with twelve 250lb bombs, the way lit by fifteen flares. Unscathed, "B" and its crew returned to Alghero after 6hr 20min flying time.

Operations continued from here until September 1, when 458 settled in at Foggia, the main elements then moving north to Falconara, using Foggia as main base for supply purposes.

Sharing the same runway at Falconara was 454 Squadron, RAAF, with 450 and its fighters based nearby, giving an Australian touch to proceedings. The initial operation from here took place on September 14/15 when W Off Priest released his bombs onto a 2 000-ton ship without obvious results. Next day, the Royal Navy confirmed that this

vessel, with a cargo of oil for Germany, had been sunk.

The Foggia detachment returned to Falconara before the year's end, having taken part in many strikes, but hampered by bad weather throughout. Targets were rare by now, causing a unit wag to note that "U-boats . . . are becoming as rare as hens' teeth", and with a slackening operational pace, tour-expired crews were soon replaced by newcomers. Not all, it must be said, were repatriated, for some crews managed to wangle a second or even third tour, thus matching the example set by their own CO.

Another detachment was sent to Leghorn, briefly, but in a period when targets were almost non-existent, soon returned to main base. The weather, as well, had not been too kind.

With the lifting of the snow, the first operation for 1945 was flown on January 3/4 when four of 458's Wellingtons and six 272 Squadron Beau-fighters carried out an armed recce off Pola. One of the Aussie pilots sighted a 2 000-ton oil tanker, and, dropping a mercury flare which turned night into day, called in the "Rockbeaus" to attack. When last sighted, the enemy ship had stopped, and for the record was listed as "damaged".

458 Squadron's services were now in great demand. The Army wanted the Wellingtons to bomb German troops in Greece, but the Navy wanted them to operate from Gibraltar in U-boat hunting operations. The Navy won!

Given 24 hours' notice, the squadron began its last move, to Gibraltar, on January 25, and completed the move in a week. Leigh light training was carried out by new crew members from "Gib", and on February 13 and 14, anti-submarine

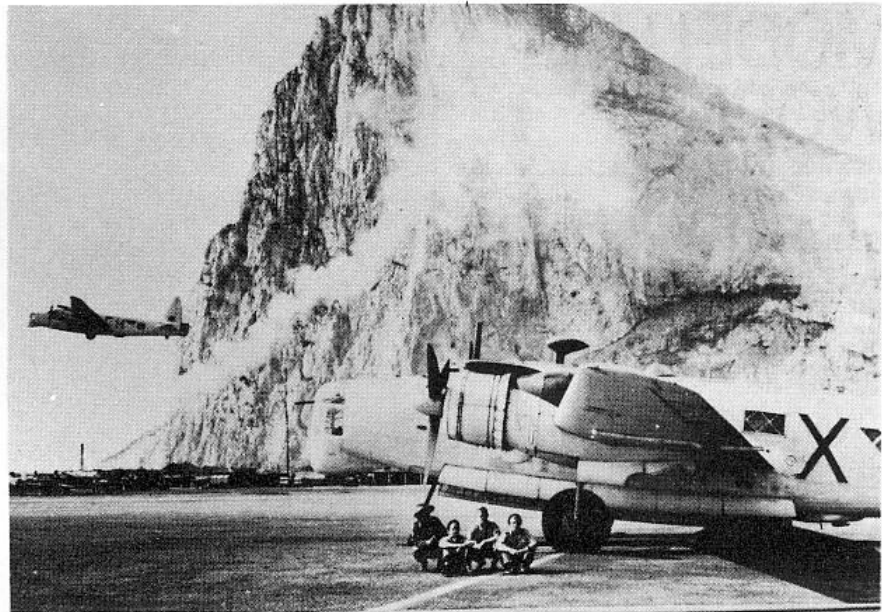
Left: In this head-on view No 458's Wellington XIV "V-Victor" is seen to carry its identity letter on its ASV blister.

Right: Twixt "X-X Ray" and the "Rock", Wellington XIV "H-Harry" of 458 Squadron takes off from Gibraltar in February 1945 on an anti-submarine patrol.
Australian War Memorial

patrols were also mounted between Cape St Vincent and Lisbon. As observed by Sir Geoffrey Tuttle, however, the enemy had now run out of ships.

The Wellingtons were now virtually on a training status, but with unrivalled facilities for their crews. A VHF radio station sited atop the Rock gave them a good contact range, and living conditions were better than they had ever been. Amenities included the staging of the play, *French without Tears*, with one of the squadron pilots, Flg Off Len Thiele, playing the lead. Years later, this Australian flier became famous in his homeland in stage and TV roles as Leonard Teale.

Convoy patrols of seven hours' duration took place as the war drew to a close, and on VE Day, Winston Churchill's unmistakable voice came over Gibraltar's PA system, telling all of the victory. The last official squadron operation was an anti-U-boat patrol on VE Day although a number of ASR missions were carried out in the remainder of the month.



News of disbandment was received on June 6 and the final squadron parade took place three days later. Australian members left for England on June 21, the official disbanding date, with RAF elements leaving soon afterwards.

"Unknown", simply because it had never sought or received any wartime publicity, 458 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, had served Britain and the Empire well. Its various marks of Wellingtons had flown over the UK, Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia, Algeria, Malta, Sardinia, France and Italy, as well as Germany, carrying bombs, flares, torpedoes and depth charges.

Achievements against two of the Axis partners had been great—but at a price. Aircraft had been lost on operations and replaced, but many air and ground crew members had also been killed or died on active service; and human lives cannot be replaced. Perhaps the most fitting tribute to 458 Squadron's service can therefore be seen in the list of those, from Wg Cdr to AC, who fell in the cause of freedom—a list which also serves as a reminder of the many nationalities represented in this cosmopolitan unit: Royal Air Force (54), Royal Australian Air Force (59), Royal Canadian Air Force (20), Royal New Zealand Air Force (3).

