

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

SERIES THREE

AIR

VOLUME III

*AIR WAR AGAINST GERMANY AND ITALY
1939-1943*

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by

JOHN HERINGTON

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CONTENTS

Page

Preface xiii

Chapter

1	THE FIRST TEN MONTHS	1
2	THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN AND THE GERMAN BLOCKADE	33
3	FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN	52
4	GREECE, SYRIA AND THE WESTERN DESERT	76
5	PROBLEMS OF THE EMPIRE AIR SCHEME	107
6	FIGHTER SQUADRONS IN 1941	129
7	DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIR OFFENSIVE AT SEA: MAY TO DECEMBER 1941	147
8	BOMBER COMMAND: JUNE 1941 TO FEBRUARY 1942	168
9	SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN	193
10	THE STRUGGLE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: MARCH TO SEPTEMBER 1942	220
11	THE AIR WAR AT SEA: JANUARY TO SEPTEMBER 1942	262
12	EXPERIMENTS IN BOMBING TECHNIQUE	298
13	FIGHTER COMMAND IN 1942	336
14	AFRICAN CAMPAIGNS: SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 1942	356
15	CONQUEST OF TUNISIA	385
16	THE CRISIS IN THE ATLANTIC	414
17	EARLY PATHFINDER RAIDS	446
18	THE RADAR BOMBING OFFENSIVE, 1943	475
19	FIGHTER COMMAND: JANUARY TO SEPTEMBER 1943	502
20	NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS	523
21	THE INVASION OF SICILY	560
22	HAMBURG—THE LAST RAIDS ON ITALY—THE STRUGGLE AGAINST NIGHT FIGHTERS	581
23	THE HOLDING CAMPAIGN AT SEA, 1943-44	609
24	BERLIN AND OTHER LONG-DISTANCE RAIDS	635
 APPENDIXES:		
1	British, American, German, Italian and French Service Aircraft, 1939-45	664
2	List of Abbreviations	698
	INDEX	701

Sicily: Castelvetro airfield, April 1942	238
Sergeant Wood and Warrant Officer Spence: desert trek, 1942	239
Mail time in the Western Desert	239
Hudson of Coastal Command attacking shipping, April 1942	270
Attack on <i>Prinz Eugen</i> , May 1942	270
Attack on <i>U71</i> , June 1942	271
Attack on <i>Munsterland</i> , May 1942	302
No. 53 Squadron R.A.F.: in the U.S.A., November 1942	302
Damage at Renault works, March 1942	302
Damage at Renault works, March 1942	302
Rostock: damage, March 1942	302
Saarbrücken: damage, July 1942	302
Düsseldorf: damage, July-August 1942	303
Mainz: damage, August 1942	303
Attack on Philips' factory, December 1942	334
Attack on Philips' factory, December 1942	334
No. 456 Squadron: Beaufighter, 1942	335
No. 457 Squadron: Spitfire, 1942	335
No. 454 Squadron: Soccer match, 1943	398
Australian Rules football, Cairo, 1943	398
No. 454 Squadron: airmen at lunch, 1943	399
No. 1 Air Ambulance Unit: evacuation of wounded	399
Padre Davies conducts service, Gethsemane, December 1943	430
No. 3 Squadron interior of operations van, 1943	430
Instrument panel of Beaufighter	430
Sunderland alights on Angle airfield, May 1943	430
R.A.F. Station Mount Batten in wind storm, January 1943	430
No. 461 Squadron: Sunderland	430
Attack on <i>U106</i> , August 1943	431
Essen: damage near Krupps, March 1943	462
Mohne dam: breached, May 1943	462
Remscheid: damage, July 1943	463
Hanover: damage, October 1943	463
Cologne: damage, July 1943	494
No. 453 Squadron: fitters at work	495

ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>Page</i>
No. 10 Squadron: original aircraft captains, 1939	14
No. 3 Squadron: disembarking in Egypt, 1940	14
Attack on <i>U26</i> , July 1940	15
German aircraft over London, September 1940	15
Battle of Britain: Flight Lieutenant Walch's combat report	46
No. 10 Squadron: working party after air raid, November 1940	46
R.A.F. Station Mount Batten after air raid, November 1940	46
No. 3 Squadron: Gladiators returning, January 1941	46
No. 3 Squadron: pilots, January 1941	46
Sidi Rezegh airfield, January 1941	47
Hurricanes in northern Palestine	47
No. 3 Squadron: pilots, Syrian campaign	78
No. 3 Squadron: Tomahawks over Syria, July 1941	78
No. 3 Squadron: living conditions at Rosh Pinna	78
No. 3 Squadron: refuelling a Tomahawk, Western Desert, 1941	78
Barracks at Pembroke Dock, 1940	79
Dug-in camp in Western Desert, 1943	79
Torpedoed tanker	110
United Kingdom: first Australian E.A.T.S. pilots arrive, 1940	110
R.C.A.F. Station Uplands	111
Australians at Uplands	111
No. 452 Squadron: Spitfires taking-off, September 1941	142
Flight Lieutenant Finucane, Sergeant Chisholm and Squadron Leader Bungey, September 1941	142
No. 452 Squadron: pilots, late 1941	143
No. 10 Squadron: Sunderland taking-off	174
No. 10 Squadron: early-type anti-submarine bombs	174
Plymouth on fire, April 1941	175
No. 50 Squadron R.A.F.: Hampden, February 1942	206
No. 50 Squadron R.A.F.: Hampden about to take-off, February 1942	206
Hampden, Wellington and Whitley aircraft	207
No. 455 Squadron: Austin's crew, 1942	207
Malta: Ta Kali airfield, April 1942	238

No. 456 Squadron: Mosquito fighter in flight	495
No. 452 Squadron: Air Marshal Williams' inspection	526
Signing the agreement to continue the E.A.T.S., April 1943	526
No. 450 Squadron: Kittyhawks at Malta, 1943	527
Nos. 3 and 450 Squadrons: Kittyhawks taxi-ing, 1943	590
No. 450 Squadron: ground staffs, Sicily, 1943	590
Bomber Command airfield	591
No. 460 Squadron: Lancaster bomb load, 1943	591
Attack on <i>U426</i> , January 1944	622
No. 463 Squadron: rear turret of Lancaster	622
No. 464 Squadron: mechanics working on Ventura aircraft	622
No. 467 Squadron: ground crew at work	622
Air Chief Marshal Harris visits Binbrook, 1943	622
No. 460 Squadron: commanding officers, 1943	622
No. 460 Squadron: Lancaster in flight	623
No. 466 Squadron: Halifax in flight	623
Bomber Command: operational briefing	638
Bomber Command: aircrew changing into flying clothing	638
Bomber Command: de-briefing	638
Bomber Command: in sergeants' mess on return from raid	638
Officers' mess, Waddington	638
No. 467 Squadron: flight party	638
No. 460 Squadron: Tasker's crew, 1943	639
No. 466 Squadron: McDonald's crew, 1944	639
Berlin: Dr Goebbels checks air-raid damage	654
Berlin: detail of damage round Tiergarten, February 1944	654
Wrecked Halifax: Germany, 1944	655
Wrecked Lancaster: Germany, 1944	655

MAPS

	<i>Page</i>
Coastal Command: United Kingdom and the Bay of Biscay	13
Photographic Reconnaissance: December 1940-February 1941	31
Areas in the Bay of Biscay where all enemy shipping might be attacked	42
Airfields in the Nile Delta	58
First Libyan Campaign	61
Greece and Crete	81
Syria	90
Fighter Command: Australian activities, 1941	132
Planned air patrols in the Bay of Biscay, summer 1941	153
The effect of anti-U-boat air effort in the Western Approaches: June-December 1941	164
Operational areas of <i>Luftwaffe</i> commands, June 1941	175
Bomber Command: Location of R.A.A.F. bases and R.A.F. emergency airfields	179
Phases of the Second Libyan Campaign	203
Agheila-Matruh	212
Gazala-El Alamein	233
The influence of air power over the Mediterranean, September 1942	258
Air cover for Atlantic convoys, 1942	270
Anti-U-boat patrols in the Bay of Biscay, April 1942	275
Coastal Command: North Sea and Norway	278
Anti-U-boat patrols, summer 1942	282
Covering operations for the Russian convoys, 14th-19th September 1942	296
Bomber Command: Principal Australian targets	318-9
Fighter Command: Australian activities, 1942	342
East Africa	357
British front, 23rd October 1942	369
The Final African Campaign	399
Western Mediterranean	412
Operations in the Bay of Biscay: February-June 1943	423
Operations in the Bay of Biscay: June-August 1943	437
Ruhr	480
Fighter Command: Australian activities, 1943	504
Sicily and southern Italy	565
Bomber Command: Targets in northern Italy	590
Phases of the U-boat war: September 1939-April 1944	630-1
Location of aircraft during the Bomber Command attack on Magdeburg, 21st-22nd January 1944	656-7

DIAGRAMS

	<i>Page</i>
Air support control communications, late 1941	194
Methods of attacking U-boats with depth-charges	426

GRAPH

Bomber Command: estimated accuracy of night-bombing of German cities (excluding Berlin)	446
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PREFACE

THE Australian contribution to air fighting against Germany and Italy consisted in the allocation of a large number of individuals for virtual incorporation within the Royal Air Force rather than the provision of self-sufficient units to work in cooperation with the major force. Admittedly, in consequence of the deep-seated desire of all Dominions that men should be identified with their homeland, it was intended from the beginning that these individuals should be grouped as soon as possible into compact national formations. The military reverses of the first years of war, the shifting emphasis of air operations themselves, the geographical spread of air action, the failure in advance to appreciate the administrative difficulties involved, and the perils which faced Australia in the Pacific and caused reorientation of her war effort, all intervened to prevent any neat and satisfactory solution. Consequently although there was no lack of good will on either side, arrangements invariably lagged behind events, and apart from three regular units of the Royal Australian Air Force and seventeen temporary squadrons of that Force which served in Europe, Australian airmen were spread among more than 500 squadrons of the Royal Air Force. At some time or other one or more Australians served with practically every combatant air squadron.

The spreading, in both time and space, of a comparatively small force among so many major and minor combatant units presents a problem of narration which has, perhaps, never before been attempted on this scale.

The first difficulty encountered was one of research, because at no time did even half the Australian airmen in this theatre of war serve with units which were required to forward even skeleton records direct to Australian authorities. The task of identifying, locating and extracting significant details of Australian deployment was undertaken by a small group of officers, N.C.O's and civilians who worked in London between 1945 and 1948. The continued existence of this research party was frequently in danger, and it never had sufficient strength or clerical assistance to do more than secure details obviously desirable. Great assistance was given by Mr J. C. Nerney of Air Historical Branch of the Air Ministry, not only in providing office space, but also in making records available to us even at a time when his own staff might require them. Mr Nerney was also very generous in giving his own time and valuable guidance to researchers in their task of fitting this heterogeneous mass of details into patterns conforming to the main trends of air warfare. Even the task of extracting details, however, was by no means simple because no thought was originally given to the likelihood that British squadron records would become important source books for Dominion authorities. It was not until late in 1943, consequent upon a policy decision evoked by the wide spread of airmen trained under the Joint Air Training Plan, that Royal Air Force operational record books began

consistently to identify Dominion personnel by their nationality and service numbers.

The standard of compilation of these records also varied greatly, although in general they compared favourably with similar Australian records. Narrators were also constantly faced with the problem familiar in law courts that they were unable to cross-examine a document to establish truth; they either had to accept or reject it. Difficulties, especially those which arose out of the less satisfactory records of 1941 and 1942, could not be resolved by reference to the airmen who might have been involved, because a very high proportion of them were dead and the remainder had been repatriated to Australia. Checking of detail was pursued in any way possible, even when it entailed a relatively large expenditure of time and effort. This checking has continued in Australia and it is now probable that omissions rather than errors impair the records collected by this research group. While acknowledging with deep gratitude the conscientious work done by all who were connected with this project, my thanks and those of the reader should go especially to Flight Lieutenant R. S. Spear and his assistant, Sergeant R. Ward, who undertook the many problems of research relating to the Middle East and Mediterranean campaigns.

The second difficulty caused by wide geographical dispersal of Australian airmen became more and more acute as the details of their activities were laboriously compiled. The variety of individual Australian experience is virtually coextensive with everything which was undertaken in the air from mid-1941 onwards. In all campaigns of the war assistance from the air was constantly demanded for all major and many minor needs, and air power was drawn inevitably to the centres of pressure. Units, changing their aircrews with a rapidity which appears fantastic compared with army or naval practice, remained fairly constantly in the front line; and incident, although perhaps minor in importance and repetitive in character, was continuous. Australian squadrons, crews or individual airmen took some part in practically all noteworthy events. The problem thus became one of selection and of attempting to do equal justice to all involved. There was a temptation to confine the story to the activities of Australian squadrons formed for service in this theatre. This would have enabled a fairly compact story of some of the major phases of the war but would have entailed the double falsity of ignoring more than half of the total Australians actually in the area, and of recording the history of units which, though Australian in name and law, were frequently of very mixed character. The compromise which has finally been adopted—to tell the story chronologically within each main command, with interest concentrated on Australian squadrons, but to include the main activities of dispersed personnel—has many weaknesses from an historical viewpoint, but it does fulfil the particular needs of an Australian war history.

Australians had no part in formulating strategy or tactics, nor were they organised in units larger than single squadrons. The whole direction

of the war which gives meaning to the effort of Australian airmen had to be sought among records and documents not in the possession of the Australian Government. This situation entails another departure from the ideal because while Australians were so ubiquitous that reference to their activities in all areas at all times is necessary, they were such a small part in relation first to the Royal Air Force and later to the Anglo-American air forces engaged that it is impracticable to give adequate consideration to every point of policy and circumstance which affected them. This history, then, does not purport to tell the complete history of air warfare in Europe and the Middle East but only why, when, where and in what degree Australian airmen were involved in such warfare.

Two difficulties must be recognised; on the one hand of submerging a small but significant force by setting it too sharply in contrast with the whole effort to which it contributed, and on the other of giving its activities a purely episodic character through failure to bring out the strategy which gave them significance. The full picture may be dimmed or distorted by failure to refer to other events which were important in themselves but had no precise reference to Australian activities. For two other circumstances the author makes no apology. Firstly, the choice of words is aimed to please not the military expert but the citizen, although some of the generalisations enforced by lack of space may offend both. Secondly, events and decisions are sometimes deliberately described as they were made known to the men at the time.

One aspect which will probably be disregarded in other histories but which is of great importance to Australia and is accorded some considerable space is the story of the composition of the oversea force. In particular the obvious disparity between the intentions of the Australian Government and the eventual distribution of airmen is depicted. In the event neither the "fully compact and easily identifiable" force desired by Australia, nor the completely integrated British Commonwealth Air Force advocated by some, was realised. There are lessons here to be learnt for future emergencies. In addition some consideration is given to the needs and aspirations of the airman as a human being and the arrangements made to satisfy those needs.

As it is possible that at the time of publication this may be the first account of one national contribution to the air warfare against Germany and Italy there are some further considerations for the reader. Although, naturally, emphasis lies continuously on Australian exploits, an attempt has been made at frequent intervals to point out that, in most cases, contribution to the total war effort was very small, and even at the decisive level of operations was a mere fraction. It is for this reason that the author has prepared frequent tables of bombing operations, so that the eye, bemused by constant repetition of Australian achievement—and Australian faults—may redress the bias in the record by quick reference to the actual proportion of the total effort. These tables are basically derived from individual raid reports made during or soon after the war, checked and amended where possible. Their principal value is to depict

the pattern of the whole offensive, and of Australian contribution to it; and to give some comparison of estimated determination in seeking out and bombing targets, and of losses sustained, between Australian squadrons and the whole force. As a measure of intention and of applied effort they may also give a rough guide to the efficacy of bombing under various conditions; but as they do not include raids in which Australian squadrons did not engage, they do not purport to be in any way final or comprehensive.

Special reference must also be made to the question of claims of damage inflicted on the enemy. In a fast-moving action covering a large area of sky it was extremely difficult for fighter pilots to assess the true results of their combat. Sometimes pilots were seen parachuting to earth, sometimes aircraft were actually seen to crash out of control on land or in the sea—but there was always the danger of confusing friend and foe. Claims could be duplicated when several pilots attacked one enemy aircraft and in good faith each made a report which in time and space made it appear that each had taken part in a separate action. In only a very small percentage of cases was incontrovertible evidence of enemy loss available. It was inevitable, perhaps, at times of great activity when many claims were under consideration, that the human factors of enthusiasm and inability to give adequate considerations to each incident resulted in many borderline and duplicated claims being officially recognised. Since the war enemy records have made it quite clear that British wartime figures were nearly always inflated, but in varying degrees.

This problem can be fairly readily resolved in a general history by stating British claims over a period with actual enemy losses in parentheses, but this is impracticable in this sectional account. It would merely introduce new absurdities to apply an average factor to Australian claims and then make arbitrary selection of incident from the claims of many individuals in each period.

The reader is therefore warned that the incidents related in the text are based for the most part on the wartime assessments. Footnotes have been employed on occasions to emphasise this, and the clumsy expedient of reiteration of "claim", "apparently", "credited with" has been liberally but not universally used. Wartime combat reports and assessments still give the best reflection of the offensive spirit, general fighting qualities and possible success of each individual. The precise tally of aircraft shot down should be regarded as merely coincidental to the main task of doing comparative justice to the Australian airmen and should be applied very cautiously to any other context.

Fortunately the task of evaluating the results of air attack against enemy naval and merchant shipping has proved much simpler because the fate of each vessel can be decided, for the most part from enemy records. When a number of aircraft attacked a single ship, however, it is still impracticable to establish definitely which was the vital torpedo, bomb or other weapon, and this particular difficulty is especially apparent with the adoption of wing-strike tactics against enemy shipping. The author is especially

indebted to Captain D. V. Peyton-Ward, R.N., of the Air Ministry's Air Historical Branch, who has furnished valuable information concerning attacks against U-boats and shipping, and whose generous guidance has rectified many errors of fact and interpretation in the original text concerning Coastal Command operations. For events in the Mediterranean reliance has been placed in Allied and enemy records of shipping losses.

Some of the author's indebtedness in the research and drafting stages has already been indicated. To the General Editor, he, in common with all the other writers, owes the inestimable boons of complete sympathetic support, valuable advice and criticism which in no way limited the writer's freedom, and special help in the matter of sources, scale and style. In the final long-drawn-out labours of compilation, checking, arrangement, indexing, planning of maps and illustrations and a host of other essential details, he owes much that is most successful to Mr W. R. Clark, who for some years has acted as literary assistant to the three air writers and who has gently but firmly eliminated errors and side issues. The maps and diagrams were all drawn by Mr Hugh Groser. In more general fashion members of the understaffed Historical Section of the Royal Australian Air Force Headquarters have shown consistent enthusiasm and ability in determining many facts which, because they were each relatively unimportant in themselves, were very hard to trace.

The author himself was an aircrew trainee under the Empire Air Training Scheme, left Australia in mid-1941 and did not return until the end of 1947. His wartime experience consisted of operations as a pilot with a Royal Air Force flying-boat squadron at Gibraltar; instructional duties at a flying-boat operational training unit; Intelligence duties with a Royal Australian Air Force squadron; education staff duties at Overseas Headquarters in London; and finally (extending until repatriation) historical research.

J.H.

*Melbourne,
15th July, 1953*