

IS THIS YOUR BRANCH?

458 SQUADRON

BY PETER ALEXANDER

458 Squadron R.A.A.F. was founded on 10th July, 1941, when a small party of Australians left Williamstown to provide a nucleus of the Squadron as an Empire Air Training Scheme Squadron in Britain.

There they were joined by other Australians of the "Blue" draft. On the way over some of them were involved in an early demonstration of the unwillingness of the Australian airmen to put up with inferior treatment. At Halifax, Canada, the Australians and other airmen walked off the "Empress of Asia" where they had been offered disgustingly dirty accommodation. With a Flight Sergeant as spokesman they parleyed with authority. Someone threw a potato at the Air Officer Commanding but the episode ended in improved accommodation on the S.S. "Louis Pasteur".

458 Squadron swung into action in September 1941, at Holme-on-Spalding Moor with No. 1 Group, Bomber Command, operating through one difficult snow-bound winter against enemy-occupied Europe. They were the sort of operational casualties to be expected in Bomber Command.

Some personalities, subsequently known in Air Force Association circles, then with the Squadron were Alan Piggott, Eric Munkman, Peter Alexander, Graeme Coombes and Fred Strom.

A large party from the Squadron was posted to help the formation of 460 Squadron.

In 1942 the Squadron was posted, with its Wellingtons, to the Middle East to provide a nucleus for the striking force against enemy U-boats and shipping. The aircraft were flown out by the Australian crews, staging at Morton-in-Marsh: and the ground-staff made the long voyage to Suez by sea. There, through the sterling efforts of their Commanding Officer, Wing Commander L. L. Johnston, they were reformed and operated from bases in the Western Desert and the Canal Zone.

Such Air Force Association identities as Stan Longhurst and Arthur Jollow took part in the Squadron's U-boat campaign — it now being equipped with "Stickleback" Wellingtons.

With detachments at Malta and Palestine the Squadron pursued the retreating Axis to Protville in Tunisia. Here they were commanded by a South African Air Force Officer, Lieut. Colonel B. McKenzie. Under his command the Squadron became known as "McKenzie's Air Force" (but that is another story which we shall tell one day). Under his command the Squadron reached the highest level of servicing and operational efficiency in the Mediterranean. Many strikes against enemy shipping with torpedoes were undertaken and in the end the enemy ran out of shipping.

Wing Commander Jack Dowling succeeded to command of the Squadron. He was later to have a distinguished R.A.A.F. career including R.A.A.F. Command in Vietnam.

The Squadron was subsequently stationed at Bone in



Algeria, Corsica, Sardinia, and the mainland of Italy, continuing with its Wellingtons to inflict heavy casualties on enemy transport and U-boats.

The final posting was at Gibraltar. Gibraltar Command half expected the Australians to push the Rock into the ocean but although much else occurred, the Rock was left there.

The Post-War Years

At the suggestion of John Waddy, the Squadron in Sydney formed a Branch of the Air Force Association in 1949. This Branch has continued to this day to lead an active existence and to provide personnel and support for the operations of the New South Wales Division of the Air Force Association.

It continues to hold regular reunions and a multiplicity of other functions, dinners, golf days, etc. The Squadron has been responsible for instituting, many years ago, a regular All States Reunion in one or other Australian State. It is about to hold its All States Reunion — on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. The Squadron has published its war-time history, "We Find and Destroy", and is shortly to publish another edition.

It has produced lapel badges, blazer pockets, cricket caps (they played cricket regularly until Anno Domini caught up). It may not be generally known that the proposal for the Air Force Association Annual Award to the most efficient Citizen Air Force Squadron came through the New South Wales Division from the 458 Squadron.

The Squadron does its best to assist, in conjunction with the Air Force Association Welfare Section, with the welfare problems of its members and their families.

Some of the 458 Squadron members who have played prominent parts in Air Force Association matters in post-war years include Graeme Coombes, Peter Alexander, Sam Barlow, Eric Munkman and Bob Bruce.