

MY TIME (fairly short) WITH 77 SQUADRON

By Bob Andrew

It was only by accident that I became a member of 77 Squadron. I had been with 5 Fighter Sector, Darwin, since its beginnings in March 1942, when, in January 43, my fellow-sergeant was posted to 77. That was OK by me - I was hoping for a bit of leave down south within a couple of months. Then came the accident, not to me but to the other bloke. He had dropped a heavy deed box onto his foot and the MO ordered that he stay put. So I was instructed to take his place. I quickly found myself down at Livingstone Strip and about to exchange my fairly comfortable quarters in the former Berrimah Hospital for the bush camp life, of which I'd had more than enough during the early months of 5FS.



I should add that I trained as a Wireless Operator (Air) at Signals school, Point Cook in 1940 and was posted to 2SFTS Wagga at the end of that year.

There I met Flight Lieutenant Dick Cresswell with whom I logged some hours in Wirraways. He and other instructor officers were very helpful to us Wireless Ops in our efforts to remuster to Observer. How we lost our aircrew status is another, and sad, story. I next met up with Dick when he arrived in Darwin as CO of 77. I was in Fighter Sector Ops Room the night he shot down a Betty. Very satisfying all round!

At Livingstone I soon received another surprise; the squadron was about to leave for Milne Bay. So at dawn on 18 January I and other ground staff found ourselves leaving Darwin Harbour aboard the US Liberty Ship *James Russell Lowell*. After a hot but uneventful voyage we had a couple of weeks in the fleshpots of Townsville. Then in a convoy out into the Coral Sea and some very rough weather. Our ship was a small Dutch steamer *Van der Lin* and pretty uncomfortable even in calm conditions. There was ample tucker – for those who were able to face it. Using my NCO rank I slept in a hammock on deck rather than down below. Better to be wet than confined in the crowded and stuffy hold.

We disembarked at Gili Gili at the head of Milne Bay. No one was sorry to leave that ship! At the squadron campsite we did our best to find a spot for the night. The floor of a native hut seemed alright until we had the company of lots of rats. We also found lots of rain. We had complained about Darwin's downpours but Milne Bay beat it easily. Our strip was Gurney and there pilots and ground crews spent many muddy days. We had only sporadic attention from the enemy. Falling coconuts, scorpions and the risk of malaria were more regular concerns. We had quite a few night visits from "Nippo" (also referred to as "Tojo") but their bombing usually had little effect. On a couple of occasions Dick Cresswell went up after the intruders but without any luck. He had a difficult job taking off and landing at night on such a tricky strip. In March-April there was a fair bit of 'fun and games', mainly associated with the Bismarck Sea Battle. That complete victory over the Japanese convoy was a great morale booster.



Squadron NCOs April 1943

On 14 April Fighter Sector told us that 50-60 'visitors' were on their way. This was the Jap's most serious attempt at a comeback over Milne Bay. It was part of a series of attacks on Port Moresby and our bases along the PNG north coast. 77's Kitties and some US Lightnings had considerable success, as did the Ack Ack boys. One downed bomber crashed beside us in the camp area. The P40 flown by Ian Kinross was badly shot up. Others were also damaged but all got back. Next night, on short-wave radio, we heard Tokyo Rose report that units of the gallant Japanese air force at Milne Bay had sunk 11 ships and shot down 44 allied planes. This took some beating when it came to exaggeration!

On ANZAC Day, in the evening, there was a big roll-up in the Rec room to listen to the rebroadcast of the Melbourne march. A reminder that we were in the 77 Milne Bay middle of another World War.

Rumours of a move became fact on 6 June when I was in charge of the advance party heading for “Ginger” (code for Goodenough Island) aboard a C47. Our base there was Vivigani strip on the north-east coast of the island. I described the spot as “100% on MB, broad flat country below high mountains. Bit dusty but better than mud.” During my time with 77 I kept a work notebook. It is pretty battered but includes a list of my W/T Section’s equipment that had to be transported to Goodenough. There were 61 boxes and crates and this was just the technical gear. Logistics play a big part in war! We were joined by 76 Squadron with Kitties; also the recently formed 79 with Spits.

On a rare day off it was possible to enjoy a hike into the mountains. I managed this on two occasions. It was refreshing to be close to waterfalls and have a swim in the pools below. Well worth the hard walk. There were interesting meetings with the village people and some bartering. We were especially keen on bananas; they made excellent fritters for a special supper. An American aircraft new to us turned up. It was a P47 Thunderbolt. For a fighter it was huge and, from a distance, could be mistaken for a Dakota. A highlight of 77’s Goodenough days was the big concert. A remarkable effort by some very talented airmen. Soon after tragedy struck. Darryl Sproule was lost over Gasmata. The whole squadron was very concerned about his fate; it was not until after war’s end that his terrible end became known. This event took place just at the time when Dick Cresswell and I were both about to go south and Sproule was to take over as CO. But it was not to be.



*L to R: Bert Leedon, Roy Young & Bob Andrew
outside 77 Squadron’s Sergeants’ Mess
Milne Bay, April 1943*

To further complicate matters the squadron was about to begin island-hopping to the north and I narrowly avoided heading in that direction instead of southwards. On 16 August 1943, after what I hoped would be my last baked-bean breakfast for a long time, I had a seat on an American C47 bound for Townsville.

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