

Just the right amount of war? The operations of 451 (RAAF) Squadron from Corsica, 1944.

Prior to the commencement of the Second World War in Europe a grand plan was formulated to provide the Royal Air Force (RAF) with the necessary trained personnel for the expected conflict. This plan came to be known as the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS). The scheme supplied personnel for regular squadrons, but also for what could be described as ‘war-only’ squadrons. 451 (RAAF) Squadron was one such formation.¹

The order for its formation as an Army Cooperation Squadron was issued on 6 February 1941.² By 5 May they were in Egypt and on 1 July they were operational and flying Hurricanes and continued to do so until February 1943 as they moved about between Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus.

The squadron was not a happy one. Many of the Australian pilots wanted to fly as fighter pilots rather than in the role of tactical reconnaissance. A British pilot posted to 451 Squadron, Geoffrey Morley-Mower heard one Australian say...

“Just our luck to miss being with Killer Caldwell and ending up with a bunch of fairy poms who don’t know how to fight...”³

The squadron received three Spitfire Mk VCs on 14 February 1943 and shortly after was reclassified as a fighter squadron but it wasn’t until October that they had a full compliment of Spitfires.⁴ Plans for the use of 451 Squadron changed a number of times over the following months but towards the end of March 1944 they received orders to proceed to Alexandria and from there they were taken to Corsica. The Spitfires arrived at their airfield at Poretta on 18 April where they constituted part of 251 Wing, which also consisted of 237 and 238 Squadrons. There was another Spitfire wing on Corsica also, and both belonged to XII Air Support Command of MATAF (Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force).⁵

On 23 April, 451 Squadron flew its first operational sortie from Corsica, forming part of the escort for USAAF B-25s tasked with bombing a target in Italy. During the sortie a group of 14 Bf 109’s and Fw 190s were sighted and engaged, and one Messerschmitt was shot down, shared between WCDr Morris and FO Wallis.⁶ First sortie, first engagement and first claim of an aircraft destroyed (since moving to Corsica), this was the war 451 Squadron had been looking for.

For the rest of the month the squadron was involved in escorting bombers and armed recce sorties, some of which included strafing barges, trains and enemy vehicles. The squadron took no casualties during this time and the Luftwaffe didn’t rise to challenge them. The squadron record included this notable comment at the end of April 1944:

‘In view of the fact that this Unit has not participated in warfare against the enemy to any great extent for a period of over two years, both aircrew and ground personnel displayed the greatest keenness in their duties. The result of the transfer of the Squadron to the present active theatre of war has resulted in great improvement in the morale of personnel.’⁷

¹ Douglas Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series Three: Air Volume I: Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 62.

² NAA: A1196, 36-501-160.

³ Geoffrey Morley-Mower, *Messerschmitt Roulette*, Phalanx, St Paul, 1993, pp. 1-17.

⁴ NAA: A9186, 136 and NAA: A9695 1004

⁵ NAA: A9186, 136 and IWM: 8231.

⁶ IWM: 8231, NAA: A9186, 136 and NAA: A9652.

⁷ NAA: A9186, 136.

With regular raids and patrols into the Axis rear areas in Italy originating from Corsica, it was only a matter of time until they struck back. About 2200 on 12 May about 25 Ju-88s attacked Poretta airfield. The defending anti-aircraft guns commenced firing at the bombers and soon flares lit up the whole area. Personnel not manning guns took what shelter they could find. The attack lasted for about 25 minutes and the Australian and British medical staff were soon joined by their American counterparts. The Australians suffered many casualties, 8 killed (or died of wounds) and 11 wounded.

A number of services were held for those killed in the raid, or who later died of wounds. At the service on 21 May a special epilogue was read, written by members of the ground crew:

We left Australia together, we arrived abroad together, we lived – we worked – we served together. We were all part of the family of a great Squadron, cemented together by youth, by a sense of duty, and by a common interest. We together faced seen and unseen dangers. We were together when they met their death. Gallant comrades every one: their graves are planted in a land far from home and kith: but their names live on in our hearts, and the unfinished task is in our hands to perform with their devotion and their unselfishness.⁸

The following week consisted of more bomber escorts and recces, and a move for 251 Wing on 23 May from Poretta to Serragia, about six miles south.⁹ On 25 May eight Spitfires were tasked to the Viterbo area for a fighter sweep where they spotted four Fw-190s, destroying three and damaging the fourth, for no loss. From 26 to 29 May, the squadron continued their bomber escorts, sometimes twice a day, and once stopping at Nettuno, inside the Anzio perimeter, to refuel.¹⁰ May 1944 was also the time of the ‘pig hunting incident’. Simply told the Australians shot some pigs in what they considered to be unfenced land, but the locals said they didn’t use fences to manage them and wanted compensation.¹¹ The complaint made by the locals was not resolved until 1949, and the case was found in favour of the squadron.¹²

Around this time several DFCs were offered to the squadron by the Americans but the offer was rejected by the RAF Group Commander, stating the pilots had not done enough to earn them.¹³ Perhaps by British, RAF, or even Commonwealth standards this was true, but the Americans are known for their generosity.

The first days of June 1944 consisted of fighter sweeps and armed recces behind the Axis front lines. If it moved it was in trouble.¹⁴ The morning armed recce on the 5th to the Genoa-Savona area found just one staff car, so they went after it, and were satisfied when it exploded. Weather on 5 June was generally cloudy, some of which obscured the mountaintops, and thus the squadron was forced to stay in the valleys, flying at or below 2,000 ft, and sometimes as low as 500 ft. On 9 June eight Spitfires from 451 Squadron combined to shoot down three Bf-109s near Livorno but a further four got away, as the pilot who saw them could not break into the radio chatter of the first combat to warn everyone.¹⁵

On 14 June the squadron flew top cover to two bombing raids carried out by the Americans. The first was uneventful but on the second the bombers were attacked by eight Bf 109s.¹⁶ A second wave of 109s also joined in. WCdr Morris claimed one of these shot down, and this was backed up

⁸ NAA: A9186, 136.

⁹ NAA: A9186, 136.

¹⁰ NAA: A9186, 136

¹¹ AWFA: Joseph Barrington.

¹² NAA: A705 42/3/388.

¹³ 451 Squadron Association, 451 Squadron R.A.A.F. Middle East Forces 1941 – 1946 Anecdotes, (2002), p. 145.

¹⁴ NAA: A9186, 136

¹⁵ NAA: A9186, 136

¹⁶ The 57th Bomb Wing Association, Accessed 17 October 2018, <http://57thbombwing.com/321stHistory/321_BG_1944-06.pdf>

by a bomber crew. Some of the 109s were chased when they broke off their attacks but no additional claims were made.

The final sortie of the day was an armed recce which claimed yet more MET, staff cars, dispatch riders and even horse-drawn wagons, and a number of pilots regarded killing the horses as an unpleasant business. These operations continued to 17 June, when the squadron's focus was diverted to the island of Elba, and they flew patrols and ground support to assist the Free French in their execution of operation *Brassard* until the afternoon of 19 June.¹⁷

A census was taken by a visiting RAAF officer on 19 and 20 June, which was essentially research for a repatriation scheme to be implemented at the conclusion of the war, preference going to those with families, married men and consideration for length of service. The squadron diary noted that as a result of the explanations given by the visiting officer and their willingness to explain matters and listen to grievances, squadron morale improved greatly, especially that of the ground crew.¹⁸

On 29 June, the squadron found some Luftwaffe fighters taking off from an airfield near Bologna. The Spitfires went into the attack, with the Luftwaffe fighters turning left and then left again over the city, with the Australians roaring down after them. One Bf-109 was shot down in flames by FSGT Vintner and a Fw-190 was hit by FO Bray and crash landed. A third aircraft – another Fw-190 – was hit numerous times by FO Sidney and was last seen with smoke pouring from it, at just 50 ft, trying to escape the battle, and this was claimed as a probable.

Since there were numerous Luftwaffe aircraft in various stages of taking off and forming up, the Spitfires became separated as they went after different groups and didn't necessarily stick with their flight leaders. Alec Arnel's Spitfire was hit by anti-aircraft fire during this period, the first thing he knew about it was when oil started gushing over his windscreen. He had to bail out and did so by winding the trim fully forward and releasing his harness. The plane simply flew away from him and he came neatly out of the cockpit.¹⁹

Alec was swiftly captured and given a hard time by his captors. He was processed through the German system, ending up at Stag-Luft III Sagan (where the Great Escape took place). All this time Arnel's morale had been quite low, he felt that he was out of the war and he would no longer be able to do his part. He'd lost his squadron and his mates. He felt useless, but after a while he came to realise that his chance of overall survival, a chance to make it home at the end, had increased. While popular in movies and dramatic stories, interest among POWs in joining escape committees was not as high as some might believe. Alec had seen the terrain on the trip to the camp, and he didn't speak any German, he held out no hope for his chances beyond the wire. He felt the war was going well for the Allies and the end was near, so a few weeks or months as a prisoner was something he could stand.²⁰

451 Squadron's claims for June 1944 were eight enemy aircraft shot down, one damaged, 110 MET flamers or destroyed, another 154 damaged, 15 railway tankers destroyed and 68 railway

¹⁷ NAA: A9186, 136, AWFA: George Purdy and J.P. Pallud, 'The Invasions of Elba Island', *After The Battle*, No. 173, August 2016, 2-36, pp. 4-36.

¹⁸ NAA: A9186, 136

¹⁹ NAA: A9186, 136 and Author interview.

²⁰ Author interview, Personal File – Arnel and 451 Squadron Association, 451 Squadron R.A.A.F. Middle East Forces 1941 – 1946 Anecdotes, (2002), p. 121.

trucks damaged, one locomotive destroyed, eight damaged, one ship sunk and four damaged in a total of 1048 operational flying hours.²¹

In early July, 451 Squadron received a few Mk VIII Spitfires and for some time the squadron operated both Mk VIII and IX Spitfires.²² Escorts to bombers attacking bridges were a regular occurrence as were fighter sweeps and area cover for USAAF P-47s on dive-bombing sorties. While Spitfires could carry bombs, the bigger P-47s could carry a much heavier payload and were definitely the better choice. Sorties took them to their usual zones near Livorno and Florence to the east, and Alessandra and Genoa to the north.²³

On 8 July, the squadron was moved from Serragia to St Catherine (about 80 km north), with less than two days' notice. When they arrived at the new location later that day, it was clear that there was very little cover and few opportunities for camouflage so everything was widely dispersed – there would be no repetitions of the earlier disaster.²⁴

Three new pilots arrived on 9 July, including Warrant Officer Joe Barrington, the second of two Jewish pilots to serve with 451 Squadron during the war. Joe should not have been accepted for military service as, due to an earlier illness, he was unable to fully extend his left arm. To get through the medical assessment he simply bent both arms at the same angle when doing the relevant test and he got through. Since a person's religion was stamped on their identity discs, Joe decided he wasn't going to wear his on operations, being a Jewish prisoner wasn't a fate he was prepared to endure.²⁵

17 July saw the loss of SQNLDR Gale. He was one of four Spitfires tasked for a special Tac/R of the Arno River to establish the state of bridges in the area and was hit by anti-aircraft fire and crashed while investigating a ground target.²⁶

Escorts and patrols continued for the next week and on 27 July when returning from an escort north of Genoa FO John Poate's engine cut out at 15,000 ft and couldn't be restarted. He made a crash landing on the mainland and was quickly made prisoner. He gradually recovered from his crash injuries and became the 16th Australian to arrive at Stalag Luft I, Barth, on the Baltic (north) coast of Germany. The Australian PoWs lived together in a block they called 'Australian House'. To pass the time John taught French to his fellow prisoners. He remained at Barth for the duration of the war and was liberated in May 1945.²⁷

With Operation *Dragoon* – the landings in the south of France – coming up in August, things were bound to get busy once again. Originally codenamed *Anvil*, the name was changed to *Dragoon* on 1 August, but so many orders had been written with *Anvil* in the references that there was no point retyping them all for the name change. So, in 451 Squadron's case at least, 'Operation Dragoon' was typed on a piece of paper noting the amendment and stapled to the top of some documents.²⁸

²¹ NAA: A9186, 136.

²² Spitfire Aircraft Production, viewed 20 August 2019, < <http://www.airhistory.org.uk/spitfire/production.html>>.

²³ NAA: A9186, 136.

²⁴ NAA: A11305 18/MED

²⁵ Author interview and Sydney Jewish Museum interview – Barrington March 2010.

²⁶ NAA: A9186, 136.

²⁷ 451 Squadron Association, 451 Squadron R.A.A.F. Middle East Forces 1941 – 1946 Anecdotes, (2002), pp. 189-200, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed 5 September 2019

<<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>> and Barth City History, Accessed 5 September 2019, <<https://rathaus.stadt-barth.de/geschichte.php>>.

²⁸ NAA: A11305 1-9-AIR.

As the day of the landings approached, the focus of operations for 251 Wing switched to western Italy, the pre-war French-Italian border areas and convoy patrols to protect the assembling assault ships. On the day of *Dragoon*, 15 August, 451 Squadron had 12 Spitfires up at 0540 patrolling a line between Corsica and the French coast, protecting the returning C-47s that had dropped airborne forces at Le Muy. The Luftwaffe was a no-show in this area. 451 Squadron then flew four patrols, each of six Spitfires, over the beachheads, but they were not challenged. The squadron's main patrol areas were allocated the codenames of Apples, Pears and Peaches.²⁹ That day the Mediterranean Allied Air Force carried out approximately 900 fighter-bomber sorties and 385 medium or heavy bomber sorties in support of *Dragoon*.³⁰

The original *Dragoon* plan had 251 Wing operational in France by D+23 or 24 but due to the good progress made by the army, this was brought forward and they were operational at Cuers, about 10 miles NE of Toulon, on D+13 (28 August).³¹ The facilities included an airship hangar and concrete runways. It came complete with German POWs for maintenance of the airship.³² From 28 to 31 August the squadron flew regular standing patrols from their new airfield and maintained four Spitfires on the ground ready to take off should they be required, but the only aircraft encountered were identified as friendly.³³

The squadron flew regular patrols, but were withdrawn from France in mid-October and advised that they would most likely be returned to Australia. However, in the Pacific, RAAF units were already complaining of being left out of the action. Adding another under-employed fighter squadron to the mix would not improve matters.³⁴

451 Squadron was in limbo once again, but they had proven beyond all doubt that, given the chance, they would fight and fight well – as evidenced by a newspaper article titled ‘All From One Squadron’, which pointed out that 451 Squadron had provided eight Commanding Officers for RAF and RAAF fighter and fighter/bomber squadrons in the Mediterranean.³⁵

1 November brought the news confirming that 451 Squadron was definitely moving, but to a different destination: the UK. It was in Italy that the squadron had to leave behind Hurri, their mascot, who was taken in by some RAF Military Police.³⁶

The final word should go to Morley-Mower:

They got into the war as soon as they could and they were so successful that most of them commanded squadrons. When I first encountered them I was taken aback by their obvious excellence ... in physique, morale and personal qualities. I already had a high expectation of Australian fighting men, but these boys were amazing.³⁷

²⁹ NAA: A9186, 136.

³⁰ Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, p. 97 and Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume 11: The Invasion of France and Germany*, pp. 86, 265, 279-281.

³¹ NAA: A11305 1-9-AIR and NAA: A1196, 36-501-160 .

³² Author interview.

³³ AWFA: Herbert Biggs, NAA: A9186, 136 and NAA: A11305 1-9-AIR.

³⁴ NAA: A9186, 136 and Herington, *Air Power Over Europe 1944-1945*, p. 257.

³⁵ NLA: Trove – “All from one Squadron” Age (Melbourne) 12 September 1944.

³⁶ AWFA: George Purdy.

³⁷ 451 Squadron Association, *451 Squadron R.A.A.F. Middle East Forces 1941 – 1946 Anecdotes*, (2002), p. 54.