The Last Mission

While many Australians are aware that Darwin was bombed in February 1942 and Broome strafed three weeks later, few are aware that hostile aircraft continued to fly missions over northern Australia well into 1944.

Slide 1 students at Adelaide River CWGC cemetery.

This is a group of students who have earned scholarships to visit military sites as part of the NSW Premier's Anzac Memorial Scholarship tours. A student is reading the potted biography he has created of one of those whose lives was cut short by war, one who is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Adelaide River in the Northern Territory. It was the story of a casualty from the last air battle over northern Australia during the Second World War.

slide 2 Broome memorial and headstones at Karrakatta cemetery

There are few 20th century battlefields on Australian soil and even fewer with dedicated memorials. This is a memorial at the base of the Broome jetty created just a few years ago to remember that morning of terror on Roebuck Bay, 3 March 1942.

The jetty has gone, the recovered bodies of the casualties were moved to Karrakatta cemetery in Perth almost 80 years ago and, with every high tide, less and less of the wrecked flying boats remain. The new memorial however will help to remember that second deadliest attack on Australia.

This afternoon, however, I want to talk about the last and probably the least remembered battle.

slide 3 (artist's impression) Dinah Mk III waiting to take off

In the predawn darkness of 20 July 1944 Lieutenant Iizuka Kyoshi, a pilot serving with Dai 70 Chutai, and his observer Lieutenant Itoh Hisao climbed into their Mitsubishi Ki-46 Mark II, or Type 100, a twin-engined low-winged monoplane reconnaissance aircraft on the airfield at Penfui at the eastern end of the island of Timor. Their mission that day was to monitor the progress of the construction of the secret RAAF bomber base, codenamed Truscott, in the far northeastern Kimberley in Western Australia.

slide 4 Dinah Mk II airborne

The Mitsubishi Ki-46 had been nicknamed 'Dinah' by the Allies.

Designed in the late 1930s it had been state of the art. Sleek, fast and manoeuvrable it was popular with Japanese aircrew in the war over China and in the victorious opening months of the war in the Pacific. The reconnaissance aircraft was lightly armoured and had no guns or cannon as it relied on speed and manoeuvrability to evade attacking fighters. The cockpit gave the pilot excellent vision forward and above. The observer occupied a separate compartment further back along the fuselage above the trailing edge of the wing.

By 1944 the Dinah's reputation was beginning to fade. The new generation of Allied fighters and bombers were surpassing the Japanese aircraft's advantages in speed, rate of climb and performance at altitude.

Iizuka had been flying out of Penfui for most of the year. In February he wrote to his brother Akira describing his living conditions, visits to the capital Kupang and the concern that he and his comrades had that the legendary British Spitfire fighters had been seen over northern Australia. He mentioned that several of his comrades in the lightly armed Dinahs had already been killed.[1]

slide 5 map: Timor to northern WA

With the bright sun of the dry season in the tropics, appearing over the Timor and Arafura Sea, at their far eastern horizon Iizuka and Itoh took a flight path south, then east, to Australia.

Flying high and fast their plan was to use altitude and speed to avoid detection, locate the rumoured air base, photograph it, and be on their way home before Allied air defences realised and reacted.

slide 6 LW AW radar station with the internal control panels

What Iizuka and Ito appear to be largely ignorant of were the extraordinary advances in technology the Allies had made with radar since 1942.

In Australia, the lessons the crucial role that radar had played in winning the Battle of Britain in 1940 were being adapted and applied to the enormous and remote northern coastline of the Australian continent. The cumbersome stationary installations that Britain had relied on just a few years earlier had been modified by Australian technicians who created the portable and robust light weight, air warning, (LW AW) radar stations.

Cheaper and easier to produce and deploy than the larger stations, these LW AW units had an impressive range. By 1944 dozens of these stations had been installed all around the Australian continent.

As you can see from this slide the LW AW stations were simplicity itself. The equipment may have been the best of its age but was still very rudimentary. It relied heavily on the skill, concentration and dedication of operators often living and working under hash tropical conditions.

slide 7 map: radar installations around Australia 1942-44

Because of the secrecy surrounding this new military technology few of it's veterans spoke about their service postwar. It was not until the 1990s that a small handful began to publish their memoirs and eventually the RAAF documented the unit histories of these small bands of largely unsung men**.**

[1] Brad Manera 'The Last Kill' in *Wartime; Official Magazine of the Australian War Memorial* Issue 19 (2002) Page 10.

On the morning of 20 July 1944, 24-year-old, Sydney born, Pilot Officer Archer Geoffrey Svensen[2] began the countdown to his new posting. He had taken command of 326 Radar Station RAAF at the tip of Cape Leveque in the Kimberley region of Western Australia at the height of the rainstorms and intense humidity of the 'wet' season. It was the warm, clear weather of the 'dry' and he was not looking forward to the next wet. Svensen was due for relief in 13 days.[3] 326 Radar Station RAAF was a tiny outpost in one of the most remote locations in Australia.

Just after 08:00 hours the equipment at 326 detected an incoming aircraft flying high and fast. Rotated by hand the antenna picked up the direction of the intruder and passed it on to other stations in the network.

Slide 8 map: radar stations in the Kimberley

As the Dinah approached the coast its signature was being monitored by several radar stations.

Adrenalin replaced tropical lethargy as the LW AW equipment detected the threat. Pilot Officer Paul Watson's team, manning 344 Radar Station RAAF, had been based on West Montalivet Island less than four months and had already seen much air traffic but rarely an enemy. They soon picked up Iizuka's aircraft.

319 and 317 Radar Stations were also relatively recent arrivals in the Kimberley but Flying Officer Bill Hammer's 319 station crew at Drysdale Mission and Flight Lieutenant Ron McCosker's crew of 317 on the eastern edge of Sir Grahame Moore Island soon joined in plotting the intruder.

Flight Lieutenant Alan Williams and his men at 154 Radar Station RAAF were equipped with a shorter-range Ground Control, Interceptor (GCI) set. Also located on the Anjo Peninsula, they were closest to Truscott but their direct communications with the aircraft at the base was still being established.[4]

At Truscott the strip was being operated by 58 Operational Base Unit RAAF.

Designed as a forward airfield and constructed as covertly as possible, Truscott was intended to have a runway long enough for the giant, four-engined B-24 Liberator heavy bombers to enable them to strike at targets deep in the heart of the Japanese occupied Netherlands East Indies.

By mid-year the longest runway was not completed however on 16 July a flight of RAAF Beaufighters had used the base to launch a successful operational sortie against Japanese aircraft and shipping.

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[2] O1155 (43420) Svensen, Archer Geoffrey stayed in the RAAF after the war and retired as a Wing Commander on 28 November 1975 https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1074017&c=WW2#R and https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=30932017&isAv=N (currently not digitised).

[3] RAAF Historical Section *Units of the Royal Australian Air Force; A Concise History, Volume 5 Radar Units* AGPS Press, Canberra 1995. Page 109.

[4] Fenton, Maurice E *154 Radar Truscott 1944-45; The story of a RAAF Radar Station in the Kimberleys* Self-published, Lockleys SA, 1990. Page 13.

slide 9 RAAF marked Spitfire taxiing at Temora[5]. 54 Sqn RAF a/c would have mid-green livery with the squadron letters DL-R in July 1944

As air protection for the base a flight of three Spitfires had been detached from No.54 Squadron RAF at Livingstone in the Northern Territory. These flights were deployed on a four-week rotation.

Slide 10 54 Squadron RAF at a bush strip in the Northern Territory

Posted to the northern Australian station of the South West Pacific Area's theatre the British squadron was equipped with model LF Mk VIII Spitfires modified for tropical conditions.

20 July 1944 was the last day of the rotation of Flight Lieutenant Derek Gossland's flight. His wingman was Flight Lieutenant Frederick Meakin and the third member of the flight was Flight Sergeant A E Knapp.

We can only wonder if Gossland, Meakin and Knapp were looking forward to re-entering the comradeship of squadron life or regretting leaving the freedom of a small, isolated detachment as they prepared to return to Livingstone.

Whatever the case, their thoughts would have been abruptly interrupted by the order to scramble at 08:50 hours!

slide 11 Commonwealth marked Spitfire taxiing

The powerful V-12 Merlin engines of the Spitfires roared as the aircraft tore down the strip and climbed for altitude.

slide 12 Dinah over coastal island

The sun was high in the sky as Iizuka and Ito saw the islands off the Mitchell plateau far beneath them. They were flying high and fast, parallel to a hostile coast.

They must have been squinting into the glare, scanning their arcs for any sign of the enemy. We can only imagine the knots in their stomachs, their desperate hope was that they had escaped detection.

slide 13 map: Kimberley Coast

They were gambling against insurmountable odds. The network of LW AW stations across northern Australia had picked them up long before they had even seen the coast of Australia.

slide 14 LW AW radar in northern Australia [inset Fl/Lt Walter Mailey DFM]

The interceptor equipment at 154 Radar Station responded to the information coming from the other stations and locked onto Iizuka's flight path as he approached the coast.

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[5] This aircraft wears the livery of the Mk VIII Spitfire from 457 (Grey Nurse) Sqn RAAF flown by W/Cdr 'Bobby' Gibbes DSO DFC*. It is owned by the Aviation Museum, Temora. Photograph Brad Manera *Warbirds 2024*

On that July day radar operator Sergeant Keith Backshall was manning the set in the van linked to the antenna. Beside him was Flight Lieutenant Walter Mailey. While Backshall calculated the direction, altitude and speed of the enemy, Mailey's task was to direct the fighters onto the target.

It is interesting to note that in a post-war interview with former fellow operator Morrie Fenton, Backshall described Mailey as "the son of the former test cricketer, Arthur Mailey."[6] He makes no mention that Fl/Lt Mailey was a fighter pilot himself, had already served a punishing tour in North Africa with No.3 Squadron RAAF and earned the Distinguished Flying Medal for shooting down enemy aircraft![7] – son of a cricketer indeed.

slide 15 V formation of three Spitfires

Although Gossland was obviously confident that the target was Truscott he appreciated that there were other nearby targets to protect. The squadron log records:

> "F/Sgt KNAPP was vectored to DRYSDALE MISSION. F/Lt GOSSLAND and F/Lt MEAKIN sighted a Dinah approaching the Drysdale Strip [Truscott] at 27,000 feet.

slide 16 close up of a Spitfire in flight

If Flight Sergeant Knapp had resisted a bad attitude to selfish officers before he certainly would have developed one that morning as he imagined Gossland and Meakin closing on their target while he was tasked with patrolling the empty sky over a barely used airfield.

The Ground Control, Interceptor set provided Backshall and Mailey with details every 45 seconds. Interpreting the data they relayed the information to the pilots. Backshall heard the controller "vector the fighter to its positions 1,000 feet below and slightly behind the target, this enabled the Spitfires to attack from the blind spot."[8]

Inside the Dinah Iizuka and Itoh saw the Spitfires climbing to attack them. Their aircraft may have been one of the fastest in the Japanese arsenal in 1940 but by 1944 it was outclassed by the latest models of Allied fighters.

As Gossland and Meakin manoeuvred below and behind the Dinah, Itoh furiously prepared grenades, the only defensive equipment on his aircraft.

The Dinah had been fitted with three rows of four 1-inch diameter tubes behind the cockpit and forward of the observer's position. By releasing grenades from the tubes, they would hopefully fall clear of the fuselage and explode in the path of any aircraft seeking to attack from below and behind. It was a desperate but forlorn hope. The Spitfires avoided the tiny shards of shrapnel and closed on the Dinah.

The squadron log takes up the story:

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[6] Ibid Page 14

[7] https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1580349

[8] Fenton. Page 14.

> As they approached the enemy a/c [aircraft] from astern, Dinah was seen to drop clusters of aerial fragmentation bombs, which burst below and behind our a/c."[9]
>
> F/Lt GOSSLAND made his attack from 7 o'clock on the port stern quarter, and his burst was seen to strike the port side of the fuselage, the port wing and both engines. The Dinah went into a steep dive. F/Lt MEAKIN fired a burst and the starboard wing broke away and the Dinah burst into flames and crashed into the sea 5 miles north of Drysdale Strip.[10]

On the ground Backshall recalled "We received a "Tally Ho" from the Spitfires when the Dinah aircraft was slightly north of our base, and we went outside the vans to watch the dogfight."[11]

The battle was over in minutes.

Were Iizuka and Itoh killed by machinegun and cannon fire from the Spitfires or were they pinned to their seats by centrifugal force as the Dinah spiralled out of control, falling 9,000 metres to the ocean, killing them on impact?

As the aircraft crashed into a sea, known to be alive with poisonous jellyfish, sharks and crocodiles, RAAF investigators waited for low tide before attempting any assessment or recovery of parts of the Dinah. It took weeks for an RAAF salvage team to arrive. By that time the wreck had been picked over by souvenir hunters from Truscott.

It is believed that the remains of the crew of the Mitsubishi Ki-46 were buried on the beach near the crash site.

The air battle above the Anjo Peninsula in 1944 was the last enemy action over Australia during the war.

Despite newspapers being full of war stories Gossland and Meakin's victory received no mention at the time. When the official history was published in the decades after the war the battle rated a single sentence: "[T]here was one clash with the enemy on 20th July when three Spitfires of No. 54 Squadron, stationed at Truscott, caught and destroyed a reconnaissance plane over the Drysdale Mission."[12]

No decorations or commendations were made for the encounter.

Perhaps the observation appended to Flight Lieutenant Walter Mailey DFM's service dossier is indicative of the official reaction, quote: "As a GCI Controller Mailey has performed his duties satisfactorily but resents being off flying duties. As C.0. 150[sic]

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[9] No.54 Squadron (RAF) https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U59582
[10] ibid
[11] Fenton page 14
[12] Odgers, George *Australia in the War of 1939-45 Series 3 – Air. Volume II – Air War Against Japan, 1943-45* AGPS Canberra 1968. Page 245.

Radar Station his administration was fair, rather inclined to make all decisions without reference to higher authority".

Despite his vital role in the destruction of the Dinah the report concludes that Mailey is: "[S]uited to flying duties rather than an administrative post"[13]

slide 17 recovered remains of a Dinah at Truscott

In 1980 a team of enthusiastic amateur aviation archaeologists recovered pieces of the Dinah from where the RAAF salvage team had dumped it at Truscott in 1944. Transported to Perth, today pieces of the wreck are preserved by the RAAF Association Aviation Heritage volunteers.

slide 18 rusting remains of war on Truscott strip

In 1993 Lieutenant Iizuka's brother Akira made a pilgrimage to Australia in the hope of visiting the site of his brother's death and burial. Having undertaken no prior research, he visited the Japanese war cemetery at Cowra, NSW, then travelled to Darwin, all to no avail.

He returned to Japan disappointed and finally wrote to the Australian War Memorial's Australia-Japan Research Project where a translation of his letter gave me the opportunity to explain to him the circumstances of his brother's last mission, that Iizuka and his observer had died 600 kilometres southwest of Darwin and the remote Kimberley now claim his remains.[14]

slide 19 Adelaide River CWGC where Meakin is buried

Another tragic postscript to the battle was the accidental death of Flight Lieutenant Fred Meakin. Just a week after the destruction of the Japanese reconnaissance flight the 23-year-old from Christchurch in Hampshire, UK, was killed when his aircraft stalled and crashed.

The entry in the 54 Squadron Operations Book, 28 July 1944, explains:

> "[A]t approximately 08:00 hrs this morning F/L MEAKIN met with a fatal accident 3 miles South East of Livingstone Strip. The aircraft were circling low just after takeoff prior to formatting, when F/L MEAKIN's machine struck a tree top; The aircraft ploughed through the trees, an explosion followed blowing their machine up and scattering it over a large area."[15]

The young English pilot is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Adelaide River in the Northern Territory.[16]

Brad Manera
3 May 2025

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[13] Service Dossier of 402375 W A H Mailey DFM RAAF https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Gallery151/dist/JGalleryViewer.aspx?B=5254281&S=50&N=56&R=0#/SearchNRetrieve/NAAMedia/ShowImage.aspx?B=5254281&T=P&S=50

[14] Correspondence Iizuka/Manera/Iizuka correspondence translated by Dr Keiko Tamura AWM AJRP 1996.

[15] No.54 Squadron (RAF) https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U59582

[16] Meakin's grieving parents Gertrude Helen and Fredrick Meakin wanted the headstone engraved "ALL YOU HAD HOPED FOR, ALL YOU HAD, YOU GAVE TO SAVE MANKIND; YOURSELF YOU SCORNED TO SAVE"