

## 67 SQUADRON - LAVERTON



On returning from Port Moresby about May 1943 I had a few days leave and then was posted to 67 Squadron at Laverton, a particularly satisfactory posting as it was on the train line to Werribee.

In 1942 a number of merchant ships had been sunk by Japanese submarines off the eastern sea-board. Australia was heavily dependent on merchant vessels for vital overseas supplies and munitions. During the first half of 1943 Japanese submarines sank 16 ships and damaging several more. No. 67 Squadron was formed in January 1943 with a strength of 180 personnel and 14 Ansons.

Operating from Laverton, on Port Phillip Bay, the squadron carried out escort convoys and 4 hour anti-submarine patrols out of Yanakie, Mallacoota and Bairnsdale. All weathers, no aids and over the Bass Strait. The flying was what you would only describe as 'very dicey' indeed.

By the end of April 1943 Allied submarines had sunk 226 Japanese vessels of 500 tons and above. Of these, American submarines had sunk 217, Dutch six and British three.

On my first day I reported to the adjutant who took me in to meet my flight commander, Sqn Ldr R. Cupper. "Sit down Flight," said he, and then proceeded to ask me about New Guinea. After a few words of compassion at my experiences up there he told me that I would enjoy the type of flying they did on convoy work etc. and to relax as they didn't worry about formalities such as 'saluting, etc.' on the base.

You can imagine my surprise the next day when passing him on opposite sides of the road I decided not to salute and finished up on the mat in his office while being lectured on the customs of the service. Thankfully, Cupper didn't stay there much longer and was replaced by a Flt. Lt. Bruce Graham who, as the result of an accident, wore a caliper on his right leg. He was a gentleman and a pleasure to work for – after the war he became a member of Parliament. I read of his giving a big farewell party on having his leg amputated a few years later! 67 Squadron was nothing if not interesting.

Tucked away at Laverton it would be easy to imagine that it might have been a bit of a rest home. Not so! In the few months in which I was a member of the squadron – July '43 to May '44 – we lost no less than six aircraft! Four due to engine failure over Bass Strait, one on a test flight at Yanakie, and another on a very silly 'shoot up' which ended with the air-

craft tail sticking up from the Mallacoota Inlet with the crew of three dead inside. The other losses were all due to engine failure over Bass Strait.

Shortly after arriving at the squadron I was flying with a young lad named David Shanks on a routine exercise dropping flame floats over Port Philip Bay. Pretty routine stuff, but I wasn't all that impressed with his flying, particularly his habit of turning his head to follow the descent of the missile and forgetting that he was flying an aircraft! Luckily during the next few days I was officially crewed with a young pilot from NSW, one Keith Robey who became a good friend, and was with him to the end of my time in with 67 Sqn.

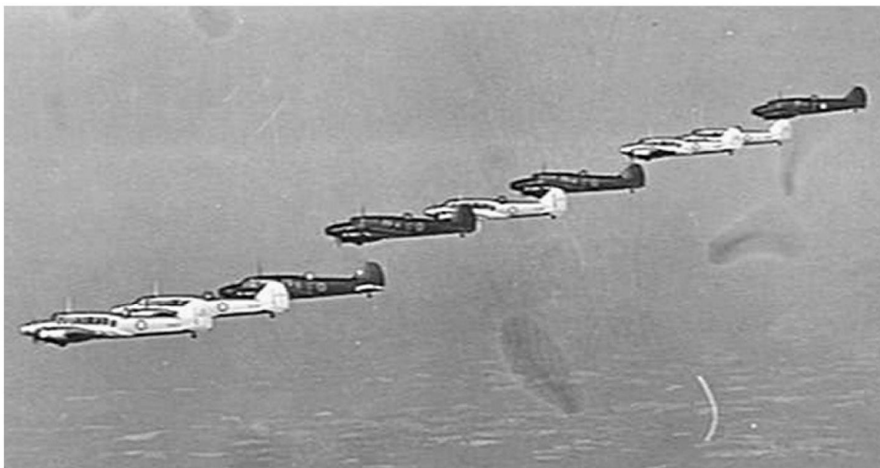
Sadly, within a couple of months, I was a pall bearer at the funeral of Dave and two others at a couple of churches in Sale. He had been checking out an aircraft after 'servicing' at Yanakie (a small field near Foster on Wilsons Promontory) and had crashed very near one of the two buildings that served as home to the crews on overnights. A small dog that they taken up for a ride was the only survivor!

67 Squadren's task was to escort convoys, usually about 15 ships operating through Bass Strait.

We would pick them up about Cape Otway or through the heads and shepherd them around Mallacoota and up the coast to Eden. Nowra would take over after that.

We never sighted a submarine in this time but I believe they did suffer a casualty or two in '44.

Our task was to be on sight of the convoy before daybreak; establish communication with the lead ship by Aldis lamp, and fly various types of patterns around the convoy in search of the elusive subs.



Our usual time over the convoy was about 4 hours, plus or minus a few minutes depending on the arrival of our relief aircraft. Or darkness. Complete radio silence was essential. What was of real concern was the weather. It could change in the blink of an eye over Bass Strait and with virtually no real navigation aids on the Ansons apart from the radio compass. It wasn't unusual to find ourselves in real strife and hugging the coast to try and pick some familiar landfall from which we could wend our way to whatever aerodrome we were to spend the night!

Although Laverton was our home base we didn't spend a lot of time there. We would generally leave Laverton, pick up the convoy and, depending on which detail we drew the next day, land at Yanakie, Bairnsdale or Mallacoota, the latter being a new airfield which at that stage consisted of a couple buildings which served as Headquarters and Operations – and anything else they could fit in!

The commanding officer of the base was an Admin. Flt. Lt. and, as we found out on our first lunch at the base, one end of the table was reserved for officers, the other for sergeants and other ranks. Fortunately for us they didn't have any accommodation so on overnight stays we were billeted and fed at the Mallacoota Hotel. We slept in huts in the grounds of the pub and were fed in the dining room. A pretty cosy set up really.

The Licencee of the hotel was quite a character. A very portly gentleman with a limited sense of humour, he bore the nickname "Sludge Bolton", based on the belief that any overflow in the drip-tray eventually found its way into the next patrons beer! He had a teenage daughter and niece working at the pub, a couple of nice girls who on one occasion arranged a dance in the local hall. Just us and a few of the locals – very nice people. I don't remember meeting more than a few of the locals – mostly fishermen.

In those days Mallacoota wasn't much more than a village I do recall dropping recent copies of newspapers etc. as we flew over the lighthouse at Gabo Island. Sometimes we were thankful for a day or two just relaxing at the 'drome or, depending on our next assignment, we could just remain in the vicinity of the pub about a mile or so away.

Our next sortie could be a dawn take-off to pick a northbound convoy or vice versa take over a southbound. Most were about 4 hours duration, the afternoon tasks lasting till last light. On one particular trip, our first landing at East Sale, then a very new base, the weather was frightful and we spent a lot of precious fuel just trying to pick up the coastline! Keith was flat out keeping the aircraft aloft, George was in the nose looking for something that looked like land and I was busy with the radio trying to get a bearing or communication with anyone willing to hear us.

Eventually Keith sighted the 'drome and with the rain and sleet, decided to make a 'straight in' approach. Not knowing what he had in mind I still had about twenty feet of trailing aerial with a couple of pounds of lead weights on the end trailing beneath the aircraft. I believe there was quite a stir as the weights trailed across the roof of the airmen's mess. It had to be meal time of course and the mess was pretty crowded. Fortunately we only had an overnight stay and so we didn't cop too much ribbing from the locals.

Mallacoota was a blessing in that sometimes we got to have a couple of days relaxing just pottering around the strip or in the vicinity of the hotel. A couple of the locals took us for short rides around the area. It was a great break. I remember one day following an aircraft servicing, sitting in the turret and over the inlets trying for a duck or two but I never did find out if we had any luck. I don't know what sort of a mess a 303 mm shell would make of a duck!

A couple of incidents stand out in the memory concerning Mallacoota. The first being the day we were at the strip doing our daily inspection of the aircraft when one of our mates was about to take off on a local test flight. Frank Howship and his crew took off out to sea and after leaving the ground were seen to dip below the horizon and towards the sea. People gasped thinking he had ditched into the sea. He fortunately appeared a few minutes later flying normally a fair distance from the base.

Later at the hotel I was talking to one of the aircrew who said, "Bad luck about Frank." I replied, "Oh no, he made it, he just appeared to dip into the sea on take off, but we saw



him pull away a short time later." It was quite shock when they replied, "Yes, but he was shooting up the pub at the inlet and the tail is still sticking out of the water. They are all dead." A sad day indeed.

On one occasion were escorting a military convoy through Bass Strait (I believe it was the 9th Brigade heading north) when all of a sudden our motors started to splutter and cough. I remember looking at the military convoy alongside and thinking, "Here we go – and what happens now?" Fortunately Keith sized up the situation pretty quickly and changed the petrol cocks over to the other tanks and, in what seemed an eternity, the engines picked up. We had a bit of a conference.

What do we do? Ditch alongside the convoy and finish up where ever they were headed, or try to make it back to Mallacoota? Mallacoota won!

Having decided that we had fuel trouble we tried alternating the feed cocks and, although neither gave us a constant supply of fuel they seemed to respond every time we changed tanks. Now we had work out what to do about notification of our situation.



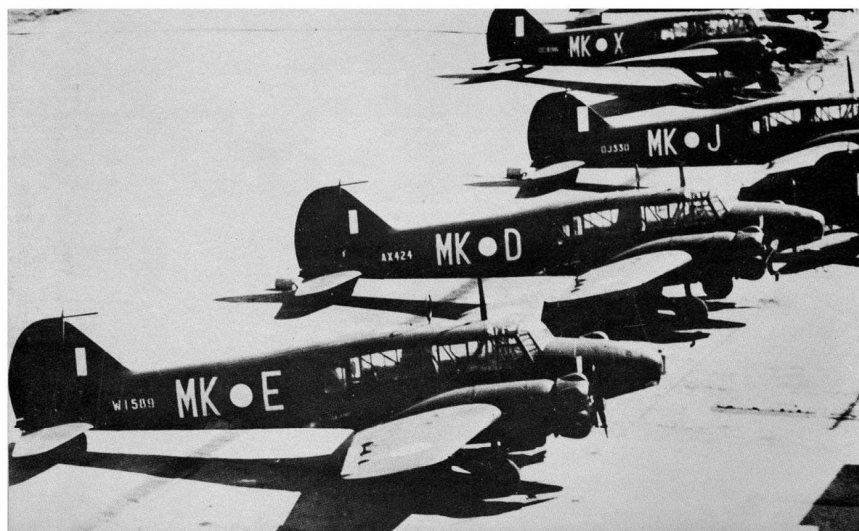
As the WAG I couldn't send out a distress signal giving our position or we would be revealing that of the convoy. Eventually, and not knowing what lay in store for us (we estimated we were about 70 miles or so from Mallacoota), I broke radio silence and sent a 'PAN' urgency message without revealing a position.

I later found out that being on high frequency the message was picked up in the north of Australia.

From here on in we were all busy; Keith flying the aircraft, George doing a bit of high class navigating and me, keeping a radio watch and helping Keith with the fuel cocks which operated in two slides about a foot or so long, and moved by rope handles! The slides were situated on the right inside wall of the aircraft. It seemed to take forever but eventually the cliffs of Mallacoota came into sight and with a final splutter of the motors we did a straight in landing much to the satisfaction of all concerned.

It was a bit nerve wracking, but as it turned out we gave a lead as to the fate of 4 aircraft that had ditched in Bass Strait during the past few months. The culprit was water in the fuel. We had all refuelled from 44 gallon drums which were later found to be contaminated with water. The book *The submarine hunters* refers to this incident.

The worst nasty of this tour was once again appropriately at Yanakee. It was the first time we had operated out of the paddock which had no aids whatsoever. Landing on the previous evening we weren't impressed with the place, however there was a senior crew already



there from whom we sought all the advice we could about taking off in the dark. Following their advice to "always take off to south," we had a good nights sleep and prepared for a pre-dawn take off.

Arriving at the aircraft about half an hour before dawn on what could only be described as a freezing morning we noted that the ground staff had laid a flare-path of about half a dozen kerosene flares on the grass but had neglected to include a cross flare, indicating the direction of take off at either end. We all went about our business, which in my case was to stand alongside the port engine and wind a very heavy handle to engage the magneto and eventually start the engine.

Eventually the motor started and we taxied out for take off to the right of the flares. Keith checked with George and I that we were ready and started the take off. We picked up speed and just after becoming airborne, at about a third of the length of the runway, all of a sudden a fence post came through the port window, a 303 browning machine gun and all sorts of debris floated past my ear. We had taken off in the wrong direction!

We had taken a farmers post and rail fence, eventually coming to rest a couple of hundred yards or so inside his farm. Pitch dark and not knowing what was going to happen to the two 100 pound bombs slung underneath the aircraft, we checked that none of us were injured and scrambled out of the aircraft and into the dark to safety. Fortunately the aircraft or what was left of it didn't burn!

By this time dawn had broken and we had to inform Laverton what had happened. We left George to guard the wreck and wandered back to the hut. I remember how good it felt to hold a nice hot cuppa while Keith spoke to the boss at Laverton. His first instruction was, "Don't go near that aircraft. Those bombs may go off at any minute." We waved George in from a safe distance and waited for someone to come and retrieve us.

Thus life went by with one convoy after another. The squadron continued to grow, reaching a strength of 244 personnel and 17 Ansons by March 1944. In early May I was posted to Rathmines in NSW to become a mariner on Catalinas.