

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to detail Allied bomber operations flown from northern Australia during the period March 1942 to August 1945, or specifically from the North-West Area (NWA). The NWA was an RAAF command zone comprising the Northern Territory and the north of Western Australia.

During that time Australia was part of General Douglas MacArthur's wider South West Pacific Area (SWPA) command, and the vast majority of combat operations took place in the New Guinea theatre. From September 1942 these were the responsibility of the US Fifth Air Force, which assumed operational command of RAAF units in that theatre. The subsequent New Guinea campaign was both complex and wide ranging, with a vast array of USAAF and RAAF squadrons seeing service there.

However, the Fifth Air Force did not generally have operational command over units on the Australian mainland, which remained under RAAF control. So a lesser-known air campaign was fought between Japanese air units in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and Allied units in the NWA, centred on the northern town of Darwin. In recent years several books have focused on the defensive efforts by Allied fighter units over Darwin, but works describing Allied bomber operations taking the fight to the Japanese from the same area have been sparse.

Probably the best work is Bob Alford's *Darwin's Air War*, first published in 1991 and followed by a larger second edition ten years later. This provides an excellent general overview of the campaign, both defensive and offensive, but understandably lacks detail in certain areas.

Hence the purpose of this book, partly inspired by my friendship with RAAF bomber crewman Brian Winspear. Brian experienced the bombing of the Darwin RAAF base on 19 February 1942 after flying Hudsons from Timor during the NEI campaign. He later served with Vengeance and Beaufort squadrons, and his full story is told in Appendix 2.

Indeed, the offensive campaign from the NWA commenced with two understrength Hudson squadrons taking the fight to Japanese forces in nearby Timor in 1942, aided occasionally by USAAF B-17s, B-25s and B-26s. They were later joined by a Dutch B-25 unit, which gave a unique flavour to NWA operations. From 1943 USAAF B-24s added a new dimension to the fight, as their long endurance could reach deep into the NEI. Other RAAF types to see offensive service in the NWA were Vengeances (very briefly), Beauforts, Venturas, B-24s, B-25s and Catalina flying boats. The last type waged an important mining campaign against Japanese held ports in the NEI and later to the Philippines and beyond.

Generally, the NWA and New Guinea campaigns are distinct. However, there was some blurring due to the operations of certain units, namely those with long endurance that operated B-24s and Catalinas. Hence some New Guinea missions are also mentioned in this narrative as they concern units primarily operating in the NWA.

I trust this book brings to life this little-known campaign for a current generation of readers and serves to remind us of the sacrifice of so many brave airmen all those years ago.

Dr Tom Lewis OAM
Canberra, Australia
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