

CHAPTER 11

THE AMERICANS AND THE DUTCH DEPART; LUCKY 13 RETURNS

With the RAAF's Catalinas busy flying by night and bottling up Japanese-occupied harbours the B-24 Liberators of the 380th BG and B-25 Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron continued their long and medium range missions against the islands of the NEI. However, there were major moves afoot for the NWA.

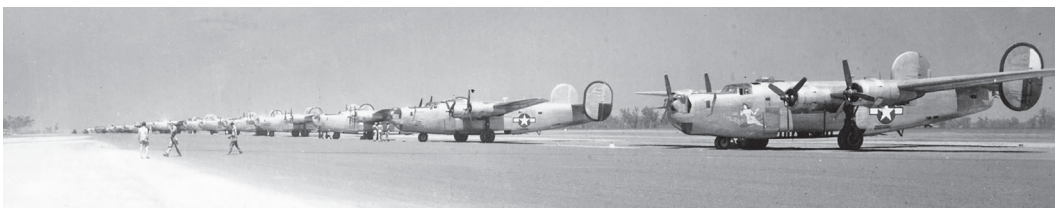
While RAAF crews were also flying with the 380th BG, others were training at the CRTC at Nadzab, flying with the 380th BG detachment at Port Moresby and at 7 OTU at Tocumwal. At Manbulloo No. 24 Squadron was declared operational on 17 June 1944, though most flights at this time were ferry flights from Amberley to Gorrie and Manbulloo. Dick Overheu had been posted into No. 24 Squadron and flew nineteen such flights during June and July along with his crew including flight engineer Lindsay McDonald. Nos. 21 and 23 Squadrons were also to re-equip with Liberators and were to join No. 24 Squadron as part of No. 82 Wing.

On 28 June 1944 the Fifth Air Force issued a directive that would see the 380th BG operate from the one location and gradually make way for the RAAF's Liberator units:

[The] ... 380th Bombardment Group to move from Fenton to RAAF aerodrome Darwin earliest ... As and when operational commitments permit. Attached RAAF personnel to move with squadrons concerned. Advise date move will commence. Request this Headquarters be advised date on which movement of each squadron is completed.

The movement began in July and was completed the following month. While the squadrons operated from four large igloo hangars on the south-eastern area of the RAAF station, headquarters, administration and accommodation was located at the McMillans camp area to the east of the airfield.

Despite the move missions continued. On 29 June 24 Liberators attacked Babo, cratering the runway and causing extensive damage to the revetments and other areas. However, the town was bombed when a newly appointed squadron commander led his aircraft over the wrong target. Two days later 31 aircraft followed after Lieutenant Lawrence Stevens' weather reconnaissance in an attack on Namlea airfield. The results were reported as good, even though twelve of the B-24s attacked shipping instead of the designated target. Captain Virgil "Big Steve" Stevens was one, with his logbook reading:



A line up of 531st BS Liberators at Darwin after their move into the base in mid-1944. By that time most of the 380th BG's bombers had been stripped of their olive drab camouflage in favour of natural metal finish. The aircraft closest to the camera is B-24J 42-73134 Milady which crashed near Darwin in January 1945. (Bob Alford)