

Keynote Address by Air Commodore Mike Kitcher AM, CSM, at the Battle for Australia Commemoration, Martin Place, Sydney, 5 September 2018

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians, the Eora people, of the land on which we are here today and pay my respects to their Elders both past and present. I would also like to pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

I am Air Commodore Mike Kitcher. I am privileged to command all the ADF and Air Forces fast jets, including Super Hornet and Growlers at RAAF Amberley near Brisbane, Hawks at RAAF Pearce near Perth and RAAF Williamtown near Newcastle, Classic Hornets at RAAF Williamtown and RAAF Tindal near Katherine in the Northern Territory, our Combat Control Team at RAAF Williamtown and the F-35A Joint Strike Fighter, currently at Luke AFB at Phoenix in Arizona in the US which will move to RAAF Williamtown in December this year. I have been fortunate to be asked to speak on behalf of the Air Commander Australia, Air Vice-Marshal Steve Robertson, as part of today's Battle for Australia commemoration.

Firstly, what is the Battle for Australia? Well, historians generally agree the Battle for Australia is more a concept designed to commemorate a chain of events in WWII with an emphasis on the Australian experience, rather than recognising a single Battle or event such as Gallipoli and ANZAC Day. Secondly, historians also generally agree, admittedly with 20/20 hindsight, Australia was never under a direct threat of invasion. However, had the Japanese advance through our immediate region not been stopped in the sea, land and air of Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific who knows what may have eventuated over time, and how the course of WWII may have changed.

Today we commemorate the heroic actions of the brave men and women who fought in and supported the Battle for Australia.

I would now like to briefly mention some key events in the Battle for Australia:

The bombing of the Australian mainland, which began on 19 Feb 42 in Darwin, with devastating effects and loss of life. This continued until November 1943 with over 96 separate air attacks targeting 13 locations across Northern Australia.

The battle for Australia also included the air defence of Port Moresby between March and May 1942 – those 44 days were critical in stopping the Japanese from invading Port Moresby and thus capturing all of PNG.

The battle for the Coral Sea in May 1942 was a key event that limited Japanese offensive operations to occupy the Solomon Islands and prevented an amphibious attack on Port Moresby.

The battle for Milne Bay in August and September 1942 was the first time Japanese forces were defeated on land and forced to withdraw.

However, probably the best known event was The Battle on the Kokoda Track from July to November 1942 where the invading forces were stopped within view of Port Moresby, and forced back northwards.

Finally, the Battle for the Bismarck Sea in March 1943 where a large Japanese convoy was prevented from resupplying forces in northern Papua, contributing to the eventual evacuation of the Japanese forces from New Guinea.

There were many other events that combine into what we now call the Battle for Australia but I would like to expand on two key areas, the air defence of Port Moresby and the Battle of Milne Bay.

The air defence of Port Moresby stands as a remarkable feat. No 75SQN was formed in Townsville with the P-40 Kittyhawk aircraft on the 4th March 1942 under the brief command of SQNLDR Peter Jeffrey. On this day only four of the squadrons 21 pilots had seen combat, the younger pilots had nine days training on the Kittyhawk and had fired their guns once. On 17th March under the new command of SQNLDR John Jackson 75SQN ground crew started moving forward from Townsville to Seven Mile field just north of Port Moresby. Kittyhawk aircraft began arriving at Seven Mile Filed four days later on 21 March. The same day, just 17 days after formation, the squadron achieved their first significant action when a Japanese bomber conducting reconnaissance over Port Moresby was shot down. The following 44 days saw 75SQN almost single handedly responsible for the air defence of Port Moresby, destroying 35 Japanese aircraft, probably destroying another four and damaging 44. This came at the cost of 12 pilots and 22 Kittyhawks. The Port Moresby International airport at Seven Mile Field is named Jackson Field in honour of Squadron Leader John Jackson, D.F.C. the Commanding Officer of 75 Squadron who was killed in action while flying a Kittyhawk in defence of Port Moresby on 28 April 1942. John Jackson was succeeded in command of 75SQN by his brother SQNLDR Les Jackson DFC and Bar, who also led 75SQN into the Battle for Milne Bay a few months later and became the RAAF's first ace in New Guinea by downing five enemy aircraft.

75SQN was joined by a US Army Air Force Airacobra squadron on 30 April. On 3 May 75 SQN participated in their final sortie of this period, a bomber interception mission, with the US Airacobra squadron. Despite the long hours and constant toil from the technicians and support personnel on the ground, through aircraft losses and damage 75SQN were reduced to a single serviceable aircraft for that last mission.

On 7 May the unit returned to Townsville to train and reconstitute until they returned to Milne Bay in August 1942.

Moving on to the Battle for Milne Bay. The battle for Milne Bay was fought between the allies and the Japanese in August and September of 1942. It was a key allied victory, where the Japanese forces suffered their first full scale defeat and were forced to withdraw. Milne Bay is a large deep water harbour on the south eastern tip of New Guinea. The Japanese wanted to secure Milne Bay to support their advance along the Kokoda Track to Port Moresby and defend against allied air and maritime forces operating in the Solomon and Coral Seas.

In August 1942 Major General Cyril Clowes commanded the 'Milne Force' which consisted of around 7400 Australian troops and 1400 American Engineers. The 7400 Australians were primarily from the 7th and 14th Infantry Brigades and included No 75 and 76SQN's operating Kittyhawk aircraft from up to three newly constructed airfields, No 1, 2 and 3 fields. They primarily operated from No 1 Field known as Gurney airstrip. Milne Force also consisted of Hudson reconnaissance aircraft from No 6 SQN, No 37 Radar Station and No 8 Fighter Control Unit.

On 25 August Kittyhawks destroyed a force of seven Japanese landing barges staging through Goodenough Island, 100km north west of Milne Bay. Early the following morning, in terrible weather, the Japanese began landing a sizeable force on the northern shore of Milne Bay, just 10km east of No 3 strip or Gili Gili field. Despite elements of the 61st battalion of 7 Brigade being heavily engaged and support from Kittyhawks and Hudsons the enemy made slow but determined westward progress towards the airfields. On the night of the 27th of August Australian troops were

defending the airfields perimeter. On 31 August Australian troops repelled three massed charges on Gili Gili field. The RAAF aircraft provided Close Air Support for the land forces throughout this period, sometimes attacking at treetop level immediately after takeoff whilst the landing gear was retracting. During this period RAAF ground crews, in addition to defending the airfields, worked around the clock, in the open, under enemy fire, to repair the airfield and aircraft from both enemy damage and damage from the persistently heavy rain. These efforts, in atrocious conditions, ensured sufficient aircraft were available to fight on every day of the battle.

The turning point in the Battle for Milne Bay came when MAJGEN Clowes determined the enemy was not able to threaten the flanks and rear of the Australian positions due to poor resupply, largely due the interdiction efforts of the Air Forces. He was able to commit the full strength of his brigades to force an enemy withdrawal to their landing point and eventual evacuation on 6th and 7th of September. Throughout the Battle for Milne Bay the Army and RAAF had combined into an effective joint force that dealt the first decisive blow to the enemy. Lessons on this cooperation are as valid today as they were over 75 years ago.

Finally, I ask you bear with me as I try to describe just how affected some ordinary Australians were by the Battle for Australia, and WWII in general, on a somewhat personal level. During September 2012 a RAAF Group Captain, along with a number of veterans from that battle and other events that form the Battle for Australia, journeyed to Milne Bay to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Battle for Milne Bay. During research for that visit he found that his grandfather had been a CPL in the Australian Army and had fought as part of the Battle for Australia in New Guinea. He also found out that his other grandfather and grandmother, along with a very young uncle, were Methodist missionaries on Goodenough Island, just north of Milne Bay. His grandmother returned to Australia in late 1941 and his grandfather caught the last ship from Port Moresby, just before the Japanese attacks began in 1942. Whilst at Milne Bay in 2012 the small Australian party was warmly welcomed by the local Papuans. Indeed, some of the locals led a few of the RAAF personnel into the jungle for about 15 minutes to show them the wreckage of a 75 or 76SQN Kittyhawk. Some of these local people were from Goodenough Island, and as it turned out their older relatives had talked about those same missionaries. The Battle for Australia continues to have an effect on younger generations even today. That Army CPL was Allan Kitcher, my paternal grandfather, and the missionaries were Reverend Athol Brooks and his wife Joy, my maternal grandparents and the GPCAPT was me. It was a very moving experience visiting Milne Bay six years ago as it has been to have the honour of addressing you here today.

I would like to close by recognising again the bravery and tenacity of all those who fought, supported and were affected by the Battle for Australia, a critical turning point in WWII. We will continue to honour their service and sacrifice.

Thank You.