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Indian Days and Burmese Nights

Flying Beaufighters in Southeast Asia with 177 RAF Squadron

A. Sutherland Brown, DFC

Introduction

This narrative is part of a longer one of personal reminiscences of my experiences in the RCAF during the Second World War and only concerns my operational tour flying Beaufighters with 177 Squadron, Royal Air Force, in Southeast Asia from early March 1944 until the end of the year. Preceding the operational tour I had spent two years training and waiting in Canada and the United Kingdom. During operational training at East Fortune near Edinburgh flying Beaufighter IIs, I was crewed with Flight Sergeant A. J. Aldham, a reserved, slim, blonde Englishman as Observer (i.e. Navigator-wireless operator-gunner). Alf quickly established his capability as a navigator and good companion in the as yet poorly understood game of war. Following a second stage of operational training on Beaufighter Is and Vis at Catfoss near Hull, Yorkshire, we picked up a new Beaufighter X from the factory at Filton, tested it, and then flew it to India on a reinforcement flight. We were surprised on arrival at Karachi on 1 September 1943 to find we were separated from the aircraft. We were then left to languish in an aircrew pool until December when we were assigned to the Southeast Asia Air Command Communications Squadron. Here we put in three months flying lesser VIPs about India until we were posted to 177 at the beginning of March.

Feni and the Real Thing

My early history at the 177 was not glorious. I was only at the squadron a couple of days and had had demonstration and local familiarization flights when my skin erupted in rashes that got worse daily. The Medical Officer (MO) prescribed Calamine lotion which stung on application and seemed to make the rashes worse. I was flown to a hospital in Calcutta devoted to skin problems, of which Bengal was rife. On examination by a specialist who was reportedly from Vienna, he said, "Ve'll giff him the Calamine lotion," to which I protested. He then responded, "Ah veil, ve'll giff him the zinc ointment." So much for science in dermatology. In any case, the zinc ointment worked, or perhaps the lack of Calamine did, for I recovered speedily and was back in Feni after a week.

The next misfortune was that after only one air firing practice with Alf he went sick, recovered and was then sent on a jungle survival course. On return I asked what he had learned and he said without hesitation, "If we come down in the jungle, I'll shoot you to save you all that trouble." His absence until late May meant I had several substitutes, principally a Flight Sergeant named F.J. Lumley. He was fine, but we did not have the mutual confidence which Alf and I had established and which can be critical for combat operations.



A Beaufighter of 177 Squadron RAF leaves on a sortie.

177 Squadron was part of Eastern Command's Tactical Air Force, 224 Group and part of a Wing of three squadrons of Beaufighters which, being based on different strips, had little contact. We all did similar operations and on occasion flew together. Our squadron was a wartime creation formed in India in 1943. It disbanded in Singapore after the war. Our motto was "Silently into the Midst of Things" and we prided ourselves on being an effective unit doing just that.

My first operation on 29 March 1944 was an offensive patrol flying as No.2 to Flight Officer (F/O) J. Lottimer down the central Irrawaddy River and back across the Arakan Yoma (southern Chin Hills) following a jungle military road through the Taungup Pass. We were the target of intense small cannon flak at Chauk, centre of the Burmese oilfields, but saw few targets of opportunity. I had a sequence of inconsequential jobs for the next two weeks and on one of them made a heavy landing and actually knocked off my tail wheel. Not a great start!

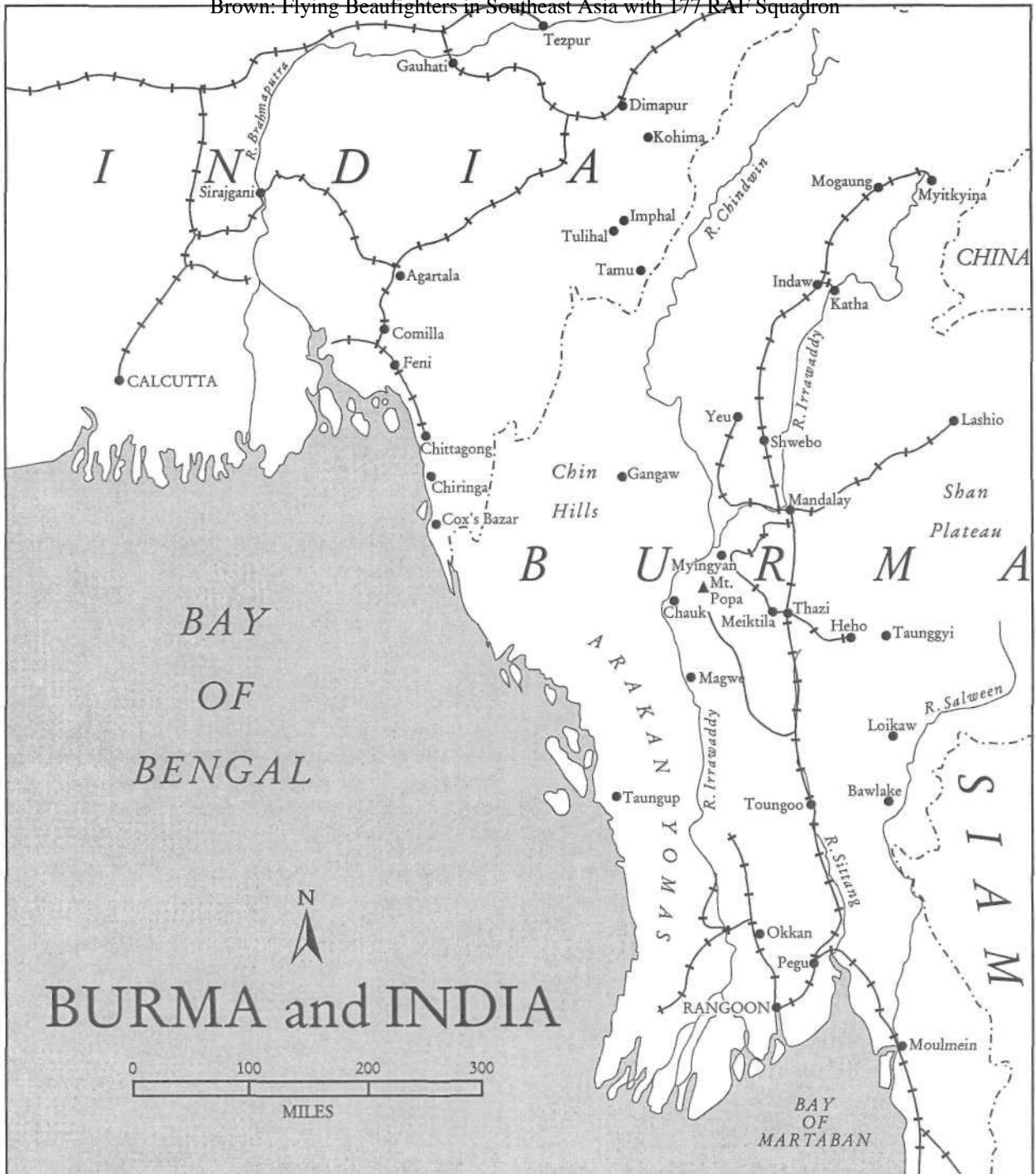
The pattern of operations was affected by the moon period, two weeks centred on the full moon during which we could make attacks on trains and military truck convoys at night and could run operations better over the target zone at first or last light. These two weeks were generally full of activity. Curiously the American Lockheed P-38 Lightning squadron based nearby at Chittagong did not fly at night so missed the time of greatest enemy ground activity. Normally at this time most of our patrols were conducted by flights of two Beaus. We climbed as high as 10,000 feet to clear the ridges of the Chin Hills and descended on the

Burma side to fly at tree top height to avoid radar contact. The Japanese radar network was rather thin and sightings along railways was one of their principal methods of early warning, and, although we chopped and changed, they were warned we were in the neighbourhood.

Typical operations at this time were mainly offensive patrols of the roads and extensive railways of central Burma. The British had laced Burma with a network of railroads consisting of a main line from Rangoon to Mandalay and on to Myitkyina in the north. From this stem three branches extended to the west and two into the Shan Plateau to the east.

My next operation was a fairly typical offensive patrol during the moon period. It began with a late night take-off and a two hour flight to the target area whereupon the actual patrol commenced at first light. We followed the roads which crossed the Arakan Yoma and came back along the indented coastline. During the patrol we attacked military trucks in the Taungup Pass with some success and received some return fire and minor damage.

The first operation on which I had several successful attacks was on 28 April as No.2 to F/O Joe Van Nes, a Canadian from Flin Flon, Manitoba. We flew across the plains of central Burma to Mandalay and then followed the branch railway into the Shan plateau toward its terminus at Lashio, returning down river canyons. We attacked and damaged two freight trains and two trucks during that patrol. During May I flew on seven operational patrols by night and day over central and southern Burma, mostly along branch



rail lines and adjacent roads. Every patrol resulted in successful attacks on either locomotives under steam with freight cars or convoys of lorries, totalling some five locos and 13 lorries. Damage to locos looked spectacular as they erupted like geysers but they were often repaired in a week or so. The lorries were usually finished. On several occasions we received minor damage from flak.

Transportation in Burma was made very difficult for the Japanese by the Beaufighter

squadrons because we sank all the large river boats, forced the trains to travel by night and to disperse into thick bamboo earth-filled shelters by day, made lorry transport hazardous, and ignited the fuel pipelines. We were subjected to intense 50-calibre machine-gun and cannon fire in return but relatively few attacks from aircraft. By mid-1943 the Allied air force had established mastery of the air over Burma so the Japanese had withdrawn their planes, mainly Army O1s (Oscars), to distant airfields such as Chiang Mai in Siam (Thailand). They moved them forward

only for specific operations. In any case, Beaus were as fast as Oscars at low levels and by flying at treetop level we were rarely sighted or attacked.

The weather during all this time was good but getting hotter as the monsoon season approached. Central Burma was always dotted with small cumulus clouds with a uniform base at several thousand feet unlike the solid cloud banks to 30,000 feet during the monsoon. The temperature at Feni became so hot that taking off in the afternoon was a race to get in the air. The Bristol Hercules engines did not over-heat easily, unlike Rolls-Royce Merlins, but we commonly did much of our vital action check while taxiing out to speed departure. The cockpit when we entered was over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit until you got the props turning. The controls were too hot to touch with your bare hands so we were issued excellent thin chamois gloves to cope with this.

Evenings were pleasant, although warm and humid. The mess was situated in fields of pineapples, rice and other crops on the edge of the jungle. Scattered mango, grapefruit and breadfruit trees grew around the mess which provided a supplement to our rations. Our bamboo huts were grouped around a *chaung*, a rectangular storage pond some 100 feet long dug below the water table to provide the natives with drainage, a source of water and a site for bathing.

In addition to the operational flights there were other flying duties - day and night air tests, firing practice and some flights transporting personnel. I did my share as I liked to fly. However, I had another unfortunate and ignominious accident with the commanding officer's Tiger Moth, pranging it on take-off on return from a strip near Comilla. There were no ground crew around and I had a passenger who had never swung a prop before so I did it, scrambling in as we started to roll forward and had no time to do up my harness. A gusty wind was blowing and the next thing I knew I was nose up with a broken prop. In the few seconds this took, my upper teeth bit right through below my lower lip and I bled fairly profusely. In due course I was in the local MOs surgery and he said, "Do you want a local or a burra peg (large tot) of brandy?" After I said yes to the latter he said, "I think I'll join you," which he did with glass and sewing needle. This little

episode resulted in a red endorsement (bad) in my log book.

177 Squadron was staffed with effective and compatible aircrew from many countries, principally the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, and a technically capable and cheerful ground crew mostly from the UK. The squadron commander was Wing Commander John E.S. Hill, a tall, cultured Englishman who took his turn on operational flights and had the respect of all. He went missing on operations in September but after the war he was found to be one of the surviving prisoners-of-war in Rangoon. One of the flight commanders was Squadron Leader H.B. Hunt, DSO and bar, DFC, who was always called Mike. He was a fairly boozie free spirit and an excellent pilot. When Hill went missing, Hunt took over the squadron until W/C G.R. Nottage, DFC arrived. Mike was the author of the "chop list" - a sequence in which arriving crews would be lost. It was a cruel, but effective, way of alerting new crews to the dangers. In the batch in which I arrived he spotted me number 1. The other flight commander was S/L A.R. Wills, DFC, a fairly colourless individual in comparison. A key member of the staff was the adjutant, Flight Lieutenant W.S. (Fergie) Ferguson, MBE, a laconic Australian who had escaped after the fall of Singapore. His method of getting rid of undesirables was simply to post them to a manning pool in India where it would be months before the error was discovered. The intelligence officer was F/O Eric Lovett, a gentle Englishman and the Medical Officer, F/L Eric Saint no less. The rest of us were a varied crew, constantly changing from losses and from being tour-expired. There were no cliques or dissension while I was on the squadron. Our morale was high even though our rate of attrition was equivalent to Bomber Command's (about 30-40 per cent). Discipline was easy and personnel troubles few. The ground crew lived in shorts, a Gurkha hat and sandals. Most of them were deeply tanned - deeper for the involuntary application of engine oil. Although they worked harmoniously together, officers and other ranks lived quite separately in the British Raj tradition; a real disadvantage for a mixed crew such as ours.

Our squadron was scheduled to be converted to Mosquitos in the near future which the old hands did not welcome because of the Beau's

Officers of the squadron in front of the mess, October 1944. Left to right, Top Row - Hughes; E.G. Saint, MO, J.W. Harper, W.S Ferguson, Adj. RAAF; author, RCAF; in shadows, M.F.C. Elliot; J. Stoney; N.F. Archer; Second Row -F.M. Macintosh, RCAF; N. Boyd, RNZAF; FN. Royle; L. Green; Third Row - Z.A. Aziz, sigs, IAF; A.J. Rieck, S. Sinibaldi, RCAF; O.E. Simpson; H.B. Hunt; G.R. Nottage, CO; R.H. Wood; E. Lovett, IO; R.J. Newcombe, RCAF; Front Row - A.C. MacDonald, RCAF; P. Gardner, EO; K.S. Waldie, RCAF; and T.N. Allen.



S/L Hunt, DSO and bar, DFC; F/O Eric Lovett, IO; FL A. Sutherland Brown, DFC; F/L W.S. Ferguson, MBE; F/O DM. Anderson, DFC at Chiringa, November 1944.



Key

- | | |
|-------|------------------------------|
| Adj. | Adjutant |
| CO | Commanding Officer |
| DFC | Distinguished Flying Cross |
| DSO | Distinguished Service Order |
| EO | Executive Officer |
| F/L | Flight Lieutenant |
| F/O | Flight Officer |
| G/C | Group Commander |
| IAF | Indian Air Force |
| IO | Intelligence Officer |
| MBE | Member of the British Empire |
| MO | Medical Officer |
| RAAF | Royal Australian Air Force |
| RCAF | Royal Canadian Air Force |
| RNZAF | Royal New Zealand Air Force |
| Sigs | Signals |
| S/L | Squadron Leader |
| W/C | Wing Commander |



Members of 177 Squadron pose in front of a Beaufighter prior to their departure for Ranchi, 31 May 1944. Group under the engine on the left includes Alf Aldham (head above kneeling Corporal), the four with uniform caps - author with earphones, S/L Hunt in front of prop, Mac Mackay back and Arthur Piatt. Group by nose includes G/C Lynch, wing CO, in front with shorts and Gurkha hat, W/C Hill, tail man in slacks with Gurkha hat, S/L Wills looking over his shoulder at left and Joe Van Nes at right. Fergie Ferguson with moustache in Bush jacket, Don Anderson without hat looking over his shoulder. Eric Lovett behind kneeling groundcrew with dog and F.J. Lumley to left with revolver web belt. Extreme right G.R. Taylor and to his left army liaison officer, Major Hughes.

strengths and long range and the Mossie's fragility. The conversion never took place because it was found by a sister squadron that the glued spruce wings of the Mosquito delaminate in the heat and high humidity with severe results.

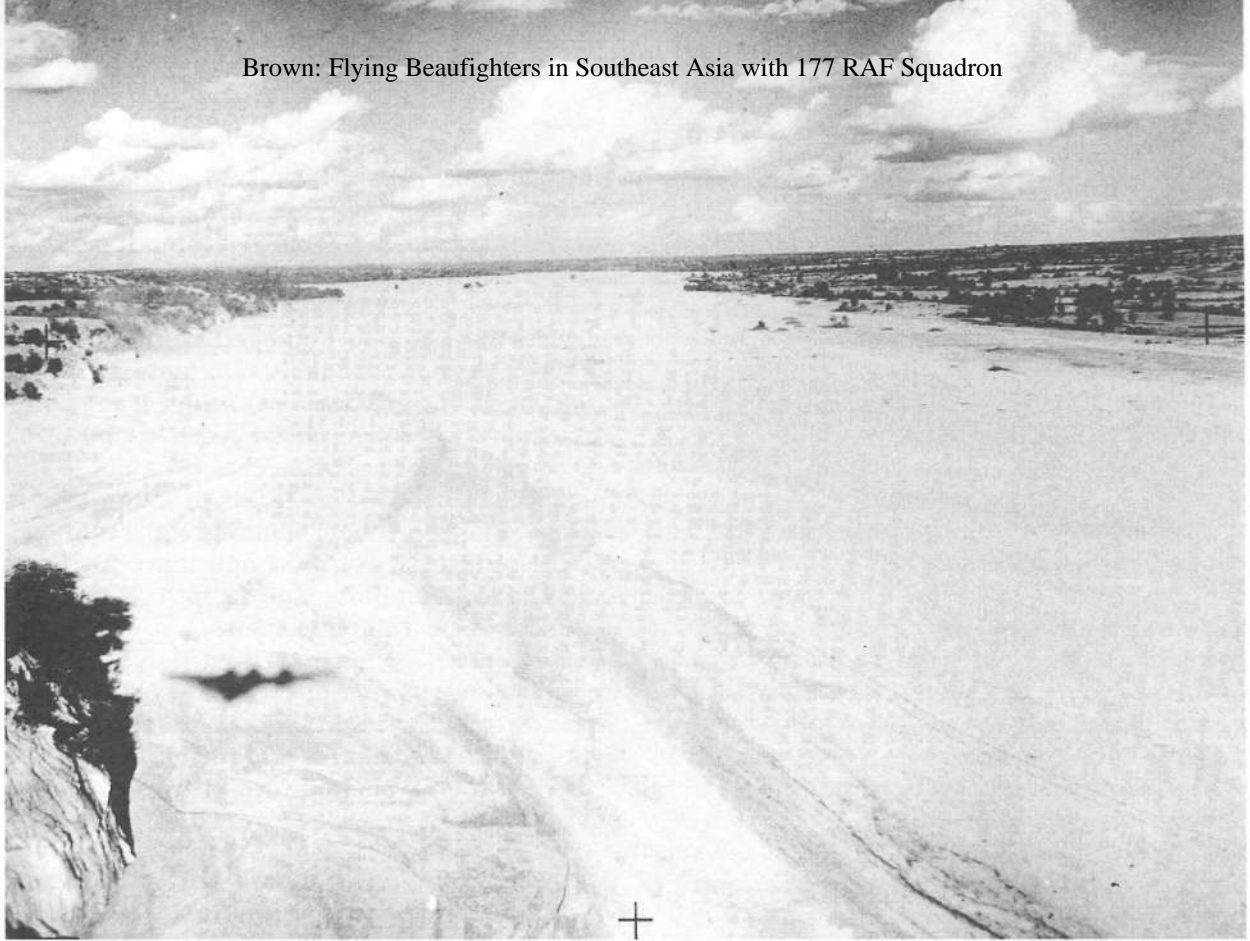
One of the main operations during this period at Feni proved our aircraft's strengths. The squadron, although not myself, attacked the critical airport at Chiang Mai in Siam. This was at extreme range, about 1,200 miles return or from the UK to Poland and back. The strike was timed to coincide with landings in the Philippines to prevent movement of Japanese aircraft to that theatre. Fierce flak met the squadron but the operation was a partial success. Unfortunately, Mike Hunt was seen to be hit and radioed to say he had lost an engine. Beaufighters did not climb well on one engine and it was thought, with the Chin Hills in the way, he was a goner. But no, he struggled back through the low passes of the Shan Plateau and the Chin Hills to land at Cox's Bazaar in the Arakan, out of gas. He got the bar to his Distinguished Service Order for this feat.

Our squadron was withdrawn at the onset of the monsoon from Feni to Ranchi, 200 miles west of Calcutta, to re-equip, rest and train with newly-fitted rockets. Happily, Alf had rejoined the squadron late in May and we were reunited. From Ranchi most of us had several weeks leave.

In July we engaged in range training with the newly-installed rockets. The weather was bad with the solid cloud deck trailing ragged fringes just above the irregular plateau and heavy rain obscuring the windscreen. One quickly had to learn the local geography, roads and railway hacks from tree top height to avoid smashing into the many low, beehive-shaped hills that projected above the plateau as one maneuvered to fire rockets at targets on the range.

The Siege of Imphal

During this period the Burmese campaign erupted into a major war with the Japanese intent on capturing India. The campaign started



Beaufighter shadow on the dry lake bed of the Mu River west of Mandalay taken by the author. River beds were used as roads in the dry season.

with a feint in the Arakan followed by two Japanese armies (equivalent to British corps) laying siege to Imphal and advancing to the railhead at Dimapur on the Brahmaputra plain. In the main attack they filtered through the jungle with a minimum of transport (for example, field guns were carried by elephants) and a maximum of stealth. They achieved tactical surprise but their plan depended on capturing the large storage depots at Imphal. This they never did because of the fierce resistance of the Indian Army, the supply drop capability of the RAF and the valour of the British 2nd Division at Kohima on the route to the plains of India. In the worst of the siege the Hurribombers based at Tuliuhul and Tamu did not even raise their undercarriage as they bombed the guns overlooking their fields within their traffic circuits. Someone decided Beaufighters could usefully attack the Japanese lorries on roads near the Chindwin River. On the morning of 4 August we got an order to drop everything and get a detachment of half our squadron to Tuliuhul in a hurry. By mid-afternoon Alf and I with a mechanic on board were airborne heading for Imphal. The next day we took off on an offensive patrol.

Our detachment at Imphal had limited success because of the awful weather, maintenance problems and surprisingly limited targets. Alf and I carried out seven sorties in eleven days including two night operations with no moonlight. All patrols were along the roads and railways between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy Rivers. One sortie was aborted because of weather and another because my cannons would not fire. Only one operation was a real success in that we attacked a moving train and a convoy of lorries on the same patrol. Other sorties resulted only in attacks on single military vehicles or rocketing bridges or loco shelters in which the results were inconclusive. At the end of the detachment on the 18 August all the aircraft needed major maintenance which they could not get in Imphal. Alf and I flew to our new base at Chiringa in a Dakota. This airfield was south of Feni and just north of the Burmese border on the Bay of Bengal. The reunion with the rest of the squadron was celebrated appropriately. I flew from that base until I was tour expired at the end of 1944.

Chiringa and Intensive Operations

Chiringa airstrip was in an agricultural area near the base of the first line of hills of the Arakan Yoma and the mess and huts were a half mile west in open fields. From this base, with our endurance of six hours, we could fly south of Moulmein and towards Bangkok up the new railway that was built by prisoners-of-war at such cost to themselves.

The move to Chiringa coincided with some changes in the squadron and our lives. W/C Hills did not return from an operation in late September. S/L Hunt took over temporarily but was nearly tour expired hence W/C George Nottage arrived to command. Crews were tour expired and as many lost. The squadron had a slightly different look but continued the same in essentials. Over the next four months we were heavily engaged in operations as the siege of Imphal was lifted and the British 14th Army broke out into the plains of northern Burma late in the year.

At the squadron there was not much contact with the outside world except for the command newspaper dropped to us from an Anson daily and letters from home that could have been from another planet. We also had a visit from Vera Lynn on an evening I was on operations. We attended in our flying gear and left in the middle to her consternation that anyone would leave her show. Mike's comment was, "Silly cow, why did she show up in khaki slacks and a sweaty shirt, to be like us? She should have been in an evening dress and high heels." Actually, her gear had been lost in transit. She was the only entertainer we saw at the front.

Our work was something else. The four months to the end of the year were filled with intensive operations in southern and eastern Burma, Siam and into present day Laos. During this period Alf and I flew 58 sorties: offensive patrols, intruder operations and radar reconnaissances. This meant a sortie every third day, not counting leave. As we were now among the most experienced of crews we were flight leaders, although many sorties were now carried out by single aircraft. Once we led a rare squadron attack. Altogether we had an effective four months from September to the end of December. During

this period we caused, or shared in, the following damage to the Japanese-run transportation network and other targets: 9 locomotives under steam and 6 goods trains damaged; 30 lorries, 3 staff cars, 2 bulldozers and a gasoline lorry destroyed. We also damaged some 30 other lorries. We attacked 3 coastal freighters and two oil barges, rocketed several bridges, set an oil pipeline on fire and destroyed a cache of oil drums. The damage was real because it was assessed from review of the 5-inch square photos taken by a nose camera while firing the cannons. We also took part in reconnaissance flights to identify radar stations and night time intruder operations near Japanese airfields. Six sorties were aborted because of weather or engine problems. We frequently received minor damage from machine gun or cannon fire, once badly enough to have to crash land at Chiringa. On my last operation I was wounded by a pre-exploded cannon shell from my own guns.

We had no qualms about who the enemy was or how we were contributing to his defeat. We probably had a weaker sense of aiding in the freeing of Burma or the protection of India. You don't ask twenty-year-olds to be philosophers and if you did, they would probably not have been very effective warriors. We did not talk or think about it much but we knew Nazism was evil although at the time the full extent of the depravity was unknown. We also knew the Japanese were aggressors who had been trying to enslave and pillage eastern Asia for more than a decade. Countries like Burma that at first welcomed them, to some degree as a means to end colonialism, were within a year resisting them passively and by guerilla tactics.

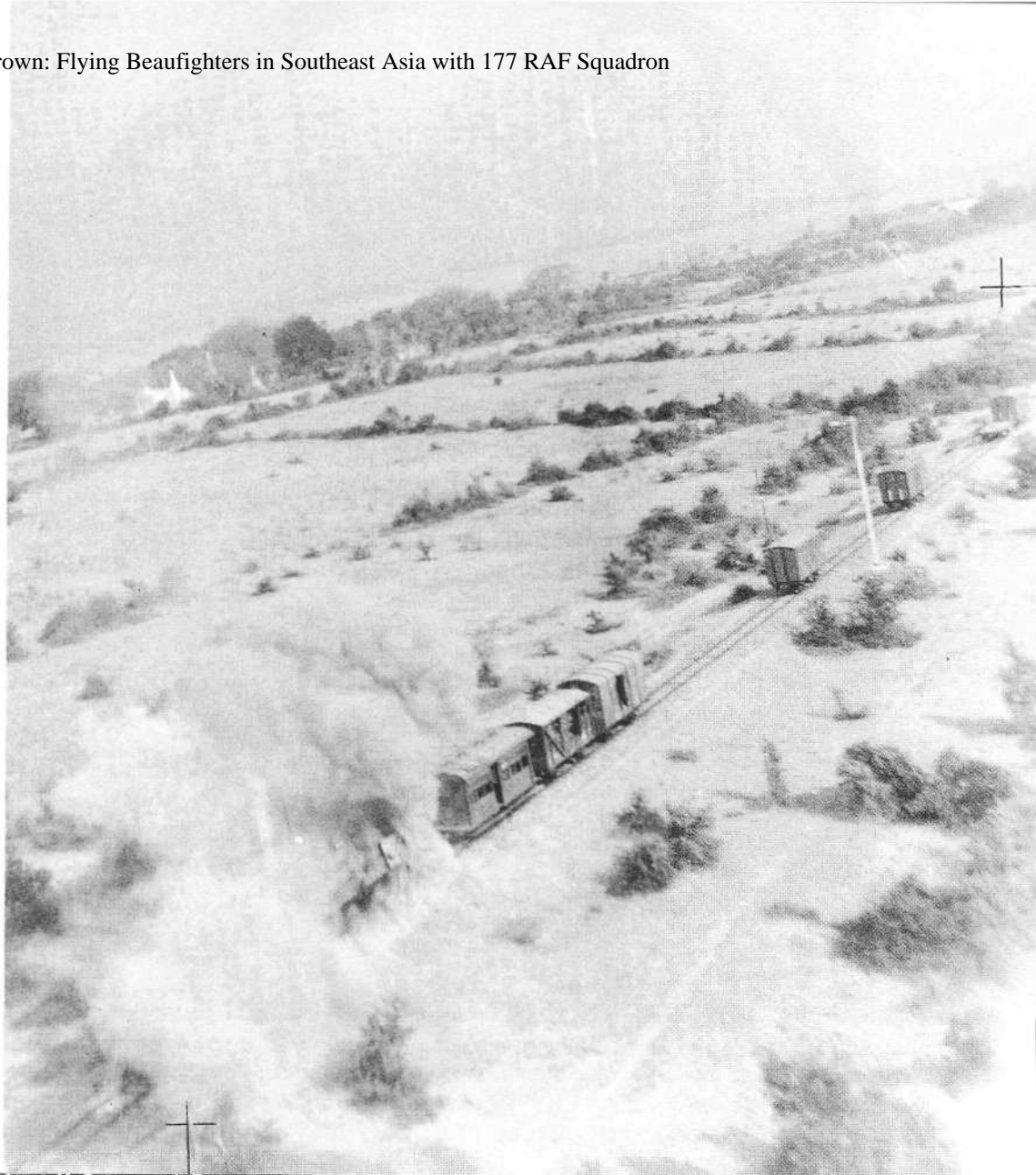
Most sorties during this period were eventful but the following was of special importance. On 10 September a flap developed when a sister squadron encountered and attacked a convoy of coastal freighters with naval escorts south of Moulmein near Kalegawk Island. Our squadron was ordered to press home the attack with armour-piercing rockets as the others rearmed for a third strike. Since the CO was on leave and Hunt had just returned from a dawn attack along the Lashio line, Wills assigned me to lead the squadron. We were quickly briefed and four of us were in the air by mid-morning. We flew in a loose formation down the coast at the wave tops

Train-busting Ops:

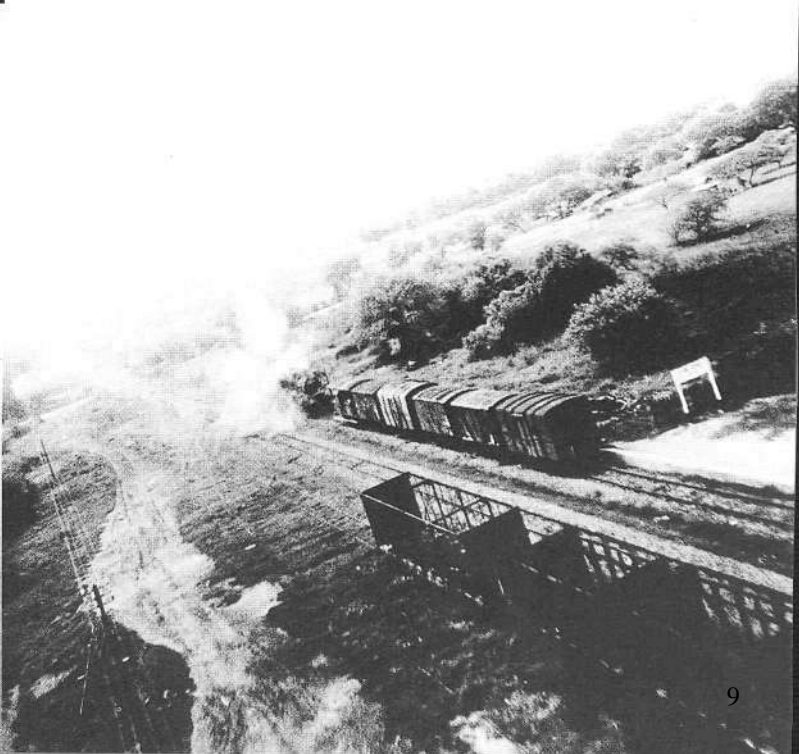
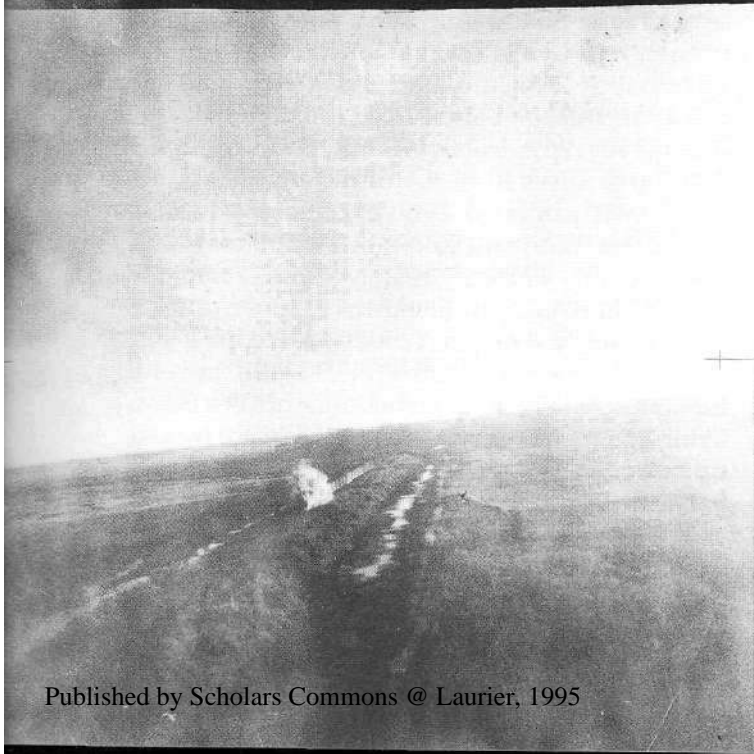
Right: Attack on a train north of Mandalay by F/L Joe Van Nes, DFC, RCAF, 19 April 1944. Note the dispersed rolling stock.

Below left: Train being attacked by the author at last light north of Pegu, 27 November 1944.

Below right: Typical attack on a locomotive by 27 Squadron.



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Advertisement by Bristol in *Flight* magazine in April 1945 illustrating the strikes at Kalegauk Island - a bit unreal - ships too large, dive too steep, no flak and gunsight not in position.

to avoid radar and likewise across the Gulf of Martaban which was like glass. In such conditions flying into the sea is a hazard but running out of fuel was a more serious one as the operation was at extreme range. We arrived off the Island to find one coastal freighter stationary at sea. Attacks were made *en passant* to try to sink it but we continued around the lee of the island where six or seven ships were moored or beached. They opened up with flak as we dove towards them and the results were hard to confirm in the confusion of the melee except we had a number of direct hits. We had no time and little inclination to linger so we formed a loose gaggle and this time cut across the delta flying just above the trees. All our tanks were virtually empty as we landed safely at base after six hours and forty minutes in the air. If this was a Japanese experiment in reinforcement it was one they did not continue but it was scarcely the great victory

in the Andaman Sea as reported in the *Calcutta Statesman* of 13 September 1944.

On another sortie on 27 September we were briefed for a solitary offensive patrol along two branch railways in central Burma that met the main line at Thazi junction. I was wrenched out of a sound sleep at about four in the morning. I donned my light drill flying suit, tied my money belt full of silver Rupees around my waist, put my kukri (Gurkha) knife on my belt, checked for my goulee (ball) chit and silk escape map and grabbed my leather helmet which I had for months laid aside in favour of earphones. The chit, money and map were aids for escape if you survived a crash landing in Burma; no one thought seriously about parachuting out of a Beau, flying like we did along the deck. We were picked up by a 1500-weight truck for a cool, jolting ride to the hard standing of our Beau, "E". I drank a

sickly sweet cup of tea in a dirty enamel mug given to me by a cheerful irk (mechanic) and took part in some light banter; strapped on my parachute and climbed the ladder behind the cockpit, grabbed the bars and swung like tarzan into my seat. This was formed by a deflated dingy attached to the chute in which the gas bottle invariably cut into one's ass. When Alf was ready I fired up the engines, did the cockpit check which was A-OK, waved away the chocks and quickly taxied out to the end of the strip. After the vital action check was completed we charged down the runway, tail up in the darkness, lifted the wheels and climbed away.

Our route took us close to Mount Victoria (10,018 feet) so we climbed over it and let down toward the Irrawaddy as dawn cracked in the east. We passed close to the 12th century temple city of Pagan, seeing the multitude of domed spires scattered over the plain as silhouettes. Further on, in increasing light, the cone of Mount Popa was black against a brilliant dawn. It was a beautiful clear morning as we picked up the railway before Meiktila. This was a little dodgy as this town was the site of the largest group of airfields in Burma, from which most Japanese sorties were then flown. We skirted the airfields, picked up the railway again and followed it to Thazi junction and then up the branch line climbing into the Shan Plateau toward Taunggyi. Although the weather was perfect in the plain, the plateau was enveloped in solid cloud so we went to our second target which was to stooge around Meiktila and Thazi before following the main line south. We caught two lorries climbing up the mountain road and set them alight, then a bowser (gasoline) truck and a staff car near Meiktila and did the same to them. We had exhausted our ammunition (250 rounds per cannon) soon after we headed south and so I told Alf, "I'm turning onto 270 (west), give me a correction for base." Alf said, "I think you should go farther south skipper." By then I had turned and was speeding above the scattered palms and acacias and continued stubbornly. Alf was right. Within seconds I flashed over an empty revetment (blast shelter) and saw a minor grass airstrip ahead which was well south of the main group. At the same time light flak started coming up at us so I began jinking among the trees, throwing maps and loose gear flying around the cockpit. We were hit by numerous bullets and exploding

shells. One blew up Alf's radio in his face and another caused black oil to pour out of the left engine nacelle. Thinking it was engine oil I had to start climbing to give us a chance of getting home on one engine. As soon as I did black explosive puffs of heavy flak started busting around us. The oil plume had stopped quickly and I realized it was hydraulic fluid not the engine oil so I dived to the deck again and flew an erratic course out of the area. There were either no Oscars at Meiktila or they did not find us for we continued with our battered craft over the mountains to Chiringa. It was difficult to assess the damage in the air - we had no radio and no hydraulics, but both of us were unscathed. I made a pass down the runway to indicate I had no landing gear or flaps, came around again and approached as slow as I could while still trying to grease her onto the grass. It went not too badly except we struck a plank roadway which caused more damage than necessary. My head crashed into the gunsight but it only hurt and did not break the skin. Thank goodness for the fluke of switching back to a helmet. We had 37 bullet and shell holes in 'E' but she lived to fly again. At the debriefing I was given hell by Wills for not avoiding the roadway, and I gave myself hell for not paying attention to Alf, but mostly I was thankful we survived. This became more poignant later that same day as two of my better friends, F/O A J. Ede and F/O Mac MacKay, did not return from their sorties.

Our next job on 1 October was completely different but equally hazardous. We were off before dawn again but there was no moon because of cloud at the end of the monsoon. We entered the crud at 500 feet and were never out of it all the way to our target. We were supposed to patrol the Irrawaddy and so we let down gradually on dead reckoning heading south along what we hoped was going to be the river valley. We had no H2S radar so we groped for contact and hoped it was gentle. We came out of cloud at about 500 feet above the river alright but wildly off our estimated position. It could have been a disaster. A stiff wind was blowing from the south and the river was crowded with small boats under sail going upstream. I remember one flew a large Union Jack. They were not military targets even though they might have been carrying Japanese supplies. Shortly after we were driven down to mast height by cloud so we aborted and climbed

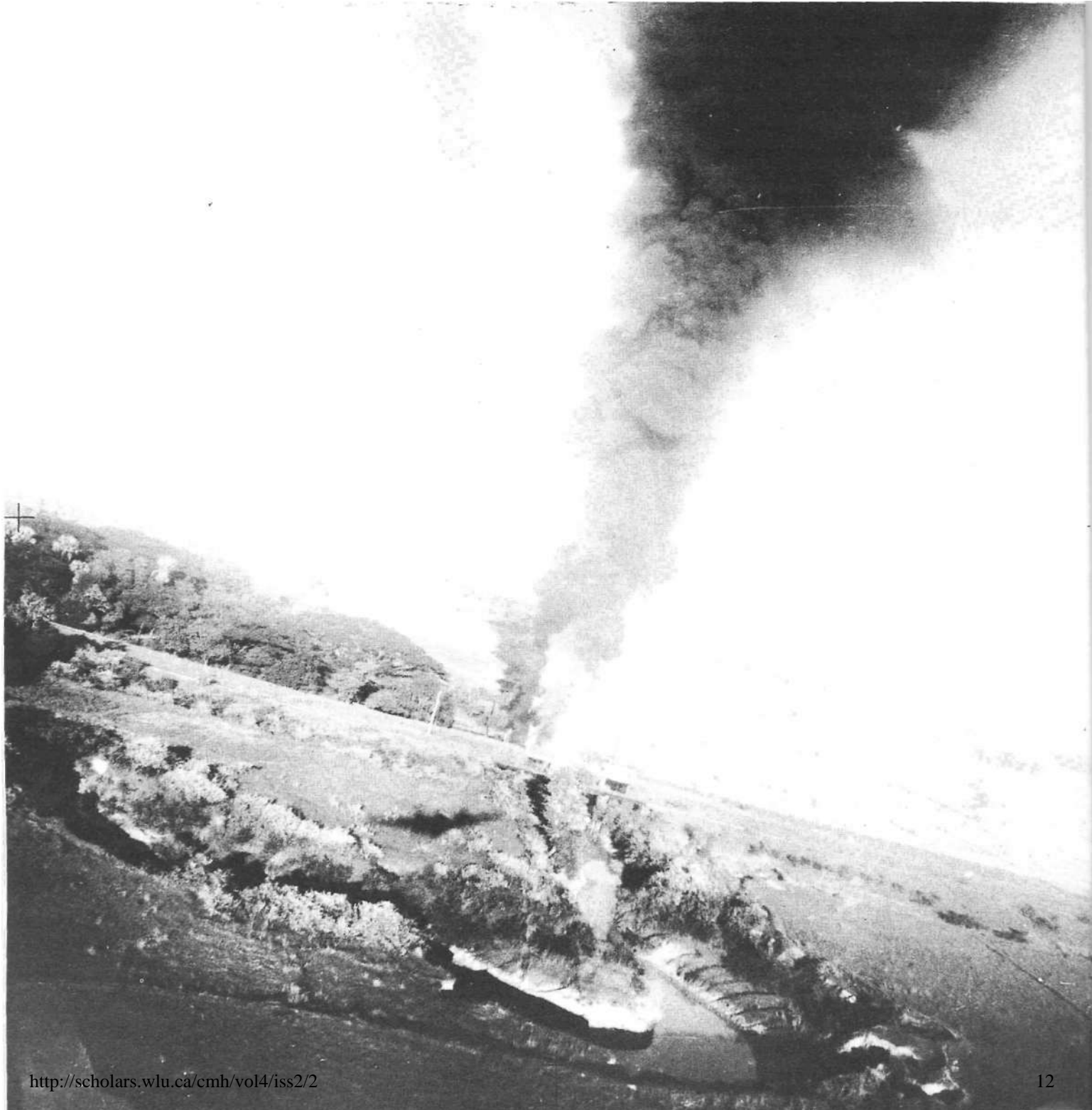
away and set course for home, again flying entirely in cloud.

Another offensive patrol on 27 November was characteristic of many successful ones. We were off two hours before dusk to patrol the main line at last light from Toungoo to Pegu near Rangoon. We encountered two trains already under way and damaged them severely as they emitted clouds of

steam and one freight car was set on fire. We also destroyed a staff car before turning for home where we arrived after a total time aloft of five hours.

A patrol on 15 December was notable because we set the oil pipeline to Rangoon on fire where it crossed a small stream at Okkan near Rangoon.

Oil pipeline set afire by author at Okkan, just north of Rangoon, 15 December 1944.



The final sortie of my tour was on 28 December. It was similar to that of 27 November except it was flown entirely at night. We caught a train pulling out of Pegu and attacked it repeatedly by moonlight while tracers from heavy machine guns sprayed towards us from the train. Suddenly there was an explosion under my feet and I banked away knowing I had been wounded in the legs. At the time I thought it was enemy fire but it was a pre-exploded shell from one of my own cannons. We set course for home with me unable to tell how bad my injury was and Alf unable to get into a position to help. My left knee and right calf were hit and my pants became soaked with blood. I removed my feet from the rudder pedals and flew on the stick all the way home with a clear sense the bleeding had stopped and it could not be too bad. On approaching base I tried gingerly to raise my feet to the pedals to land but initially could not move the right one. Actually my boot had filled with blood, overflowed and congealed around the sole. A small additional effort freed it and I felt foolish at my fright. The landing went alright and I was quickly attended to. Initially the MO thought the fragments could be left in my legs but after several days I still could not walk or properly straighten one leg without considerable pain so I was flown to hospital in Chittagong. It turned out both legs had small ragged chunks of shrapnel in the fleshy part of them and the fragments were removed the next day. I then lay in a hospital that had been the Bishop's Palace and the days passed pleasantly enough as we were wheeled out on the terrace overlooking the broad meanders of the river below. My colleagues had provided me with a little medicine to ward off tigers and so when tired of things in the evening one just rolled down the mosquito net and went to sleep. There was no stumbling home in the dark.

I had planned a leave in Darjeeling before my last sortie and when I came out of hospital after a couple of weeks was surprised to find not only was that leave cancelled but I was to get no sick leave. I was back at the squadron for only a couple of days when I started on my last flight. I flew myself in a Harvard to Alipore, Calcutta from where I was taken to a new posting in Ranchi by Beaufighter. I was to become CO of a direct air support control unit with the 14th Army. This was not my idea of how to end a tour of operations with no rest and no leave. The RCAF had a new liaison office in Calcutta and I dropped by to

discuss my lack of leave. This had a dramatic effect in a few weeks but in the meantime I was off to Ranchi. Meanwhile Alf was not yet tour expired and continued in operations.

At Ranchi I acquired a unit of seven men - signallers and riflemen-drivers along with four jeeps and trailers stuffed with equipment. We trained for a couple of weeks and then were loaded on a train for Gauhati on the Brahmaputra plain. From there we took off as a unit driving to Imphal and on down the "highway" towards Army HQ currently at Monywa in the central plains. The Indian Army was rolling down Burma and currently fighting a tank battle at Meiktila. The drive was frustrating because we were stuck in the dust behind a troop of tank transporters on the narrow hill roads. We eventually got free and drove through the dry teak jungles of the plain. On our own, we had to take precautions overnight in our camps by setting guards as Japanese stragglers abounded as well as a few tigers. Seeing the terrain from the ground I had flown over for so long was interesting but I did not relish an army life. I was surprised and pleased to be met at HQ by an irate operations officer holding an immediate posting for me to Bombay to take the first steps on the road home.

At Bombay I had a few days leave before I boarded my ship early. I presented what seemed a normal passenger ticket with a numbered accommodation only to be conducted to a hold with three banks of pipestem berths and room for hundreds. This was an experiment, a troopship in which all the passengers were officers. After a brief inquiry which revealed you had to be a Colonel or equivalent rank to rate a cabin, I and a couple of friends went up on deck to have fun with the smart British officers boarding to this surprise. The trip was made palatable by a number of new and old friends on board including Blondie Newcombe, a former Chindit (Wingate expedition) and member of our squadron who came from Vancouver, Charlie Guiget from Victoria and Don Poaps of Toronto. The trip was mostly notable for the cold stormy weather in the Mediterranean and the sharp attack by two-man subs in the Irish Sea during the last weeks of the war in Europe.

I spent about two months in the UK at Bournemouth, London during VE Day and Warrington near Liverpool. We boarded an old

Cunard liner, *Scythia*, and were treated regally on the voyage to Halifax. Within three months I was a civilian and studying at the University of British Columbia. While there I was presented with the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) I had won while with 177 Squadron. The citation read:

This officer has completed many operations over Burma and Siam. He has attained outstanding results and inflicted most severe damage against enemy technical transport. He has at all times shown the utmost determination and courage in low level attacks. His unfailing keenness and devotion to duty have been most praiseworthy.

Epilogue

While in the UK on the way home I was told Alf "had bought it" on one of his last sorties. This proved not to be true for I got in touch with him by a coincidence in 1971. We correspond at least yearly and meet when I travel to the UK. Alf will not fly, even commercially, since the war. What courage he had then to do his duty so well and without complaining. W/C Hill, who went missing, survived being shot down and was captured by the Japanese. He was one of the "Rangoon Rats" who had such a bad time there. He remained in the RAF after the war and was awarded the DSO. S/L Hunt continued in the RAF and he recognized my brother by name when they were both at the Imperial Staff College in the 1960s. Mike drowned later in the decade in a sailing accident off Scotland. Joe Van Nes is alive and well and living in the Okanagan. The others, alive or dead, I think of frequently in the framework of the time and how courageous, irreverent and cheerful they all were. *Per Ardua Ad Astra*.

These reminiscences are based primarily upon the data in my pilot's logbook which triggered memories. These being dimmed by 47 years, it was helpful to have photographs from our nose and other cameras, as well as a list of squadron personnel, casualties and awards received from

A.H. (Tony) Rieck. Also useful was the principal topographic map we used, "Arakan," at a scale of 1:1 000 000 which covers central Burma. Finally, three books provided references:

Bowyer, Chaz. *Beaufighter at War*. Shepperton, Surrey, U.K.: Ian Allan Ltd., 1976.

Klein, Wilhelm. *Burma, Insight Guides*. Hong Kong: Apa Publications (HK) Ltd., 1983.

Thakin, Nu. *Burma Under the Japanese*. London: MacMillan and Company, 1954.



A. Sutherland Brown, Bombay, March 1945.

After the war, Mr. Sutherland Brown earned a Ph.D. in Geology at Princeton University and subsequently worked as the Chief Geologist on the British Columbia Geological Survey. Now retired, he has recently completed an history of 177 Squadron entitled, *Silently into the Midst of Things*.