CHAPTER 6

FIGHTER SQUADRONS IN 1941

Fighter Command of the Royal Air Force emerged victorious but sadly depleted from the Battle of Britain. In the autumn of 1940, twenty-four of its sixty-two operational squadrons were fit only for operations in quiet sectors, and indeed functioned for some months chiefly as reinforcement pools for the units active in the south and south-east of England. Recovery was rapid during the winter months and, with mounting reserves of aircraft and pilots, a large re-equipment and expansion program was effected so that, should the spring of 1941 bring any repetition of the enemy attempt to prepare for invasion by air attacks on Britain, he could be beaten even more decisively than before. The purely defensive tactics, hitherto necessary to conserve the inadequate stocks of Spitfires and Hurricanes, were also modified, Fighter Command becoming a double-edged weapon designed not only to defend Britain from attack, but capable of extending the struggle for air supremacy over the enemy hinterland. As early as 20th December 1940 two Spitfires carried out a low-level attack on Le Touquet airfield, and as resources grew, and enemy preoccupation in the Mediterranean and the Balkans discounted the threat of invasion, so the initial small-scale offensive sweeps grew in size, until, on 5th March, eighteen R.A.F. fighter squadrons took part in sorties over France within a period of six hours, and on 21st May sixteen fighter squadrons joined in a single patrol.

These offensive tactics were even further extended in June after Germany's attack on Russia, and were then designed not only to seek out and destroy German aircraft but to pin as many Luftwaffe squadrons as possible to western Europe and thus afford indirect help to Russia. The rapid decrease of enemy bombing activity over Britain and around her coasts, also resulted in the release of squadrons previously tied to defensive duties, and during the last six months of 1941 by far the greater part of Fighter Command's potential was devoted to offensive duties either independently or in cooperation with the light day bombers of No. 2 Group, Bomber Command. These operations in the main tended to conform to the following categories, by which code name they will hereafter be mentioned:

Circus—An operation by bombers or fighter-bombers, escorted by fighters and designed primarily to bring enemy fighters into action.

Rhubarb—Small-scale fighter attacks on ground targets.

Ramrod—An operation similar to a Circus, but its principal objective being the destruction of the target. Fighter Ramrods were also flown using cannon fighters instead of bombers.

Roadstead—An operation to escort bombers in diving or low-level attacks on ships, whether at sea or in harbour. Fighter Roadsteads were also flown.

Rodeo—Fighter sweeps over enemy territory without bombers.

Many other requirements including reconnaissance, air-sea rescue duties, special escorts and diversionary patrols had to be fulfilled as day-to-day tasks by
individual squadrons, as well as the standing readiness for defence, but the main pattern was of continuous aggression by day and vigilant defence by night.

Within the planned expansion of Fighter Command, three R.A.A.F. squadrons were formed during 1941, and, although only one of them was actively engaged in the mounting offensive over the Continent, the work of the other two in rear areas helped indirectly to augment the actual strength available for the more spectacular role.\(^1\) Nor can the work of squadrons actually prosecuting the offensive be rigidly analysed, for although, as will become apparent, No. 452 Squadron R.A.A.F. was to play an important and distinguished part in air fighting over the English Channel and France, it flew as merely a sub-section of a wing, which itself might have from day to day any one of several distinct duties, all equally necessary for the success of any one of the types of operation, but which gave varying chances of engaging enemy aircraft. Thus, although the incidents and victories which resulted from courage, skill and opportunities well taken naturally form the main theme of any purely Australian history of these events, yet the wider picture of the gradual struggle for air supremacy must not be forgotten. The combats of one squadron, however heroic, form only part of the general pattern.

No. 452 Squadron began to form on 8th April 1941 at R.A.F. Station, Kirton-in-Lindsey in Lincolnshire, with sixteen Spitfire Mark I aircraft.\(^2\) By 10th May twenty R.A.A.F. pilots had arrived from operational training units and a vigorous training program was initiated, as most of the Australians naturally had no squadron or operational experience. The commanding officer, Squadron Leader Dutton,\(^3\) and the two flight commanders, Flight Lieutenants Finucane\(^4\) and Douglas,\(^5\) were all R.A.F. officers and their painstaking and inspiring work during this formative period undoubtedly contributed largely to the fine record later achieved by the squadron. Within six weeks from the date of formation No. 452 became defensively operational on 22nd May 1941. Although at first all ground staff personnel were supplied by the R.A.F., these were gradually replaced as the necessary tradesmen arrived from Australia, and when, on 15th June, Squadron Leader Bungey arrived to take over command from Dutton, No. 452 was predominantly Australian in character. During the period 22nd May-11th July in an almost unbroken spell of good weather 189 operational patrols were carried out, but although on two occasions single enemy Ju-88’s had been seen in the distance neither

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\(^1\) In Jun 1941 Fighter Cd had 84 squadrons.

\(^2\) With two as initial reserve.

\(^3\) W Cdr R. G. Dutton, DSO, DFC, 39072 RAF. 111 and 145 Sqns RAF; comd 452 Sqn and 19 Sqn RAF 1941; 141 Sqn RAF; comd 4 Ferry Control RAF 1943-44; SASO 249 Wing RAF 1944; comd 512 Sqn RAF 1945, 525 Sqn RAF 1945-46. Regular air force offr; of Sanderstead, Eng; b. Hatton, Ceylon, 2 Mar 1917.


could be intercepted. The only encounter with the enemy was an unhappy one when a Spitfire approaching at dusk to land at North Coates was shot down by an enemy fighter. These operational patrols and many training formation flights gave the pilots experience and confidence in their aircraft (now changed to Spitfire Mark IIA), while frequent gunnery exercises further developed the fighting capabilities of the squadron, so that by early July it was judged ready for offensive duties.

Meanwhile, on 16th June a second R.A.A.F. Spitfire squadron had begun to form at Baginton in Warwickshire. Again the commanding officer, Squadron Leader Brothers, his two flight commanders, and all ground personnel were supplied by the R.A.F., while the majority of pilots were Australians trained under the Empire Air Training Scheme. By the beginning of August No. 457 Squadron R.A.A.F. was fully operational and moved to Jurby on the Isle of Man. From Jurby and the neighbouring airfield at Andreas patrols and convoy escorts were flown in the Irish Sea, monotonous routine flying unrelieved by any contact with the enemy. On the few occasions when the ever-waiting Spitfires were scrambled to intercept unidentified aircraft they invariably proved to be friendly. These operations, though personally unsatisfying to the pilot, were the lesser of the two tasks No. 457 performed during its stay on the Isle of Man from August 1941 to March 1942. To an increasing extent it acted as a school squadron for Spitfire pilots, and besides training a number of Canadians and Englishmen it supplied operational R.A.A.F. pilots to keep No. 452 fully manned, and also sent some pilots to the Middle East. Although experienced pilots were repeatedly withdrawn No. 457 grew to maturity during this phase, and with the arrival of 110 R.A.A.F. ground staff in October and November 1941 became almost entirely an Australian squadron.

The experience of No. 452, however, was vastly different for it was to be welded together and shaped in the heat of constant operations and combats. Its first offensive engagement on 11th July was undertaken from Kirton-in-Lindsey and necessitated refuelling at West Malling. As part of No. 12 Group Wing supporting a Circus operation, the R.A.A.F. pilots rendezvoused with other fighter wings over Manston at 2.35 p.m. and then crossed the French coast a little to the east of Dunkirk at 2.45. Over Poperinghe No. 12 Group Wing split up into sections of four aircraft in line astern and swept towards Cassel, with the Australians at 18,000 feet to the rear slightly behind No. 266 and No. 65 Squadrons R.A.F. At about 3 p.m., near St Omer, No. 452 was attacked by eight Me-109's diving from port-quarter astern. Finucane warned the Australians of the enemy approach, and, their leader having overshot, Finucane followed the Messerschmitt in its dive and shot it down with a short burst of machine-gun fire at close range. None of the remaining pilots could get into an attacking position, and, being split up, the Aus-

*W Cdr P. M. Brothers, DSO, DFC, 37668 RAF, 32 and 257 Sns RAF; comd 457 Sqn 1941-42, 602 Sqn RAF 1942; W Ldr RAF Stn Tangmere 1942-43; comd RAF Sns Milfield, Exeter and Culmhead 1944. Regular air force offr; of Manchester, Eng; b. Prestwich, Lancs, Eng, 30 Sep 1917.
tralians made for base. They sighted other enemy aircraft over Gravelines, but these were too distant to be intercepted. Sergeant Roberts, who was not seen to fall out of formation, had been shot down in the initial combat but parachuted safely to ground and walked to Calais where he found willing helpers. Guided by French resistance workers he travelled by bicycle and train as far as the border of Unoccupied France. There he was apprehended by French police and interned by the Germans, but escaped after a few weeks in company with another airman and seven soldiers, and again contacted the Underground movement. He was finally guided over the Pyrenees into Spain, and was repatriated to England via Gibraltar during October.

Minor routine patrols continued from Kirton-in-Lindsey until 21st July when No. 452 learnt with satisfaction that it was transferring to Kenley in No. 11 Group, and therefore in future would be constantly engaged on offensive operations. On 22nd July the squadron joined No. 602 Squadron R.A.F. in a reconnaissance sweep from St Valery to Le Tréport and the following day operated twice as target-supporting squadron for a Circus operation, without meeting any opposition leading to conclusive combat. On 24th July, however, while forming, with No. 602, the escorting wing for bombers making the second attack that day on Cherbourg, No. 452 was challenged during the withdrawal. Some fifteen miles north of Cherbourg two Me-109 fighters dived steeply on the Australians' starboard section, but Flying Officer Humphrey, who had recently joined the squadron, quickly destroyed one of them and no further attacks resulted. The remainder of the month passed quietly, for only two major offensive sweeps were mounted and both proved uneventful.

August, however, ushered in a period of great activity for Fighter Command, bad weather alone restricting operations. Circus operations were flown repeatedly, and, as the role of No. 452 in these operations was constantly changing, some brief description of a typical Circus may help in the interpretation of their patrols. The nucleus of a Circus was a box, normally of six light bombers, which although they actually bombed the allotted tactical target, were primarily designed to cause enemy fighter reaction. The bombers were escorted to the target by two fighter wings each of three squadrons, one wing acting as close escort and the other as high cover. Near the target a target-support wing would join company to deflect enemy attacks at a distance, and, failing opposition, to make gun-fire attacks on the target itself. On the way home a rear-support wing would take over prime responsibility for beating off any enemy pursuers. Thus a minimum of twelve squadrons was engaged in every Circus operation while additional squadrons might patrol the route shortly before the main formation, and “mopping-up” squadrons sweep the same area immediately after the operation to catch German fighters still in the air. The
Kenley Wing to which No. 452 belonged played some part in most of these August Circuses, and the Australians, who were slowly re-equipping with Mark V Spitfires armed with two 20-mm cannon and four machine-guns, showed remarkable proficiency in combat against German fighters, although the sorties on which their greatest personal victories were gained were not necessarily the most successful operations as a whole.

The month began well on 3rd August when No. 452 led No. 602 on an evening sweep in the Gravelines-St Omer-Ambleteuse area. At 7.20 p.m. five Me-109Fs made a very spiritless attack on the leading section, but Finucane and Pilot Officer Eccleton\(^6\) each claimed to have shot down one of the enemy. Soon afterwards another eighteen Messerschmitts were seen milling around in a loose circle and Finucane led the squadron to attack, himself claiming another enemy aircraft probably destroyed, but other individual combats were inconclusive and the Australians finally withdrew. A Circus operation on 5th August was abortive due to adverse cloud conditions over France; a Channel patrol the following day provoked no enemy reaction, but on 7th August No. 452 engaged in two successful Circuses. In the morning the Australians were part of the close escort to six Blenheims attacking St Omer, and in the afternoon part of the high cover to a similar force bombing an electric power house at Lille Sequedin, and though they themselves had no combats, the target-support squadrons in each case achieved victories.

On 9th August No. 452 had better fortune for it was detailed as part of the target-support wing for an attack on Gosnay. Flying at 19,000-20,000 feet throughout, the Australians were split up by attacking enemy formations as soon as they crossed the French coast at Mardick at 11.11 a.m. Red and Yellow sections led by Finucane and Pilot Officer Thorold-Smith\(^1\) were first engaged by about thirty Me-109’s, after which dog-fights developed all over the sky and a total of 100 enemy aircraft were estimated to be in action against the whole wing. A confused but lively combat continued all the way to the target and back to the French coast, No. 452 claiming five enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of three Spitfires and damage to another, which, although it had its airscrew shot away, successfully reached Lympne in Kent. Finucane whose prompt reaction and leadership during the initial attack gave the starboard sections (Red and Yellow) a great tactical advantage, shot down one Messerschmitt and shared with Thorold-Smith and Sergeant Chisholm\(^2\) in the destruction of two more. Chisholm also joined Pilot Officer Lewis\(^3\) in shooting down a fourth aircraft and Pilot Officer Truscott\(^4\) accounted for the fifth.

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\(^2\) F-Lt K. B. Chisholm, MC, DFM, 402159; 452 Sqn. Dental student; of Petersham, NSW; b. Sydney, 22 Dec 1918.


Both Lewis and Truscott, who had followed their victims down to low level, machine-gunned ground targets in Boulogne from which heavy anti-aircraft fire had been experienced while the wing crossed the coast.

On 12th August No. 452 took part in two of three Circuses flown that day to divert enemy fighters from the Cologne area, where Bomber Command intended to mount a heavy daylight attack; and two days later the Kenley squadrons acted as close-escort wing to Blenheims bombing the E-boat base at Boulogne, but these operations passed off uneventfully.5 Early on 16th August during a sweep by the Kenley and Biggin Hill Wings over northern France, Finucane saw eight enemy fighters diving to attack No. 485, so he quickly climbed from his own formation, intercepted one of the enemy, and shot it down. None of the Australians claimed any success, but they had a further chance to distinguish themselves the same evening when Kenley Wing flew as close escort to bombers attacking St Omer. About fifty enemy aircraft were seen, and as the Circus was recrossing the French coast, Messerschmitt attacks penetrated the outer screen, and No. 452 became engaged in a short but hot battle, which is succinctly described in Finucane’s combat report:

I was 452 sqdn leader. We were top cover to 602 and 485 sqdns. A number of enemy aircraft were sighted on way to the target. On the return from the target 10-15 enemy aircraft were sighted diving down on the rear of 602 squadron. I dived down and intercepted a Messerschmitt 109. The attack was broken up, Red 2 (Sgt E. B. Tainton6 402009) and Yellow 2 (Chisholm) followed and we carried out a few attacks without result. About 15 miles north-east of Boulogne a number of enemy aircraft were sighted. These were attacked and I gave a three second burst to the rear one, a Messerschmitt 109F from about 75 yards on a quarter attack. The enemy aircraft went down with smoke and flames coming from it. Meanwhile Tainton and Chisholm had become separated from me. The bulb in my sight went unserviceable and whilst I was changing it, I was hopped on by two Me-109’s. Tainton warned me and I attacked rear one without any sight. I did a full beam attack and from ten yards range blew his tail unit clean off. On my port side Tainton attacked a Me-109E and sent it down in flames. Chisholm attacked a Me-109 from quarter astern and was in turn attacked by three Me-109’s. I warned him he was being shot at and whilst doing so observed his enemy aircraft going down which crashed in a field. Soon afterwards I saw a Spitfire shoot down a Me-109 which crashed into the ground and the Spitfire was later identified by me as Chisholm’s. I and other members of the squadron also saw a Me-109 crash just inside the coast on the return journey. It left a long trail of smoke behind it and the enemy aircraft shot down by P/O Truscott.

In addition to the six Messerschmitts claimed above, Sergeant Stuart7 also destroyed one of the fifteen enemy aircraft which made the opening attack on No. 602, his victim being seen to crash by Truscott, and all the other Australian pilots made attacks in the general mêlée. The most satisfactory aspect was that on this occasion No. 452 suffered no loss for this brilliant achievement, while their combat tactics had improved.

Two more Circuses followed on 18th August, in the morning uneventfully against Fives-Lille and in the afternoon against Marquise, when four

5 At the time 452 RAAF, 485 RNZAF and 602 RAF Sqns formed the Kenley Wing.
7 F-Lt A. R. Stuart, 402141; 452 Sqn. Accountant; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 28 Sep 1918.
enemy fighters dived to attack the Australians from above. Only Finucane was able to fire a short burst at one of the attackers, the speed they had attained in their dive enabling them to escape. Much heavier opposition was encountered the following day however when Kenley Wing acted as high escort cover for Blenheims attacking Gosnay power-station. Squadrons proceeded in sections, line abreast, No. 452 to port at 20,000 feet, No. 485 to starboard at 17,000 feet and No. 602 leading in the centre at 15,000 feet. As soon as the French coast was crossed enemy aircraft, finally thought to aggregate about 100, began to converge on the Circus. Before reaching the target one Messerschmitt dived to attack Pilot Officer Willis who was slightly wounded, and with a damaged aircraft forced to break formation and return to base. Truscott, however, who had profited from the previous day’s experience, half-rolled and dived after the Messerschmitt and, opening fire at 100 yards’ range, saw a section of the enemy’s port wing fly off, after which it dropped vertically into cloud at 4,000 feet apparently out of control. Truscott rejoined the squadron which was hotly beset, continuous enemy attacks splitting up the sections which fought their way back from the target in defensive circles. Two Australians were shot down and Douglas had his Spitfire badly holed, but Finucane leading Red Section to intercept enemy attacks as they developed, shot down one aircraft observed to crash in France, and probably destroyed another last seen low down over the English Channel.

An air-sea rescue search on 21st August and an offensive fighter sweep on 24th August provoked no reaction, but enemy fighters again rose in strength to oppose a Circus attack on St Omer airfield on the evening of 26th August. After crossing the French coast, the Kenley squadrons acting as high cover were attacked continually, both on the way to the target and while withdrawing, by Messerschmitts which dived in threes and sixes out of the sun. The Australians continued to escort the Blenheims which were unharmed, but Douglas and Stuart each claimed victories over enemy aircraft which ventured too close, both Messerschmitts being left smoking in uncontrolled vertical dives. Early next morning the same target was again nominated, but the bombers failed to make rendezvous, so the Kenley, Northolt, Tangmere and Biggin Hill Wings commenced an independent sweep over the Pas de Calais. They were recalled soon after crossing into France at 7.12 a.m., but contact with the enemy had already begun, and, in running fights which continued half way back to England, Finucane and Thorold-Smith each shot down two Me-109’s, all four being seen to fall in the sea.

Three more Circus operations and air cover to light naval units in the Channel gave no further opportunity during August for No. 452 to engage the enemy, but it had already created a remarkable record for a squadron so recently formed and composed almost entirely of new-fledged pilots. It was credited by contemporary assessments with twenty-two enemy aircraft destroyed and a further three probably destroyed, the highest score

*F-O W. D. Willis, 400166; 452 Sqn. Clerk; of Canterbury, Vic; b. South Yarra, Vic, 26 Apr 1917. Killed in action 18 Sep 1941.*
that month in Fighter Command, and although almost half of these successes fell to Finucane, yet with every engagement the Australians were profiting from experience and brilliant leadership, and taking an increasing part in the fighting themselves.\footnote{The full "score" of aircraft destroyed by 452 Sqn to the end of Aug 1941 was: F-Lt B. E. Finucane, 10; Sgt K. B. Chisholm, 3; P-O R. E. Thorold-Smith, 21; P-O K. W. Truscott, 2; Sgt A. R. Stuart, 2; F-Lt A. G. Douglas, RAF, 1; F-O A. H. Humphrey, RAF, 1; P-O W. D. Eccleton, 1; Sgt E. B. Tainton, 1; P-O D. E. Lewis, 1.} The general air struggle continued unabated, and on 2nd September No. 452 had a busy day. Two sorties on convoy patrol and a "scramble" to intercept an aircraft eventually identified as friendly, were followed late in the forenoon by a Roadstead attack on shipping near Ostend. Three Blenheims and a few Hurricane bombers comprised the striking force and were escorted by a wing consisting of Nos. 242, 452 and 485 Squadrons. Ship and shore anti-aircraft defences were extremely active and on the approach one of the Blenheims was shot down. The other bombers, however, claimed the sinking of a 5,000-ton vessel and a small anti-aircraft "flakship". As the formation withdrew Willis saw one Blenheim returning at sea-level without escort. Accordingly he and Stuart broke away to protect it as its slipstream was churning up the water, leaving a long white trail which was bound to attract enemy fighters. Within two minutes a pair of Messerschmitts arrived to attack but both were intercepted and shot into the sea. The Spitfires then returned independently having lost sight of the Blenheim.

A successful Circus operation against Mazingarbe power station on 4th September, though uneventful for No. 452, resulted in other squadrons shooting down ten enemy aircraft and claiming an additional ten as probably destroyed. A fairly long period of bad weather then intervened and kept all fighter squadrons virtually grounded until 16th September. A small amount of training during which No. 452 lost two of its new pilots who collided in mid-air, and an abortive Rhubarb attempted by Douglas and Truscott on 11th September constituted the only flying done by the Australians, who, however, were enabled to overhaul squadron organisation, a large proportion of the R.A.F. ground crews having recently been replaced by relatively newly-trained R.A.A.F. personnel. When flying resumed on the 16th No. 452 joined in a twin-wing sweep and the following day took part in two Circuses, one of them on an unusually large scale. The morning attack on Mazingarbe, which was becoming a routine target, was made by twenty-three Blenheims supported by no less than twenty-five fighter squadrons, and the afternoon attack on the normal scale was directed against Marquise. On none of these patrols did the Australians meet any opposition, but their turn came on 18th September when detailed with Nos. 485 and 602 as close escort to twelve Blenheims attacking Rouen.

The Kenley Wing formed up correctly but, on joining the bombers over Beachy Head at 2.30 p.m., found a Hurricane squadron, detailed for a different operation, already in close company with the forward box of six Blenheims. No. 452 took station on the rear box but were pushed away as the Hurricanes began to string out backwards over both forma-
tions, and the Australians were forced into the unwieldy expedition of flying divided into flights in line astern, one either side and above the bombers. Just before the target was reached the left-hand, close-escort squadron closed in and forced “B” Flight of No. 452 up to the top of the escort wing. The bombers turned to starboard after the attack leaving “B” Flight isolated on the outside of the turn. Numerous enemy fighters were above and the pre-arranged top cover was not in sight with the result that by a continuous series of attacks from above the Messerschmitts drew “B” Flight back from the rest of the fighter “beehive” and held them at a great numerical disadvantage. From this point a series of dog-fights ensued, “A” Flight moving across to aid “B” Flight but the whole squadron eventually becoming split into individuals or pairs. In opportunist attacks, Thorold-Smith, Chisholm, Douglas and Truscott each destroyed one enemy aircraft, while Truscott claimed another as probably destroyed and Sergeant Wawn\(^1\) two as damaged. Although Bungey made no claim, he fired several times at enemy aircraft and helped to deflect the initial assault on “B” Flight. Four Australians failed to return from this operation fought under such difficult circumstances.

No. 452 was again out in strength on 20th September when three coordinated Circus were mounted against railway and shipbuilding yards in northern France. The Kenley Wing led by Bungey was detailed as high cover over Abbeville and again met very determined opposition from some fifty Messerschmitts as the bombers neared the target in clear visibility. No. 452 broke up into sections to counter successive attacks and a general mêlée ensued during which Finucane claimed three, Truscott two and Chisholm and Sergeant Dunstan\(^2\) each one enemy fighter destroyed, while Truscott damaged a further Messerschmitt and Sergeant Elphick\(^3\) damaged two. On this occasion the squadron’s own losses were not so severe, one Spitfire failing to return. The following day an even more signal victory was gained, when five enemy aircraft were destroyed and two damaged without loss. Kenley Wing was detailed as high cover in an attack on Gosnay but failing to meet the bombers, Bungey led the three squadrons out over Dungeness and into France at Le Touquet. There the wing orbited, still searching for the Blenheims, and finally proceeded towards the target, being shadowed by enemy fighters. At 3.20 p.m., over Desvres a considerable number of Messerschmitts were encountered and for the next ten minutes a furious battle raged commencing at 20,000 feet but in the case of some combats continuing down to ground level. Finucane was again leading scorer with two victories, Truscott, Chisholm and Wawn accounting for the three other enemy aircraft destroyed, while Chisholm and Lewis each damaged one.

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\(^1\) F-Lt C. N. Wawn, DFC, 400163. 111 and 92 Sqns RAF, 452 and 76 Sqns. Grazier; of Langkoop, Vic; b. Melbourne, 5 Nov 1910.

\(^2\) Sgt B. P. Dunstan, 1256932 RAF. 452 Sqn, 41 Sqn RAF. Plumber’s mate; of Torquay, Eng; b. Chelsea, Vic, 1 Sep 1920. Killed in action 12 Feb 1942.

\(^3\) F-Lt J. R. H. Elphick, 402157. 111 Sqn RAF, 452 and 76 Sns, 113 and 115 Air-Sea Rescue Flights. Bank clerk; of Lismore, NSW; b. Cootamundra, NSW, 28 Feb 1919.
These three days of magnificent successes were again followed by a lull in activity. Fog and bad weather interrupted operations until 26th September when an uneventful Rhubarb was flown by four aircraft, and only one more Circus was attempted during the month, when, although the target was Amiens marshalling yards, no enemy opposition was met. Squadron spirits remained high for No. 452 was again pre-eminent among Fighter Command squadrons with eighteen enemy aircraft claimed destroyed during the month, and the posting of Douglas to command a squadron, an honour richly deserved by his zeal for training and his skill in leading "B" Flight, permitted the elevation of an Australian to his place. Truscott, whose determination and judgment had become increasingly apparent with every engagement, was chosen. It was realised that with the onset of winter it would be increasingly difficult because of adverse cloud and general weather conditions to maintain Circus operations on the same scale as in previous months, but the Australians, nevertheless, keenly anticipated opportunities for further battle. The pilots appreciated that every time the enemy was attacked over his own vital air space, he was losing some measure even of his local air supremacy and consequently his ability to exercise his air power to the full. This cold satisfaction mingled in their hearts with the springing feeling of joy, pride, and personal endeavour which lies at the root of all individual combat. There was no doubt that the squadron had reached full maturity and even replacement pilots quickly became imbued with this élan, the precious corporate spirit of daring and tenacity which at the cutting edge of battle denotes the true fighter. Much of this elemental temper had been absorbed unconsciously from the experienced courage of Bungey and from Finucane's instinctive battle sense, but the fire innate in all of them burned brighter with every opportunity.

The meteoric rise to prominence of No. 452 owed much, as has been stated, to the complete confidence which the pilots placed in Bungey's training and administrative leadership. They were fortunate, too, in coming fresh to the battle at a time when Fighter Command was firmly seizing the initiative, and when the tactical situation was favourable. Raw as they were initially, these men were the pick of the first fruits of the E.A.T.S. and, partly self-consciously but entirely whole-heartedly, they regarded themselves as the vanguard of Australian effort in the air. It was undoubtedly Finucane who turned these other assisting factors into the final success by which so brilliant a fighting team was rapidly created. Young and yet a veteran of the Battle of Britain, light of heart but serious minded, eloquent only in action, utterly fearless, and of strong imaginative character, he easily evoked the best that lay within his apt Australian pupils. He had studied the technique of combat flying very deeply and in addition to his practical leadership, gave lucid and brilliant explanations of tactics which were then meticulously practised until the Australians acquired something of his own instinctive reactions. He was very loyal

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4 In contrast was the unhappy experience at this time of 453 Sqn in Malaya. See D. Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force, 1939-42* (in this series).
to his companions and had too the generosity and absence of bitterness of the fighting man. He left a vivid commentary on the personal experience and feelings of fighter pilots when he said at this time:

Before going off on a trip I usually have a funny feeling in my tummy, but once I'm in my aircraft everything is fine. The brain is working fast, and if the enemy is met it seems to work like a clockwork motor. Accepting that, rejecting that, sizing up this, and remembering that. You don't have time to feel anything. But your nerves may be on edge—not from fear, but from excitement and the intensity of the mental effort. I have come back from a sweep to find my shirt and tunic wet through with perspiration.

Our chaps sometimes find that they can't sleep. What happens is this. You come back from a show and find it very hard to remember what happened. Maybe you have a clear impression of three or four incidents, which stand out like illuminated lantern slides in the mind's eye. Perhaps a picture of two Me-109's belting down on your tail from out of the sun and already within firing range. Perhaps another picture of your cannon shells striking at the belly of an Me. and the aircraft spraying debris around. But for the life of you, you can't remember what you did. Later, when you have turned in and sleep is stealing over you, some tiny link in the forgotten chain of events comes back. Instantly you are fully awake, and then the whole story of the operation pieces itself together and you lie there, sleep driven away, re-living the combat, congratulating yourself for this thing, blaming yourself for that. The reason for this is simply that everything happens so quickly in the air that you crowd a tremendous amount of thinking, action and emotion into a very short space of time, and you suffer afterwards from mental indigestion.

The tactical side of the game is quite fascinating. You get to learn, for instance, how to fly so that all the time you have a view behind you as well as in front. The first necessity in combat is to see the other chap before he sees you, or at least before he gets the tactical advantage of you. The second is to hit him when you fire. You mightn't have a second chance.

No. 452 took part in a large-scale sweep over France on 1st October and the next day Kenley Wing took off for an evening Circus operation. The bombers were recalled because of unfavourable weather soon after making rendezvous, but the fighter wings made an offensive sweep. Enemy attacks began over France and a running fight continued several miles out to sea. Finucane's leading section was continuously engaged, he himself claiming one victim, and his No. 2, Sergeant Cowan, another. No further operations took place until 12th October when a special Circus operation was flown, twenty-three Blenheims effectively bombing the docks at Boulogne. No. 452 flew in one of the two wings provided for target support and many individual dog-fights resulted. Truscott damaged two aircraft and Finucane shot down one but Chisholm failed to return.

In Chisholm the squadron lost a pilot of outstanding ability who had contributed greatly to its record of achievements. His subsequent exploits, though outside the battle proper, may serve to indicate the character of these early non-professional pilots. Chisholm parachuted into the sea near Berck-sur-Mer, was picked up by a German launch, and after temporary confinement at various places was sent towards

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6 His identity of interests with the RAAF pilots was very great and he spoke frequently of settling in Australia (as an accountant) after the war. Of Truscott he said: "He came from Melbourne to England and I came from Dublin to England and in the first moment of our meeting the perfect friendship, which will not finish with the war, began." But neither survived.

6 F-Lt R. J. Cowan, 404087. 452 and 75 Sqs; comd 78 Sqn 1945. Clerk; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 13 Jun 1918.
the end of the month to a prisoner-of-war camp at Lamsdorf. Here he met Stuart who had been shot down on 18th September and during the winter they prepared a plan to escape.

In April 1942 they changed identities with two soldiers so that they could join a working party, and soon after, under their new names, were detailed to repair railway lines near Freudental. The prisoners were billeted in an old mill and another fourteen soldiers were enlisted in an effort to escape. This was made early in June through a ventilator beneath the floor boards which had previously been pulled up and loosely replaced. Arrangements to reunite some distance away broke down and Chisholm with two soldiers set out for Prague where they hoped to find help. They walked to Brno, moving only by night, and had great difficulty in obtaining help on the way as the Gestapo were very active in Czechoslovakia after the assassination of Heydrich the Reich "Protector" of Bohemia and Moravia. In the outer suburbs of Brno they sought shelter in a house but were betrayed to the Germans, imprisoned, and finally returned to Lamsdorf. Here while awaiting sentence for his escape, Chisholm by a subterfuge managed to be transferred to the camp hospital and immediately concerted another plan to join a working party near Gleiwitz airfield in the hope of stealing a German aircraft. This plan involved an elaborate second change of identity, this time with a New Zealand soldier, and then, in company with three other pilots and a soldier co-opted because of his knowledge of central-European languages, Chisholm successfully arranged to be included in a working party for Gleiwitz. Before the original plan could be carried out, the absence of the two officers of the party (Wing Commander Bader5 and Flight Lieutenant Palmer6) from the prison hospital led to a widespread search and they were apprehended at Gleiwitz, without, however, Chisholm or the other two conspirators being discovered.

Chisholm now decided to escape into Poland, and on 11th August 1942 he and three others escaped from the Gleiwitz working camp through a boiler room to which they had made a skeleton key. They marched south-east for four nights and then east meeting friendly Poles on the sixth day. For two months they remained on farms near Oswiecim and then were taken to Cracow to the home of a leader of the Resistance Movement. A plan to be taken as medical patients through Slovakia into Hungary and thence to Turkey was prepared but abandoned when an alleged British agent arrived saying he had orders for the party to proceed to Warsaw. Here the four escapers separated, and Chisholm lived from October 1942 until March 1943 in the home of a Polish family while arrangements to pass him across Europe were completed. In April 1943 the Gestapo discovered and arrested key agents of the Warsaw-Paris "underground railway", and finally in July 1943 Chisholm was told that he would have to make his own travelling arrangements, but that he could still be helped with false papers, money, and any necessary disguise.

Chisholm now rejoined one of his original companions and in October met two fugitive Belgian workmen, who, in return for forged rail passes, were to smuggle them to Belgium. While still awaiting new Belgian identity cards, Chisholm's companion was arrested but again Chisholm was not caught. The Belgians abandoned the plan, one taking a job in Warsaw, and the other, having obtained the forged rail pass, going off alone. Undaunted, Chisholm found two Dutchmen willing to join him in the attempt to reach Belgium, but again, before they could start, one of the Dutchmen, while walking with Chisholm, was challenged by police who were checking identity papers. Chisholm threw the policeman into the Vistula, but the Dutchman, whose identity was now known, had to withdraw, and urged the other two to go on alone. Finally on 23rd March 1944 Chisholm and the remaining Dutchman left Warsaw on the military train for Brussels via Berlin. The following

5 Gp Capt D. R. S. Bader, DSO, DFC, 26151 RAF, 19 and 222 Sqn RAF; comd 242 Sqn RAF 1940-41; W Ldr RAF Sin Tangmere 1941. Aviation petrol rep; of London and Doncaster, Yorks, Eng; b. St. John's Wood, London, 21 Feb 1910. On 14 Dec 1931, as result of flying accident, Bader lost both legs, and was discharged from the RAF 30 Apr 1933. On 26 Nov 1939 he rejoined with the rank of flying officer.

day was spent in Berlin visiting cinemas, viewing bomb damage and dining in restaurants; then they rejoined the military train. So far their papers had passed muster, but at Venlo in Holland they were suspect, and so Chisholm and his companion returned to Aachen, where after further delay they crossed the frontier and reached Brussels. After a month a guide was secured to lead them into France and on 10th May they reached Paris. Chisholm stayed with the family of a French policeman until the outbreak of hostilities in Paris between the French Forces of the Interior (Underground Army) and the Germans. He joined the F.F.I. and fought in the streets until Allied forces occupied the city and he was at last able to return to England on 30th August 1944. For more than two years he had by tenacity, effrontery and resilience kept himself free in enemy territory and despite repeated failures as his successive plans neared fruition, had finally surmounted all difficulties and escaped completely.

This odyssey was only beginning when No. 452, on 13th October 1941, engaged in one of its most exciting and successful operations while flying as close escort to four Blenheims in an early afternoon raid against Arques. Five miles from the target a very determined attack was made on the bombers by enemy aircraft and No. 452 received permission to break formation to beat off these attackers. This was done, but as soon as the squadron resumed escort, further attacks developed and the Australians were quickly involved in individual dog-fights during which six Messerschmitts were claimed destroyed and one probably destroyed in addition to three damaged. Truscott and Finucane (each two), Thorold-Smith and Sergeant Emery⁹ were the successful pilots, while Sergeant Schrader¹ claimed the probable. The squadron lost one pilot killed in this action, and in addition Elphick’s Spitfire was hit and he had to bale out near the English coast. Thorold-Smith and Truscott circled over him so that the exact position could be determined by ground radar stations, and he was soon afterwards picked up by an air-sea rescue launch.²

The weather prohibited further operations until 21st October, the day No. 452 moved to Redhill. They still operated as part of Kenley Wing and during a sweep over the Pas de Calais that day Thorold-Smith and Truscott both fired their guns in fleeting engagements with six Messerschmitts but made no claim. One more Circus, and a few attempts to carry out small Rhubarb sorties, followed in the course of the month but resulted in no action. The inclement weather continued into November, and though No. 452 flew to Martlesham on 4th November, Kenley acted as escort to three Tomahawks which were directing the fire of the Dover coastal batteries across the Channel. The Spitfires were at 12,000 feet near Cap Gris Nez when attacked at approximately 2.45 p.m. by some twenty enemy aircraft, the initial dive attack being made by six Messerschmitts. Thorold-Smith turned his section hard to port to engage these and scored effective strikes on one Messerschmitt. Then looking over his shoulder he found a radial-engined Focke-Wulf 190 attacking him from fifty yards

² Aircraft could switch their IFF sets to a special setting, reserved for aircraft in distress, which produced a characteristic response on radar screens.
A section of Spitfires from No. 452 Squadron taking-off from Kenley airfield for France, September 1941.

Pilots of No. 452 Squadron on return from a fighter sweep over France in September 1941. Facing the camera, left to right: F-Lt B. E. Finucane, Sgt K. B. Chisholm, Sqn Ldr R. W. Bungey. Finucane's Spitfire (bearing shamrock) is in the background.
on the fine port quarter, having already shot down his No. 2. Continuing
the turn to port Thorold-Smith pulled up firmly into a very steep climbing
turn, throttled back and flicked into a vertical turn in the opposite direc-
tion, so that the enemy was then below, slightly ahead and crossing him
from port to starboard. He did a diving starboard beam-to-quarter attack,
opening fire in short bursts at 300 yards, and closing to 200 yards when
pieces began to fly from the FW-190's engine cowling and tail unit; it
went into a vertical dive leaving a black smoke trail. Thorold-Smith
followed down to 5,000 feet in case this was a feint breakaway but saw
the enemy crash into the sea about eight miles north-west of Cap Gris
Nez. Only one FW-190 apparently was present but Truscott and Bungey
each claimed a victory against Me-109's, while other pilots, unable to see
conclusive results from apparently effective attacks, claimed another three
as damaged. Two Australians failed to return.

No. 452 was again in action two days later when a Circus operation
was projected against Lille. Confusion was caused among the supporting
fighters when six of the twelve Blenheims turned back en route, and the
remaining bombers attacked a factory near Mons instead of going to
Lille. Kenley Wing attempted to form high cover to a rather muddled
bee-hive formation, and while returning towards the French coast the star-
board section of No. 452 was attacked. Truscott, who was leading, pulled
round hard to meet this and fired from very short range at the foremost
Messerschmitt achieving cannon hits in the engine and around the cockpit.
This enemy aircraft seemed to explode and dropped in an uncontrolled
vertical dive. Truscott's attention was immediately taken by other enemy
attackers and he fired without apparent effect at three of them. By this
time he had dropped to the rear of the Circus which had just crossed
the coast and he saw two Messerschmitts diving down on two Spitfires.
Warning his comrades, he made to intercept the enemy machines which
broke away to starboard, but he was able to follow the second one and
firing from dead astern with a five-second burst of cannon fire blew
away the complete tail unit of the enemy which flicked over and went
down vertically. At the same moment he felt his own Spitfire shudder
and saw bursts on the starboard wing, so quickly pulled away to port and
dived out of danger. He made direct for the English coast, but realising
that his petrol supply was failing, climbed to 3,000 feet, when fore-and-
aft control of his aircraft failed. Truscott baled out into the sea, but
was rescued about an hour later with Dunstan who had also been shot
down. Another pilot crash-landed near Gravesend having run out of petrol.

This was the last Circus operation of 1941 engaged in by No. 452.
Coordination of bombers and fighters in bad weather had become pro-
gressively more difficult, and Ramrod and Roadstead operations, in which
Hurricane bombers acted as striking power, replaced the Circuses. Even
these were infrequent as weather severely limited flying, the Australians
joining in only two: the first on 18th November against an alcohol dis-
tillery at Hesdin and the other on 27th November against shipping at
Boulogne.
No large-scale operations of any kind occurred during December, a bitter disappointment to the Australians whose natural anxiety concerning the extension of war to the Pacific needed to be sublimated in action. Protection of mine-layers, convoy escort and one uneventful sweep accounted for most of the 82 operational hours flown, a severe reduction from 137 in November and but a fraction of the 445 during the preceding August. Only one fight resulted, when thirteen Spitfires which were escorting two rescue launches south of Dungeness were engaged shortly after midday on 8th December by FW-190's; while preoccupied with these, a further three Focke-Wulfs dived down to attack, scattering the Spitfires. In the resultant mêlée four of the Australians fired at enemy aircraft without being able to observe results, but Emery failed to return, being last seen chasing an FW-190 with two enemy aircraft on his tail. Although getting somewhat the worse of this fight No. 452 profited from an early encounter with the new enemy fighter which appeared faster both in diving and climbing than the Spitfire, which had hitherto maintained progressive superiority over the various types of Me-109.

While in 1941 Fighter Command was employing its single-engined aircraft to prosecute an increasing offensive over enemy territory, it was still vitally concerned with the defence of Great Britain against enemy air attack by night. The German night offensive which had reached its highest peak in the attacks on London in mid-September 1940, finally settled into the long spasmodic bombing of provincial cities as well as London throughout the winter and spring of 1941. Although, after the attack on Russia on 22nd June, the Luftwaffe night effort was to fall in July below 1,000 sorties, and to fall lower still in succeeding months, this could not be foreseen and the most pressing defensive need early in 1941 was obviously some means of mitigating the severity of night bombing. There was an important expansion in all passive defences (anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, balloon barrages, decoy targets, camouflage, radio interference and jamming) but to provide the most efficacious means of destroying bombers before they reached their objective, more and more night-fighter squadrons were required. In the consequent expansion of Fighter Command, one R.A.A.F. night-fighter squadron was formed on 30th June 1941 according to the provisions of Article II of the Empire Air Training Scheme Agreement of 17th April 1941.³

The pre-conditions of successful combat at night were up to a point the same as those for day fighting: an adequate early-warning system, accurate and up-to-date plots of raids, radio-telephony for direct control (from the ground) of fighters in the air, and finally a satisfactory type of aircraft in sufficient numbers. However, a far greater degree of precision was required. By day any defensive formation up to wing size (thirty-six aircraft) could be controlled as easily as a single aircraft, and an enemy force by day constituted a conspicuous target to be picked

³ This gave precision to the principle stated in Article XV of the main Ottawa Agreement of Dec 1939.
up by any one of the fighter pilots patrolling. At night, however, each single fighter needed to be controlled as a separate unit and directed on to the individual raider, no matter how many fighters or bombers were operating. This problem was resolved in stages mainly by a number of special applications of the radar principle: the ground control interception station (G.C.I.), the airborne aircraft interception set (A.I.) and airborne identification friend-or-foe set (I.F.F.), all of which in varying degrees of perfection were available by mid-1941. The first enabled a ground controller to direct his fighter to the vicinity of a raiding force and put the pilot in a position suitable for interception of a particular enemy aircraft. The A.I. set operator would then obtain a contact on his cathode-ray tube screen and give detailed directions to the pilot to enable him to close and obtain visual sense of the enemy in circumstances of tactical advantage. The I.F.F. set was a device enabling the ground controller to distinguish his fighter from any other aircraft whose presence might be indicated on the ground apparatus, an indispensable condition for controlled interception. Lastly, in 1941, after many difficulties both of design and supply, a satisfactory night-fighter aircraft, which was speedy enough to overtake enemy bombers rapidly, large enough to carry pilot, observer, and the bulky radar apparatus, and an armament of heavy fire power, and possessed a patrol duration of several hours, had at last been found in the Bristol Beaufighter. Originally Blenheims and single-engined fighters had been employed, and later the turret-equipped, single-engined Boulton-Paul Defiant, but each lacked one or more of the essentials of the ideal night fighter and had limited success in action.

Thus when No. 456 Squadron began to form at Valley airfield on the Isle of Anglesey under the command of Squadron Leader Olive on 30th June 1941, a period of rapid development in the organisation and technique of night-fighting was in progress. The squadron was located in No. 9 Group, a quiet area where it could pursue with a minimum of interruption the inevitably slow process of training in such highly-specialised and difficult air operations as night-fighting involved. The first months of No. 456's existence were naturally formative, and at the beginning all aircrew and ground crew were provided by the R.A.F. with the intention of replacing them by R.A.A.F. men as they became available. The original aircraft were Defiants, and as no R.A.A.F. pilots had yet completed courses at No. 60 Operational Training Unit, East Fortune, there was not, as in the case of Nos. 452 and 457, a pool of Australians ready to man the new squadron. R.A.A.F. ground crews totalling 180 men arrived during September 1941, but formed only about half of the full complement, while in the air the squadron remained almost exclusively English. One Australian observer joined during July, sixteen R.A.A.F. gunners in August, eleven R.A.A.F. pilots and gunners during October, but all these required long training, especially when in October Beaufighters began to replace the Defiants and the gunners became redundant until they had been retrained as “Observers, Radio”. 
No. 456 became officially operational in Defiants on 5th September, and thereafter night-fighter patrols on a limited scale were carried out as normal routine. Valley airfield with five long runways and unobstructed approaches was one of the best in Britain and was conveniently situated for the defence of the industrial areas in Lancashire, particularly from raiders approaching up the Irish Sea. With the preoccupation of the Luftwaffe in eastern Europe, however, enemy activity in this area fell away almost to nothing, and No. 456, like No. 457 at Andreas, became acutely conscious that they were in a backward area. No incidents at all occurred during the Defiant patrols, and though the change to Beaufighters and the introduction of radar ground-controlled interception brought promise of more fruitful employment, throughout October, November and December 1941, the Beaufighters continued night operations under sector control in St George’s Channel without any chance of engaging the enemy. This disappointment was heightened on 19th December when sneak raiders attacked a convoy off the coast within sight and hearing of the airfield. Cloud base was down to 200 feet and permission for the Beaufighters to take off was refused, giving a “maddening feeling of helplessness” to the pilots who had sought the enemy fruitlessly in long night vigil, only to be prevented from attacking him when so palpably near at hand. Though uneventful—and briefly dismissed here—these months at Valley were important, for while No. 456 was only slowly assuming an Australian character, and still virtually serving an apprenticeship to the work it would do elsewhere, it represented the necessary insurance against any resurgence of enemy night-bombing. It was as necessary to train and give experience in night-fighter technique to the ground-control organisation as to the aircrew themselves in view of possible developments should Russia be overwhelmed; and this task, though unwelcome to the more ardent spirits, proceeded effectively during this period.