

REPORT
OF
ATTACK ON CONVOY OF LAE

BY
NO. THIRTY SQUADRON
R. A. A. F.

ATTACK ON CONVOY OFF LAE, 3/3/43

BY NO. 30 SQUADRON, R.A.A.F.

1. GENERAL.

The LAE convoy was attacked between 1000 hours and 1020 hours on 3rd March, 1943, by 12 Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron, R.A.A.F. Another Beaufighter watched the operation from a higher level, but took no part in the attack as the pilot, the Commanding Officer of the Squadron, was medically unfit for combat duty.

2. ORDERS.

Only verbal orders were issued to the strike force as the form green was not originated until 0806/3L, received by Wards Signals at 0826/3L, and handed to No. 30 Squadron Operations after take-off.

Aircraft took off on the following information received by telephone from No. 9 Operational Group at 0700/3L:

"One squadron of 16 Bl7's lead in. Assemble at 9000 ft. Cape Ward Hunt. Attack from 7000 ft. each carrying full load of 1000 lb. bombs. One squadron of 8 B25's assemble 8000' Cape Ward Hunt bomb from 3-6000 ft. fully loaded with 500 lb. bombs. One squadron 8 B25's assemble 7000 ft. attack 3-6000 ft. carrying 500 lb bombs. One squadron Beaufighters assemble 6000 feet and straffe as practised. One squadron 8 B25's assemble 6000 feet, carrying 500 lb. bombs, attack at masthead height as practised with Beaufighters. One squadron 12 B25-Cl's assemble 5000 feet masthead attack with 500 lb. bombs. One squadron 15 A20's assemble 4500 feet masthead attack carrying 500 lb. bombs. Top cover of at least 32 P38's".

This was supplemented at 0755/3L by the following:

Rendezvous at Cape Ward Hunt at 0930/L at 6000 feet. Anticraft remain in visual contact on approach to target.

The form green was as follows:

WAR 4 - 61G - 3/3. One squadron Beaufighters carry out co-ordinated attack on enemy convoy last reported position 0650 S. 14800 E. spread over area 15 miles by 5 miles at 0645/3/L. Aircraft rendezvous at Cape Ward Hunt at 6000 feet. Set course from rendezvous at 0930/3/L remaining in visual contact during approach to target. Rally point Cape Waria. Aircraft attack as practised with B25's. Primary target transports first alternative warships second alternative LAE Aerodrome. Fighter cover have command sets on 4895 kc's. Bomber flight leaders will identify and locate themselves relative to target when calling for fighters in any emergency. Enemy convoy protected by fighters. Call signs bomber PEANUTS fighter POPCORN.

The co-ordinated attack had been practised on 28th February, when 4 Beaufighters took part in an attack on the Moresby wreck with Bl7's, B25's and B25-Cl's.

On the previous day a warning order (WAR 49) had been issued for a co-ordinated attack by two bomber forces. This mission in broad outline was similar to the attack carried out at 1000 hours on 3rd March, but was cancelled owing to bad weather. However, this early warning gave crews ample opportunity to become thoroughly acquainted with their role.

3. EXECUTION.

The following aircraft took part in the operations:-

"A" FLIGHT

Al9-8 S/Ldr. R. A. Little, F/O. A. Spooner.
Al9-87 F/O. R. H. Roe, F/Sgt. P. Fiske.
Al9-15 F/O. R. Bradenor, Sgt. F. Anderson.
Al9-10 F/O. R. C. Bennett, Sgt. P. Edwards.
Al9-11 F/O. E. C. Drury, Sgt. D. Beasley.
Al9-24 F/O. L. S. Vial, F/Sgt. R. Nelson.

"B" FLIGHT

Al9-5 F/Lt. R. Uren, P/O. H. Suthons.
Al9-32 F/O. J. T. Sandford, F/Sgt. A. Jaggs.
Al9-38 F/Lt. G. Gibson, Sgt. W. B. Cameron.
Al9-50 Sgt. M. L. Morgan, Sgt. F. Cassidy.
Al9-74 F/Sgt. R. H. Cummins, W/O. A. L. Kirley.
Al9-53 Sgt. G. R. Dwoning, Sgt. D. K. Box.

INDEPENDENT

Al9-3 W/Cdr. B. R. Walker, Sgt. W. Clarke.

All aircraft were airborne by 0846/3L, except Al9-3, which took off at 0909/3L.

The operation was led by S/Ldr. Little, with F/Lt. Uren commanding "B" Flight.

4. APPROACH TO TARGET.

The squadron reached the rendezvous as directed, and went into the target with flights in line astern. Each flight comprised three pairs in vic.

From the rendezvous height of 6000 feet a shallow dive using zero boost at 2000 revs. was made toward the target. When the Beaufighters first came within range of the destroyer screen at 1000 hours they were at 500 feet. They then lost height rapidly and using rated power attacked in line abreast at a speed of 220 knots.

5. COMPOSITION OF CONVOY.

Owing to the low level at which the attack was made, crews varied slightly in their estimate of its composition, but most agreed that it comprised seven destroyers and five (possibly more) merchant ships, their original disposition being as shown in Appendix A. The general direction of the convoy was west. On the south were four destroyers in line astern. Three other destroyers covered the north, while the five merchant ships were scattered between the two naval forces.

For the sake of simplicity the ships are designated in this report as follows:-

AP: A camouflaged passenger ship of about seven thousand tons. A large red cross on a white ground was painted on the aft hatch cover, but there were no other hospital markings. A 3-inch gun was mounted in a circular shield at the stern, and much cargo was piled on the decks. Photo. Nos. 27 and 28.

AK"A": The largest cargo ship in the convoy. She was of about 7000 tons with goal-post masts. Photo No. 6.

AK"B": A ship of 3000 tons with four goal-post masts. She was camouflaged with a painted bow wave and bears the number "967" near the bridge. Photo. No. 5.

AK"C": Similar to AK"B", but with pole masts. Photo. No. 17.

AK"D": A ship of about 2000 tons numbered "025". Photos. Nos. 15 and 16.

6. ATTACK ON TARGET.

The attack was made from the south. The original course of the Beaufighters would have taken them over the line of four destroyers, so the two flights turned to starboard to avoid them. As they did so the destroyer force, apparently mistaking them for torpedo carriers, turned towards them. The Beaufighters resumed their original course and attacked the transports.

They came in to attack just as the heavy bombers had dropped their bombs.

As the transports were not heavily armed the normal dive attack was utilised. The available aircraft were fairly evenly distributed over the targets. The first attack was from the beam, and after clearing the transports, little avoiding action was necessary.

Strafing was concentrated on decks, superstructure and deck cargo.

One aircraft (A19-5, F/Lt. Uren) made a second run so that an adequate photographic record could be made of the damage done by Beaufighters and bombers. The pilot considered the transports were open for a photographic run as they were not covered by warships.

7. OBSERVED RESULTS.

Photographs taken by various aircraft of this squadron, but more especially by A19-5, confirm the damage done by strafing.

Photograph No. 5 shows AK"B" smoking from the bridge, while photograph No. 6 depicts cargo burning on the deck of AK"A".

In addition, deck cargo was set alight on AP.

Other damage included the killing of gun crews on two vessels and the almost certain killing of the gun crew on a third. Japanese on AK"D", which was already burning fiercely at the stern, jumped into the water (see Photo No. 15).

Strafing quietened the opposition from merchant ships. Even where crews were not hit, they had their heads down when the low-level bombing attack was made, thus facilitating the work of medium bombers attacking from mast-head height.

It is considered that all merchant vessels in the convoy were thoroughly strafed with 2000 rounds of 20mm and 10,000 rounds of .303.

8. EFFECT OF BOMBING.

As the Beaufighters left the target medium bombers pressed home most effective masthead attacks. Four ships were seen to be burning and direct hits had been observed on many others. One aircraft (A19-87; F/O. Roe) saw a ship explode amidships while he was strafing her. He flew through the smoke and his aircraft was slightly damaged by flying debris. Other pilots saw a direct hit by a B25 on the stern of a destroyer at 1000/L.

A Bl7 was seen to drop a stick of bombs across a destroyer on the south side of the convoy. When the smoke cleared the ship could not be seen.

Photographs Nos. 23 and 24 show a column of smoke and a brown smoke ring which accompanied a tremendous explosion. Pilots are unable to explain this. The destroyer shown in photograph No. 23 appeared undamaged from behind the smoke, but since the low cloud shown in the photograph remained for four or five minutes, it is possible that some other ship might have been completely destroyed.

Attention is directed to photograph No. 57. This shows a direct hit on a transport by a B25 skip bombing. The observer who took this photograph states that two bombs hit the side of the ship and bounced back about ten feet before exploding.

9. ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENCES.

Most of the A/A from warships was fused to burst at 5-8000 feet. The guns were obviously heavy; from five miles away large sheets of flame could be seen. Several guns normally fired together.

Other guns fired at aircraft attacking at low level. Heavy guns used in this way were particularly accurate. At a range of 6-7 miles shells burst within 50-100 yards of Beaufighters. These bursts were almost invariably in groups of three, the first shell bursting at about 50 feet above the sea and the third down at water level. A photograph is annexed as Appendix B.

The destroyers showed excellent fire control. All waited until our aircraft were in position for cross fire and then opened together.

Anti-aircraft fire was most intense when the Beaufighters were at higher levels. When the destroyer escort moved out to meet the attacking force, it left the convoy unprotected. During the actual strafing run anti-aircraft fire was at extreme range and by the time the destroyers turned in again the Beaufighter attack had been completed.

Merchant ship defences appeared to be Bofors type mainly directed at medium and high level aircraft. Guns in two ships were surprised by a Beaufighter pointing at aircraft overhead and gun crews were killed.

In general, A/A from transports was most ineffective.

No damage was done to squadron aircraft by A/A fire.

10. INTERCEPTIONS AND CASUALTIES.

At about 5000 feet eight or nine Zekes were seen, two of which came down and intercepted a Beaufighter after the run through the convoy was completed. One of these aircraft dived straight down from cloud cover. He opened his attack at about 1000 yards and scored hits with his first burst of 20mm cannon, wounding the pilot, Sgt. Downing, in the shoulder, and the observer, Sgt. Box, in the thigh and wrist.

The pilot took evasive action by skidding and varying altitude, and no further hits were scored, although the Zeke made strenuous efforts to get his sight on the Beaufighter. He kept firing until within 100 feet and then pulled up in an almost vertical climb.

The Beaufighter had its port engine out, port elevator shot away, holes in the fuselage and possibly had the starboard engine damaged. This aircraft was escorted by two other Beaufighters to Popondetta, where it made a belly landing.

Another Zeke was seen by S/Ldr. Little on the tail of a B25 at about 1500 feet. In an attack from the port quarter the Beaufighter opened fire at 600 yards to divert the attention of the enemy pilot. The tracer appeared to pass in front of the enemy aircraft, which climbed and let the Beaufighter get underneath. The Zeke then half-rolled on the the Beaufighter's tail, and attacked from dead astern. The observer, F/O Spooner, fired 150 rounds with the Browning rear gun devised by him and so far installed in only a few Beaufighters. Nil hits were claimed, but the enemy aircraft pulled up in a climbing turn and disappeared in the direction of the convoy.

11. ENEMY NAVAL TACTICS.

A major tactical blunder was made by the enemy destroyers when they mistook the low-flying Beaufighters for torpedo-carrying aircraft. By turning to port and steaming toward the attacking aircraft they left the merchant vessels wide open.

When they turned again toward the convoy they deployed to present a broadside A/A defence.

Transports kept under way during the attack, and took no evading action.

12. WEATHER.

Scattered cumulus at varying levels down to 1000 feet. 10/10 alto-stratus at 11,000 feet. Visibility poor owing to haze.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS.

The attack was carried out successfully according to plan, but the following suggestions are made for future operations:-

It cannot be assumed that the Japanese will repeat the mistake of opening up and leaving transports. Our aircraft losses may therefore be expected to be heavier, as they will have to pass through the destroyer screen to reach the heart of the convoy. Therefore, close support by torpedo aircraft could be used to great advantage.

It is suggested that the attacking aircraft might well be split into two forces, each comprising high and medium level bombers, Beaufighters, low-level bombers and torpedo aircraft, in that order. The forces, it is suggested, should approach from the direction in which the convoy is heading, split, and attack from each side.

This method of attack would give torpedo-carrying aircraft adequate protection, as they need not cross the target, but could turn off after releasing their torpedoes.

The Beaufighter strike must be perfectly timed to hit right on the fall of bombs from the high and medium level bombers, to take advantage of the confusion caused. Formation leaders must watch the heavy bombers to determine the time to begin the attack dive. A certain amount of weaving may be necessary to keep behind the slower heavy bombers.

Beaufighters leading low-level American bombers must keep the initial dive back to a comfortable speed of 230 knots (for B25 types) to avoid getting ahead and ruining the concentrated effect of the attack.

Strafing aircraft are useless unless mast-head bombers hit immediately afterwards, when heads are down.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that joint briefing of all crews taking part in combined operations is essential. If this is not practicable, flight and section leaders, at the very least, must be briefed together.

SECTION II - AFTERNOON STRIKE

1. GENERAL.

A similar mission was ordered for the afternoon, but was not successful owing to weather.

2. ORDERS.

The form green was as follows:-

WAR 6 - 61B GENERAL - 3rd March. Repeat co-ordinated attack as in 90.G./G1/3 MARCH (WAR 4 - 61G). Additional squadron of Bostons to follow A20's at 4,000 feet attack masthead. Order of attack - Beaufighters followed by mastheads attacks then medium and high level bombers. All other details unchanged.

3. EXECUTION.

Ten aircraft were airborne by 1405/L, but failed to find any gap in the weather on the ranges. They returned to base at 1535/L.

SECTION III - ATTACKS ON BARGES

1. GENERAL.

Two missions against barges and lifeboats were ordered on the afternoon of 5th March.

2. ORDERS.

Orders for the missions were:-

WAR 15 - 63J - 5th March. Five Beaufighters attack barges reported in position $08^{\circ}00' S.$, $149^{\circ}30' E.$ at 1000/5L. Estimated number ten to fifteen, some filled with Japs, some with cargo, some covered.

WAR 14 - 63K - 5th March. Six Beaufighters attack 30 enemy lifeboats reported 30 miles off Cape Ward Hunt on a bearing of 045T. at 1000/5L. Take off as soon as possible.

3. EXECUTION - WAR 15.

The following aircraft were airborne by 1430/5L:-

Al9-8	S/Ldr. Little, F/O. Spooner. (Leader).
Al9-10	F/O. Bennett, Sgt. Edwards.
Al9-11	F/O. Roe, F/Sgt. Fisker.
Al9-15	F/O. Brazenor, Sgt. Anderson.
Al9-24	P/O. Vial, F/Sgt. Nelson.

All aircraft returned to base by 1659/5L.

4. ATTACK - WAR 15.

The flight searched from Cape Ward Hunt to $08^{\circ}20' S.$, $149^{\circ}50' E.$, thence to $07^{\circ}35' S.$, $149^{\circ}35' E.$ and returned to Cape Ward Hunt.

A Hudson was found attacking a large military landing craft and a Type "B" small barge about 20 miles due west of the Lusancay Islands. The smaller barge was loaded with 30 men and the other with at least as many, probably more. The men were wearing green uniforms with full equipment, and some wore lifebelts. Both barges were heavily strafed.

The occupants did not attempt to jump overboard at first and it can be assumed that practically all were killed. The water was crimson with blood and sharks could be seen in the vicinity. The smaller boat was sunk and the other left sinking.

Twenty miles north-east of Cape Ward Hunt the flight found another barge containing 30 Japanese. This was left sinking. Possible small arms fire was encountered from this barge and one aircraft received a bullet hole in a wing, but this might easily have been caused by a ricochet.

A small steel barge containing six Japanese, was left sinking 12 miles east of Cape Ward Hunt. An empty barge and a lifeboat, 60 miles east of Cape Ward Hunt, were not attacked.

Weather over the target was 4/10 scattered cumulus between 2000 and 6000 feet with a visibility of 20 miles.

5. RESULTS - WAR 15.

All boats attacked are considered destroyed.

6. EXECUTION - WAR 14.

The following aircraft were airborne by 1445/5L:-

A19-37 F/Lt. Uren, P/O. Suthons. (Leader).
A19-38 F/Lt. Gibson, Sgt. Clarke.
A19-6 F/O. R. Harding, Sgt. H. Cane.
A19-74 F/Sgt. Cummins, W/O Kirley.
A19-50 Sgt. Morgan, Sgt. Cassidy.

They returned to base by 1801/5L.

7. ATTACK - WAR 14.

The flight located four separate groups of barges around a point 25 miles from Cape Ward Hunt on a bearing of 050T. For rough sketch see Appendix C.

Group A, ten miles to the west, comprised five Type "B" small barges and one small boat. Four of these barges each contained 25 Japanese and the other was filled with stores. This group was thoroughly strafed by all aircraft. The barge loaded with stores sank, another was left sinking, and the remainder settling slowly. The group was considered destroyed. Most of the Japanese jumped into the water before the boats were strafed, and as a result aircrews were spared the nauseating spectacle which confronted pilots on WAR 15.

One aircraft, which was unable to contact the remainder of the flight, found three additional groups of boats.

Group B, ten miles east of the point given above, comprised 14 rafts, each supporting about 12 men, and 4 lifeboats, each of which contained about 6 men. Two of the lifeboats were under sail and were heading towards shore. It was noted that, although men were supporting themselves on crowded rafts, the lifeboats nearby were only partly filled. The pilot suggests that the lifeboats might have been occupied by officers.

Ten of the rafts and all the lifeboats were strafed before ammunition ran out.

Five to ten miles south-east of Group B were four empty Type "B" small barges and a few miles further to the south-east were four more empty barges of the same type. These were not attacked.

Sub-machine-gun or light machine-gun fire was encountered from one barge in Group A, but no damage was done.

One man in a yellow aircraft dinghy was seen paddling toward an empty barge to the north of group A. The barge had already been strafed and the nearest Japanese was a mile away. This man was probably the pilot of a P38 which was shot down over the convoy. He was seen by the observer in an aircraft in which the inter-communication was out of order. By the time the observer went forward to tell the pilot the aircraft was out of the area.

8. AMMUNITION EXPENDITURE.

On WAR 15 1250 rounds of 20mm. and 10,000 rounds of .303 were fired. For WAR 14 the figures were 2250 and 26,000 rounds respectively.

9. CLAIMS.

On these two operations the squadron strafed a total of 9 barges, 5 lifeboats and 10 rafts, of which 2 barges were sunk and the remainder left sinking. At least 350 Japanese must have been killed.

10. TACTICS.

On both missions the squadron adopted the usual tactics against such targets. A circle was formed and each aircraft attacked one barge at a time. This guarded against any surprise attack by enemy aircraft.

Although the necessity for the strafing of undefended barges was completely understood, and the targets accordingly thoroughly strafed, the two missions were most distasteful for the crews involved.