

BOMBERS OVER GRAFTON.1942.

How the War came to the Northern Rivers.

78 years ago on the 14 August 1942, five American 5th. Air Force B25 ***Mitchell Bombers***, on a delivery flight from California USA to Amberley, near Ipswich in Queensland, became lost on reaching the Australian Coast. Confusing Radio signals received with those expected from Brisbane, they followed the Clarence River to Grafton, presuming it to be the Brisbane River.

For Security reasons the Australian Censor clamped down on all but the most basic news.

The sub-editor of ***The Daily Examiner***, Jim McNab, contacted the Censor and asked if he could publish the story and was told;

Only the most basic details otherwise you will be out of business tomorrow.

Night Landing.

Military Planes.

At South Grafton.

Car Headlights used.

Excitement was caused in Grafton shortly after nightfall last night when a number of planes came in and circled the town several times.

It was thought that the machines were in difficulties and arrangements were made to direct them to a nearby landing field.

Different times but today I am not influenced by the Censor and will attempt to tell you the real story.

The B25 was a formidable aircraft in 1942. Its two Wright Cyclone Radial engines gave it a top speed of 264 mph. It carried 3,500 lbs of bombs and it had seven .50 machine guns firing forward , two .50 machine guns in the top turret , one .05 machine gun in the tail and two .05 machine guns in the waist positions. It carried a crew of five young men.

The crews of the five bombers were getting tired as they flew on the last leg of their flight from California to their new base at Amberley in Queensland. A short time before, they had assembled at their base and were assigned to individual aircraft and given training in the operation of the B25, under wartime conditions. These were not training aircraft but were fully equipped combat aircraft and it was not to be a routine delivery task.

It was a journey across the Pacific Ocean into an area where they might encounter enemy aircraft. Each stage, from island to island, was to be under full combat conditions with gunners in position with loaded guns and on full alert. There were no bombs in the bomb-bays.

They had staged, day by day, from California to Hawaii then along a chain of airfields with coral runways on previously unknown islands. On each of these islands there was a direction-finding beacon, enabling the Navigator in the lead plane to bring his flight to safety. There was to be radio silence at all times.

The system was very new and there were many problems to be overcome at this stage.

The last stage was from New Caledonia to Brisbane, 800 miles, and there was no beacon at Brisbane. The Navigator would have to plot his course and tune into a Commercial Radio station for his final approach. He would home in on this beam and follow it to Ipswich and then change course to Amberley.

At this time most Americans knew nothing about Australia and its people and those in Australia knew nothing about what an American aeroplane looked like.

They certainly did not know that Australia had more than one radio station.

With night drawing in and approaching the Coast of Australia, the Navigator tuned in and found only a faint signal so he turned the knob and found a much stronger station. However it was Grafton, not Brisbane.

As they came in sight of the Coast they found that the landscape was not what they had expected.

They thought that as it was wartime there must be some sort of blackout but the river was not full of ships. There were only a few lights so the five planes circled to see where Ipswich was.

There was a small town below them and not many lights and no traffic moving around. They thought that they must have a blackout. They never imagined that they were the cause of the Aircraft Warning that was happening down below.

They were now getting very low on fuel and had no idea where they were.

Meanwhile, down on the ground there was a Company of Army Signalers and it was meal time and there was only one young Corporal on duty and he went outside to take a look at these aircraft circling above. He knew a bit about Aircraft Recognition and decided that they were American B25's

At the rear of the Drill Hall was a tennis court with lighting and on his own initiative, without authority, he turned the lights on and off and sent a Morse-code message to the planes above and asked;

Who are you?

The Navigator read the signal and used his Aldus Lamp to flash back;

We are Americans and we are running out of fuel.

He then established Radio contact and got the full picture.

The Officer in charge took over and notified Headquarters and they said that they had not received any advice about aircraft arrivals and said that they were to be considered as Enemy Aircraft.

The only RAAF Base was at Evans Head and they received a Red Alert and took cover for a possible attack.

At this point two of the planes announced that they were out of fuel and that they were bailing out over Casino.

The Army sent out trucks and found the men but one had been killed because he did not have a parachute.

Back at Grafton the Army organized all the motor vehicles they could find and used them to light-up South Grafton Airstrip. Two of the B25.s landed but the runway was too short and they ran into the bush at the end. The planes had minor damage and the ten crew members were unharmed.

The RAAF at Evans Head had recovered and sent up a *Fairy Battle* plane with its lights on and it found the final B25 still circling and led it back to Evans Head where it landed safely.

The crews were to be taken to Amberley and the two aircraft at Grafton would be repaired and were soon back in service, the only casualty was the one man who had been killed at Casino.

That however is not the end of my story as we must return to Evans Head where the last B25 was resting, undamaged.

Because it was wartime the plane was moved off the airfield to be ready for its take-off next day and parked on an old unused road nearby and covered with Camouflage netting to confuse the enemy if there was a real air raid.

Unfortunately, a member of the RAAF who lived nearby and was on leave that day, always used this old road when he drove back to base in his truck. In the dark he ran into the B25 and badly damaged it.

It too, would be repaired and go back into service.

So we had 24 Aircrew, all very brave young men, with three damaged aircraft. This would be their introduction to the Air War that was about to take place in the North of Australia

We must also remember the initiative of the young Australian Corporal who knew his Aircraft Recognition and made it possible to save three B25.s and the lives of 24 young airmen.

There were many reports written about this event and all were kept secret. It was said the Navigators of the B25's had no maps of the Australian Coast showing rivers, towns and airfields. They had not been told the frequencies of the RAAF Base at Evans Head and that there was

an airfield there. The Aircraft should not have been allowed to leave Noumea when they did as there was insufficient daylight safety margin.

The five B25's had names on their fuselages;

Torpedo Junctionlanded at Grafton.

Satan's SisterLanded at Evans Head.

Bud and his Pugmaster. ...Crashed at Casino.

Woodchopper. Crashed at Casino.

Unknown.Landed at Grafton.

B25 Mitchell Bombers carried out the first bombing raid on the Japanese Mainland. On the 18 April 1942 they bombed Tokyo and four other cities.

Sixteen B25's under the command of Major General Jimmy Doolittle (a stunt pilot of the 1930's) were adapted to take off from the Carrier *USS Hornet* some 1,000 km's from Tokyo. Lacking fuel to return to the Carrier they flew on to Mainland China where they bailed out.

Most made it to safety but three were killed and eight were captured.

That ends my story (uncensored) about how the war came to the Northern Rivers in 1942. Hope that you liked it.