

## CHAPTER 6

# A TURNING OF THE TIDE, AND THE DUTCH ARRIVE

On 26 December 1942 a new phase in the air war over the NWA commenced, with the arrival of No. 18 (NEI) Squadron. This was a Dutch unit operating under the administrative umbrella of the RAAF.<sup>1</sup> The squadron and its B-25 Mitchells flew into McDonald airfield near Pine Creek. Although the aircrews were largely made up of Dutch nationals, the RAAF supplied many co-pilots, air gunners, bombardiers, photographers and ground staff.

The Dutch were reasonably appalled by what they had arrived at. They had spent months being frustrated in the southern states and were keen to get at the enemy – many of them traumatised by the situation of their families, many of whom had become prisoners of the Japanese in their old colonial lands. They found in the Northern Territory – instead of an airbase ready to operate from – a field where the runway was too short for their B-25s; little in the way of facilities, and to make matters worse it was the beginning of “The Wet”: the months-long period of high humidity and usually daily torrential rain.

The new unit flew a number of familiarisation and training flights before its first mission on 18 January 1943 with a reconnaissance of the Tanimbar Islands. A search for reported enemy shipping was also carried out. The following day a follow-up armed reconnaissance of Toel in the Kai Islands saw a B-25 hit by Japanese ground fire. On 20 January two Zeros were claimed as “probably destroyed” during an engagement over Fuiloro, while a floatplane was claimed as a probable over Dobo.

The location of McDonald airfield so far south of Darwin meant that these missions required the B-25s to fly north to Darwin to refuel and then be ready on standby. On 31 January a six-aircraft mission was launched against Dili, with the priorities being shipping and the aerodrome. Led by Lieutenant Gus Winckel, visibility obscured the targets, and no bombs were released. Both N5-134 and N5-139 ran short of fuel on the return trip and jettisoned their bombs before landing southwest of Darwin: N5-134 at the Port Keats airstrip and N5-139 on the nearby Moyle River floodplains.

On 2 February N5-144 carried out a successful attack on Dobo. Two days later No. 18 Squadron suffered its first loss in the NWA, though it was not combat related. N5-132 was one of three aircraft of No. 2 Flight flying to Darwin to be on standby for a mission. It crashed north of McDonald airfield shortly after take-off and two of its bombs detonated.

Ted Lewis was the duty fire tender driver that morning and recalled:

Two of the B-25s took off ... and the third was just airborne when a flash in the sky was seen followed by ... detonations. [I] later had to go and pick up the remains, one of whom was LAC Palamountain ... he'd been married [for] a fortnight. Another was Sergeant Walton.

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1 See Appendix 1 for a detailed summary of No. 18 Squadron by Dutch author Eler Mesman.