

CHAPTER 8

NO. 4 SQUADRON

In early 1943 the RAAF considered how to utilise the Boomerang after re-equipment of the Interceptor Fighter squadrons with the type had been completed. It decided that Boomerangs should be directed to its army cooperation squadrons. Pilots from No. 4 Squadron travelled from their New Guinea base to Australia in May 1943 and returned with Boomerangs in June. The Boomerang had finally gone to war.

The Boomerang would see service in a unit with superb capabilities in the army cooperation role. No. 4 Squadron was originally established in WWI as an AFC unit. The WWII iteration was formed at Richmond, New South Wales, in June 1940. After initially flying Hawker Demon biplane fighters it converted to Wirraways in September 1940. The unit was stationed in Canberra from October 1940 to May 1942, where it trained intensely in the army cooperation role, which included frequent exercises with Army units. After further movements to bases in New South Wales and Queensland, the squadron transferred to Berry Airfield near Port Moresby in New Guinea. On 20 November 1942 the squadron started to operate Wirraways over enemy occupied territory.

The Wirraway crews quickly gained experience in the types of missions they would soon be flying in Boomerangs. Tactical reconnaissance missions provided crucial assistance to the Diggers fighting a jungle campaign against an elusive enemy. These missions required dangerous flights across the Japanese lines at tree-top level, which allowed troop concentrations, fortifications, trenches and gun positions to be identified visually. Artillery reconnaissance, which involved observing where artillery rounds landed relative to the target and radioing corrections to the gunners, was exceptionally valuable. In addition, aerial photography was very useful considering the poorly mapped New Guinea of the 1940s, as it allowed accurate maps to be prepared to help plan ground and air operations.

Having gained operational experience since November 1942, No. 4 Squadron's pilots were exceptionally well placed to use the Boomerang in the army cooperation role when they started flying operations in the single seater in July 1943.

The Boomerang's introduction was quickly marred by an unfortunate "friendly fire" incident. The appearance and performance of the Boomerang differed from other Allied aircraft operating in New Guinea and the aircraft often came under ground fire from Allied units unused to seeing it. Flying Officers James Collier (A46-88) and John Utber (A46-89) departed from Wau on 5 July, having been tasked with carrying out a tactical reconnaissance at Salamaua. Cloud intervened and the pilots flew to the Nassau Bay area (30 kilometres south of Salamaua) to reconnoitre that location. US forces had recently landed at Nassau Bay and Collier sighted some of the invasion barges on the beach. Diving to inspect them, he was unaware that an earlier Japanese air attack had put the American forces on edge. American gunners opened fire on Collier with light anti-aircraft weapons. The Boomerang was hit, struck the water,