

CHAPTER 6

The First Combats: March-May 1942

When the first elements of the 49th PG arrived in Darwin, the RAAF had its own fighter control unit known as No. 5 Fighter Sector, which operated from tents to the south of the RAAF base in what was known as “Sandfly Gully”. This was linked to the first RDF station which was only just being calibrated and was untested in operations, as Second Lieutenant Jesse Peaslee reported:

...the air raid warning system was still pretty much in the theoretical stage ...[RDF] was supposed to give an 80-mile warning, but ... it was often not functioning ... The firing of anti-aircraft guns was often the only warning of an impending air raid.

From March 1942, a small RAAF group established an observation post on Bathurst Island, north of Cape Fourcroy. Led by acting Corporal Bill Woodnutt, the group included two airmen and a couple of local Tiwi Islanders, with their bush camp established near Wiyaparaly which meant “the place of the big sand dune”. They passed information to No. 5 Fighter Sector through callsign 8X7. The post was ideally situated, with Cape Fourcroy being something of a focal point:

... the Japanese used [it] as a navigational point, every raid passed virtually overhead ... the unit counted the number of planes passing and after contacting 5FS they waited to hear details of the raid.

Lieutenant Colonel Wurtsmith later wrote to Air Commodore Frank “Pop” Bladin, the Air Officer Commanding North Western Area (NWA) praising:

... the excellent performance of the W/T crew stationed at Cape Fourcroy, Bathurst Island ... On the first day of operation the messages received were letter perfect ... this station had definitely proven its value and Acting Corporal Woodnutt and his crew are to be commended.

By 26 March still only one squadron had arrived in Darwin, the 9th PS which could boast 17 serviceable P-40s and 28 pilots. Two days later four of its P-40s intercepted seven Bettys of the *Takao Ku* led by Lieutenant Takeji Fujiwara. The target was the Darwin RAAF base. Armed with 83 x 60-kilogram bombs the raiders were over Darwin at 1445. They released the bombs from 18,000 feet, damaging one Wirraway and cratering the runway.

The P-40s intercepted the bombers as they exited Darwin to the northwest. Piloting the fighters were Second Lieutenants Mitchell Zawisza, Clyde L Harvey, Robert H Vaught and William D Sells. Harvey followed his prey seven miles out over the ocean, and then downed the Betty of Lieutenant Taketoshi Asihiro and his crew:

I first saw enemy bombers at 19,000 feet ... and followed them ... out to sea ... [I] dived