

CHAPTER 7: PORT PIRIE 1942–43

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the outbreak of the Pacific War saw No. 2 Bombing and Gunnery School (2BAGS) at Port Pirie ready itself for possible operational duty via the formation of No. 54 (R) Squadron. Another wartime role performed by 2BAGS Battles was to tow targets over Whyalla for the benefit of the 3.7-inch AA gun battery that protected the steelworks there. January 1942 also saw a change of command with Wing Commander Dalton leaving to lead No. 3 BAGS at Sale, Victoria. He was replaced by Wing Commander AG Carr who was posted from No. 2 Air Navigation School at Nhill, Victoria.

Otherwise, the Port Pirie base directly felt the war emergency in February 1942 when a number of the unit's motor transport vehicles were urgently sent up to Darwin.

February 1942 also saw a visit by a group of USAAC P-40E fighters undertaking an urgent cross-country flight from Amberley to Fremantle (they were to be loaded on the old carrier USS *Langley* for what would be a doomed mission to reinforce Java). At Port Pirie, 15 of these aircraft, under the command of Major Floyd Pell of the 33rd Provisional Fighter Squadron, were diverted north to Darwin.

One of Pell's pilots, Second Lieutenant Richard Pingree, was delayed at Port Pirie for several days with engine trouble. Pingree was joined by one of the pilots destined for Fremantle, Bryce Wilhite, who had suffered a blown tyre at Port Pirie on 16 February. Both were accommodated in the RAAF officers' quarters during their few days at Port Pirie and attended an RAAF dining-in night on 17 February. After repairs to his engine, Pingree undertook a test flight on 19 February. While turning on to his landing approach, his aircraft's luggage door came open. The P-40E crashed into the swampy area at the end of the runway and Pingree was killed. This young American pilot was the first fatality at RAAF Port Pirie.

Serviceability of the 2BAGS Battles had hovered around 50% in 1941. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, this dropped further as war pressures meant resources were allocated elsewhere. By April 1942, Battle serviceability had plummeted to just 16%. However, this coincided with the

formation of No. 2 Operational Training Unit (2OTU) at Port Pirie on 6 April. This unit was given the urgent task of training fighter pilots and was led by Squadron Leader Peter Jeffrey who had fighter experience in the Middle East. It commenced training at Port Pirie using Wirraways and a small number of Battles acquired from 2BAGS. In fact, 2OTU had been formed from the Wirraway Flight of No. 1 OTU at West Sale, Victoria, from which a dedicated fighter training unit was created. The first five P-40E Kittyhawks were delivered to 2OTU on 14 May from No. 1 Aircraft Depot at Laverton, following which the unit vacated Port Pirie, after a stay of about five weeks, and moved to its permanent base at Mildura.

Freed of the pressure of maintaining 2OTU, 2BAGS serviceability steadily rose over the remainder of the year. By the end of October, it had 80 aircraft on strength with a serviceability of 63%. Most of these were Battles, but a handful of other aircraft were also operated. Alongside the Gipsy Moth and Ryan STMs, at least two Tiger Moths were also operated for a short time. Maintenance of these light aircraft, and some of the Battles, was undertaken by Guinea Airways and ANA at Parafield.

In June, Wing Commander Carr departed 2BAGS for a posting at air force headquarters. He was replaced on a temporary basis by Squadron Leader BC Waddy who commanded 2BAGS until a permanent commander arrived in September in the form of 39-year-old Group Captain Alan M Charlesworth. A Duntroon graduate, Charlesworth had transferred into the RAAF in 1925 and had experience in senior staff positions, including at Headquarters, Western Area, from whence he arrived at 2BAGS.

In November 1942, the organisation of 2BAGS was as shown and it is likely this was the same as used throughout the peak of 2BAGS operations in 1942-43:

Four Flights:	Battle Mark Is
Towing Flight:	Battle TTs
Towing Practice & Communications:	Ryan STMs, Gipsy Moth