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Victory in Burma: The Role of Canada and the Air Force

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Victory in Burma

The role of Canada

and the Air Force

Atholl Sutherland Brown

In Victoria, BC this August 2005, the 60th Anniversary of the end of the War against Japan (VJ Day) was celebrated at a number of events. Included were a march to the Cenotaph by Veterans, Service Units and Air Cadets on Sunday, August 14th; a reception sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs at Government House on the actual day, August 15; a service the next day at Arakan Park in the forest on the Cowichan River followed by one at the Cenotaph in Duncan both arranged by the Burma Star Organization and, finally, a luncheon by the Vancouver Island Branch of the AirCrew Association at the Gun Room at Work Point Barracks. At all these events except the last, the role of the Commonwealth Air Forces in the victory over the Japanese Army in Burma was scarcely mentioned although some interesting brochures and talks were presented. From my own experience and research I believe the Air Force's role was decisive.

A small obsolescent Allied air force provided a sacrificial delay to the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942 enabling the evacuation of a considerable portion of the Allied armed forces and refugees over the Chin Hills to India. Contemporaneously, a few Catalina squadrons, notably 413 RCAF Squadron, provided exhaustive patrols of the Indian Ocean. They identified and provided early warning of the Japanese Imperial Naval Task Force approaching Ceylon and India to attack bases and the ancient RN fleet. The Catalinas, later augmented by Liberators, continued to provide effective anti-submarine

patrols of the vulnerable Allied supply routes in the Indian Ocean.

During the stalemate of 1943, Spitfires arrived in India and soon established air superiority over India and western Burma. They were the first Allied fighters that could turn inside, out climb and outgun the Japanese Oscar fighters (Nakajimi Ki-43 Hayabusa). They and the Beaufighters drove the Japanese Air Division out of the forward airstrips and the Spits took a deadly toll of the Oscars in combat. This was critical to the victories of the 14th (Forgotten) Army because, thereafter, the complete control of the air was established. This was essential to the level of air supply and transport needed to provide ammunition, food and troops both in the jungle battles of the Arakan, and later in the Imphal Valley and the Chin Hills, and followed by the advance down the central plains of Burma. The Dakota squadrons were able to freely conduct air supply drops to isolated units in the jungles, move whole divisions from reserve to the front, and unload supplies at temporary fields within miles of enemy forces. Meanwhile Hurribombers operating at forward air strips provided constant bombardment of enemy positions and bunkers. They were essentially the mobile artillery of the 14th Army.

In contrast, the Japanese were starved of supplies and reinforcements because of the devastating low-level attacks of the Beaufighter Squadrons. These carried their attacks on the trains, motor transport, river boats and ships

at sea as far south as central Siam and Malay Peninsula. The Bangkok-Moulmein railway was never able to carry more than a third of the designed load because of the Beaufighter attacks and low-level bombing of bridges by RAF Liberator Squadrons.

In total the Air Forces had a major, but scarcely acknowledged role in the defeat of the Japanese in Southeast Asia. Probably in no other theatre except Europe during the Battle of Britain were the air forces of such relative importance, this in spite of the abominable flying weather during the Monsoons in Burma.

Although the Canadian contribution to ground forces was only a few hundred men, mostly in Indian regiments and SOE Force 136, its part in the air war was substantial. Records are poor but about 7,500 Air Force personnel served in Southeast Asia. These airmen were distributed between two Canadian Dakota Squadrons (435 and 436), one Canadian Catalina squadron (413), a majority of radar technicians within the Command and fully one quarter of all the pilots in Commonwealth squadrons. Four

hundred and thirty-one Canadians were killed or missing in action. Several hundred more became prisoners of war to their sorrow. The Canadian aircrew on the strength of RAF squadrons was virtually ignored by RCAF HQ during the War and barely acknowledged in the RCAF official history. Their major contribution to victory in Burma is not forgotten because it was never known.

Atholl Sutherland Brown, DFC, PhD flew Beaufighters with 177 Squadron in Burma and is the author of a history of that unit, *Silently into the Midst of Things: 177 Squadron Royal Air Force in Burma, 1943-1945, History and Personal Narratives* (Sussex, England: The Book Guild Ltd., 1997). He has also written a biography of his father, *Buster, A Canadian Patriot and Imperialist: The Life and Times of Brigadier James Sutherland Brown* (Waterloo, LCMSDS, 2004) and has published a number of articles based on his wartime experiences in *Canadian Military History*.



Above: A 413 Squadron RCAF Catalina parked on the beach in Ceylon (CFPU PL 18412)



Left: Ground crew pose in front of a 435 Squadron RCAF Dakota and fuel truck in Burma. (CFPU PL 60548)