

Song of the Beauforts: No 100 Squadron RAAF and Beaufort Bomber Operations

Colin King

A review essay by Jack McCaffrie



Song of the Beauforts, republished to a wider audience by the RAAF Air Power Development Centre as a volume in the RAAF historical series, is a very well produced history of RAAF Beaufort bomber operations in the South West Pacific during World War II. Written by one of the surviving No. 100 Squadron aircrew, Colin King, the book concentrates on the exploits of the squadron and the work of other squadrons within No. 71 Wing.

Originally a Royal Air Force squadron based in Singapore, No. 100 received the first six Australian-built Beauforts at Seletar in December 1941. None of the aircraft was armed; five were returned to Australia because of serious defects and the one aircraft remaining at Seletar was destroyed by Japanese strafing on 07 December after a forced landing at Kota Bharu. This was an inauspicious and revealing beginning for an aircraft that became a mainstay of RAAF anti-shipping, anti-submarine and close support operations in the South Pacific.

The squadron transferred to the RAAF on 28 February 1942 while based at Laverton. For much of the remainder of 1942 it conducted sea patrols (often monotonous), firstly in southern waters and then in the Coral Sea. It moved bases several times and by September 1942 No. 100 was operating from Milne Bay. For the remainder of the war the squadron operated from a succession of bases around the coast of Papua New Guinea.

Much of No. 100's work in and around New Guinea consisted of anti-shipping strikes using torpedoes dropped at low level. As the author points out, however, by mid-1943 there was much dissatisfaction with the limited effectiveness of torpedo attacks and consideration was being given to converting the Beauforts to close-air-support aircraft. By late 1943 that had happened, at least for No. 100 Squadron, and it began to concentrate on day and night bombing attacks in support of Allied troops operating against the Japanese. These operations, with occasional diversions into anti-submarine work, continued until the end of the war in the Pacific.

The book brings this work to life. It was often conducted in poor weather conditions and in the face of heavy enemy fire, but with growing and ultimately total control of the air. The squadron enjoyed its greatest success with bombing operations in support of ground forces, operations for which the aircraft was perhaps best suited and from which the crews derived greatest satisfaction. Perhaps even though aircraft and their crews are considered to be capable of 'multi-roling' some roles will always be performed better than others.

One of the strengths of this history is the way in which it illustrates the factors that made life more miserable and

dangerous that it might otherwise have been for air and ground crews alike. High on the list of these was the performance of the Beaufort itself. Even after some significant modification for Australian conditions it still gave trouble for most of the war. Problems with elevator trim and carbon monoxide poisoning caused the loss of several crews and aircraft. According to King, the elevator trim problem was suspected to be behind many of the 91 deaths at the Operational Training Unit at Bairnsdale and East Sale between March 1942 and August 1945. This particular problem was not finally resolved until early in 1944.

The Beaufort was also difficult to fly in formation at the very low levels needed to drop torpedoes because it tended to waffle at 150 knots. Adding to the potential for a lack of confidence in the aircraft were ongoing and significant serviceability problems relating to engines and bomb tail fuses, for example, both of which led to fatalities. Landing accidents also seemed to be quite frequent. In fact, by mid-1943 Prime Minister Curtin was expressing concern as to the state of the Beaufort force, with 51 of the 303 aircraft then delivered having been lost and only 121 serviceable of the remaining 252.

King relates very vividly the constant problems associated with operating in the tropics. For the aircrews there 'was nothing exciting in searching a vast expanse of ocean for hours on end in normal conditions and, in stormy weather, it was irksome and hazardous.' Indicating the nature of the problem, when returning from a strike on 16 April 1944, 31 US Army Air Force fighters and their pilots were lost through bad weather and the limited navigation aids which afflicted all aircraft types at the time. Tropical diseases also took their toll, dysentery and malaria especially. At one period in late 1942 nearly one third of No. 100 Squadron had malaria. This was not unusual.

Although the book does not delve deeply into the personnel issues that exacerbated the inherently stressful existence of the air and ground crews, it does provide hints that there were many complications and that the Air Force 'system' took some time to come to terms with this. Crew fatigue had become a problem by mid-1943 and the associated loss of a crew led to the posting out of other original squadron members. Not surprisingly, some individuals developed drinking problems and the loneliness coupled with broken personal relationships did result in occasional suicides. But, only in late 1944 did the RAAF introduce a personnel rotation system that took account of the nature and extent of the demands on its people.

Inevitably a book like this relies on anecdote for much of its value and interest. There are many personal stories in this book but none as arresting as that of Ray Graetz, a wireless operator with No. 100 Squadron. His Beaufort ditched on 20 May 1944 after being shot down. Two crewmembers were killed when their dinghy was machine-gunned from the shore. Graetz, though wounded in this encounter, survived until 28 May (when he was picked up by a US Navy PT boat). During the intervening days, Graetz, while trying to get back to his airfield, stumbled across a succession of Japanese patrols which either failed to see him or ignored him. He also took the trouble to sabotage Japanese equipment along the way, whenever the opportunity allowed. Reading the account of this amazing saga left the reviewer wondering if it had all been a figment of Graetz's imagination. The reality is that he was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery and initiative.

The second half of the book is a series of 'behind the scenes' vignettes, covering various aspects of the Beaufort and its equipment, the support and maintenance effort and a whole range of personnel-related matters. For this reviewer the most interesting of these were the story of the trim tab problem already alluded to (and how it was eventually solved) and the No. 100 Squadron personnel profiles. While some of the air and ground crews drew a line under their war service, a good number remained in touch over the years and the profiles show that many lived long and eventful lives after the war in a variety of occupations.

Seeking lessons from experiences such as those of No. 100 Squadron can be worthwhile, if also perhaps somewhat risky. The point is to examine these experiences and to determine whether they hold any relevance for today and tomorrow. One such issue might well be the operation of tactical aircraft in and around the archipelagoes to our north, particularly for sustained periods.


Although the Beaufort was 'state of the art' in its day, it was a fairly simple machine by today's standards. Despite its comparative simplicity, however, it suffered several major and fatal faults. Additionally, the RAAF was hard-pressed to provide the necessary level of logistics support for the aircraft in the theatre of operations. The logistics problems extended beyond maintenance of the aircraft. As King points out, once the US Army Air Force Squadrons moved on, the RAAF was forced for a time to impose food rationing. The far greater complexity of today's aircraft and the raised expectations of Service personnel have not made logistic support any easier to manage. Significant air and sea-lift capacity, together with assured supplies of materiel, would be needed to support any protracted operations offshore.

Despite the Beaufort having a quite respectable range (about 1600 miles) No. 100 and the other squadrons operated from several Papua New Guinea airfields during the war. The squadrons moved as tasking changed, as the focus of ground operations shifted and to ensure responsiveness to such tasking. Future campaigns in, for example, the so-called 'inner arc' of the archipelagoes to our north could be similarly geographically dispersed. A major difference, however, would be the relatively few airfields capable of supporting

current or projected combat aircraft – not to mention the fewer aircraft likely to be available. The situation could be further complicated by the need to operate both air-to-air refueling, and airborne early warning and control aircraft, in conjunction with the tactical aircraft given the comparatively limited combat range of contemporary tactical aircraft. The anticipated entry into ADF service of two medium-sized amphibious ships within the next few years emphasises the potential for future offshore operations. It also emphasises the need for responsive air support for at least some of those operations.

Song of the Beauforts is not a chronicle of the South Pacific campaigns in World War II. It is a chronicle of the part played in those campaigns by a dedicated group of RAAF air and ground crews flying one particular aircraft, and of their tribulations in trying to get the job done. As such it is a valuable addition to the writings on the war in the South Pacific. It will be welcomed by general readers and those with a specific interest in the air war in this part of the world. ♦

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