

Combat Notes From Down Under

An analysis of Army Air Forces operations in the Southwest Pacific.

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AIR FORCE has asked me to tell you something of the conditions we face in fighting the Japanese in the Southwest Pacific.

The problems are many-fold, and we should face them frankly. Many of the problems have been overcome, for much pioneering has been done, but a lot of hard work lies ahead. The Jap is a ruthless and competent enemy, and nature causes hardships that are almost as bad as the Jap himself.

But I have found that our men of the Air Forces—whether Army, Navy or Marine—do their work uncomplainingly and set up great records in fighting and in maintenance. Our equipment is second to none, and we can match the enemy everywhere in skill and courage—in the air, on the ground and on the sea. We can have implicit faith in our final victory over him.

The key to our operations in the Southwest Pacific theater is, of course, the island continent of Australia. I arrived in Australia shortly before the fall of Java. Ours had been the last American plane to come into Java from India.

Australia is almost as big as the United States, but supports only slightly more than 7,000,000 people, over half of whom live along the east coast in the large cities of Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. Most of the industries are grouped around these metropolitan areas, which in turn are largely dependent on the Murray River Valley in the southeastern part of the continent, the main agricultural region.

West of the eastern coast range is a large semi-arid region which the Australians call the "Bush." The country is so dry that the average Australian does not figure on so many sheep to the acre, but rather on how many acres will support one sheep. Beyond the Bush stretches the western desert. When means are found for irrigating this vast arid region, Australia will be able to support a much larger population.

Because of the vastness of the land, combined with its characteristics and the shortage of population, practically no development of highways or railroads has taken place beyond the vicinity of the large cities along the eastern coast range. In the early days each state was developed separately. Jealous of its independence, each built its own railroad—with its separate gauge.

All of this is of vital importance to our operations. The network of independent railroads, for instance, always creates difficulty in the movement of our supplies. If an airplane engine is unloaded at Adelaide in the south, to be shipped 2,500 miles to Townsville in the north, we have to unload and load it several different times.

TO MOVE our equipment from Adelaide to Darwin, we have to make the first part of the journey by a slow, narrow-gauge railroad to Alice Springs, almost in the center of the continent, because there is no passable highway to that point from Adelaide. From Alice Springs to the small town of Birdum, some 200 miles south of Darwin, the Australian engineers built a military highway for 600 miles over the desert. Our engineers are now helping to improve this highway. From Birdum to Darwin we trans-ship again on another small-gauge railway.

But even where there is an adequate railroad, the methods of operation and the equipment often are, by our standards, entirely out of date and, in most cases, cannot handle the heavy loads that we have to ship to our various bases. Australian freight cars have been known to break under the weight of one of our Army's prime movers. Moreover, one is unable to turn to the roads, because they are usually impassable except in the extremely dry season. I have known many of our large units to be stuck for as long as a month, although we desperately needed them in the combat zone. Of course, such conditions make air transport vital to

our operations. To a great extent we found that it can alleviate many of the transportation problems just mentioned.

Communications, likewise, both for ourselves and the Australians, cause many headaches. Inadequate telegraph and telephone lines were overtaxed even in peacetime. They cannot begin to handle the volume of military business. We turned to the greatly expanded use of radio, but this forced us to encode and decode. Not only did we have to use many additional operatives, but we lost precious time in actual combat operations.

In the matter of airports, Australia is not so bad. Before the war the people had developed a system of airplane ambulances—flown by young doctors who had learned to fly in order to take care of the people who lived hundreds of miles removed from any large center of population. Ranches were equipped with what is known as pedal radio sets, permitting calls for medical aid in the quickest possible time. But the airports used for this purpose, while numerous, were not well situated from a tactical standpoint, nor were they large enough to accommodate our heavy, fast military aircraft.

Moreover, it was found impossible to create large fields as we know them in the United States because of the rocky nature of the terrain, or, in the extreme north, because of dense woods and the lack of heavy bulldozers and earth-moving equipment.

This and a fast-moving tactical picture forced the building of operational strips, 6,000 feet long, 300 feet wide, with the middle hard-surfaced to stand heavy bomber operations. This construction, of course, destroyed the top soil, and then the dust problem became acute. Dust got into every moving part that we used: engines, wheels, machine-guns and trucks. At one island airport the dust was fifty percent pure iron oxide. You can imagine what this did to our engines. (Continued on Page 40)



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Of course, every effort was made to lay the dust, but in most cases no black-top was available to cover the strips properly. Sometimes resort was made to the use of molasses—a trick learned in the Philippines, where the surplus of molasses would really hold the dust for a considerable length of time.

In New Guinea the problem was very much the same due to the hilly nature of the ground, except that if our planes ever got off the runway they frequently bogged down in the soft, swampy land. Operational needs often forced the use of these strips before dispersion areas could be built. The inability to effect dispersion immediately in many instances was the cause of the loss of planes from strafing by the enemy.

Most of the operations took place in the northeastern and northwestern parts of Australia. The climate and the type of operations were different from anything we had seen before. Our pilots and our combat and maintenance crews have experienced conditions they little dreamed existed. But, nevertheless, our men of the Air Forces have been masterful in their achievements.

On the northwest side, for example, we had one fighter group of P-40s that was especially successful. Aply led by Colonel Wurtsmith and skillfully managed by subordinate commanders, it established the remarkable record of 64 victories against 16 pilots lost from April 7 to the time of my departure from Australia on August 23. It is felt that credit should be given them for twice that number, as the Japs had to return home over 500 miles of open sea after this Group had jumped them. Many Jap planes were surely lost in the sea due to mechanical failures, such as holes in the oil coolers and leaky radiators, that forced them down some time after breaking off combat. Certainly others were lost through lack of sufficient fuel to return to their base.

FOR OPERATIONS off New Guinea, our bombers especially faced many difficult problems. They were usually based on the northeast side of the mainland of Australia. Often they had to fly 1,000 miles before reaching their point of departure for the raid.

If Rabaul was the target, they flew to an airport on New Guinea, refueled, and then headed for the target 550 miles away, first climbing over a 14,000-foot mountain range within the first sixty miles, which forced them many miles off the direct route. This meant a total of 3,200 miles an airplane had to cover to make one raid on Rabaul, approximately eighteen flying hours for the crew. Excessive use of engines, the wear and tear of combat and the effects of dust not only cut down the operational life of our planes but necessitated more frequent rest for the combat crews.

The weather there adds a great deal to the strain of combat. A constant equatorial front hangs in a northwesterly-southeasterly line from New Guinea to the Solomons. It shifts

back and forth only about sixty miles during the various seasons. Its weather has a nasty habit of being clear and unlimited one moment, and a solid sheet of rain the next.

Many of the pilots, in order to make their way home with gas still in the tanks, have to force their way through weather of this kind. The buffeting they get takes a lot out of them and their airplanes. Many of their missions had to be abandoned because of this front, and I feel sure that some of the ones that failed to return did so because of extreme meteorological conditions.

THIS weather, combined with combat, gives the navigator as difficult a job as he has ever experienced. The utmost accuracy on his part is demanded in flying over sea and jungle—and this despite the lack of landmarks, decent maps, navigational and radio aids, and the inability to use celestial navigation because of heavy cloud formation. The fact that he seldom fails is a commentary on the fine training he received at home.

The Fortress really hits hard. To support the Marine landing at Guadalcanal on August 7, Colonel Carmichael personally led his Group over Rabaul. Not only did his Group plaster the Japanese main airfield of Vunakanai, but it shot down forty percent of attacking Zeros in an aerial combat that lasted for an hour and a half.

The B-26 and the B-25 have had a similar record over Lae and Salamaua. In one raid that I recall, the B-26s, without fighter escort, shot down fifty percent of the Japanese who attacked them.

Flying conditions in the Southwest Pacific theater demand the best in equipment and we have the best. But it takes proper maintenance to keep it that way. Here the ground crews are doing a remarkable job. None of us could fly without them. In our April raid on the Philippines from Australian bases, I personally saw how vital they are to flying.

Too much credit for the success of that operation cannot be given to the combat crews who not only faced the dangers encountered throughout the trip to, from, and during the raids, but who helped in most of their own maintenance and rearming once we arrived at secret bases in the Philippines. Their brilliant success, however, depended on the work previously done by the Air Force ground troops in Australia. He who does not pay tribute to the boys who keep him flying isn't much of an airman.

But the good work of our ground crews is generally reflected throughout all of the service. Despite obstacles and incredible hardships, our men are cheerful and eager to get on with the job of winning the war.

They do recognize that they are up against a ruthless enemy—one of the toughest foes we have to face. If he is successful in combat, he has accomplished a divine mission for the Emperor. Should he die, he then goes to one of the great Japanese shrines, where he is rewarded for his efforts with hot Sake wine and geisha girls. We should do everything we can to help him get there. ☆