

BOOK REVIEW:

Battle of the Atlantic: RAAF in Coastal Command 1939-45

by John Quaife

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From the outset of World War II, Germany pursued a strategy to isolate Britain from the support available from the United States and the rest of the world. A relentless U-boat campaign nearly succeeded, resulting in a long and difficult battle for control of the Atlantic Ocean fought on the Allied side by Coastal Command and the Royal Navy.

In *Battle of the Atlantic*, John Quaife has provided an excellent account of the Australian participation in the campaign while expertly placing it within the context of the overall battle situation. Published by Big Sky Publishing, it is a co-operative production with the History and Heritage Branch of the Royal Australian Air Force.

From experience in World War I, Germany understood that an effective U-boat campaign to starve Great Britain was possible and could result in the Allies suing for peace. In 1939 Germany had 57 U-boats and by war's end had built 1153. It was against this backdrop that Coastal Command, the Cinderella arm of the RAF, commenced its war. Divisions within RAF Commands and disputes between the Air Force and Navy delayed any move to acquire modern aircraft designed for the task.

In 1939, No 10 Squadron RAAF had just taken delivery of state-of-the-art Sunderland anti-submarine aircraft in England and was preparing to fly them to Australia. Instead, they were placed at the disposal of RAF Coastal Command. Later, No 461 Squadron RAAF, also flying Sunderland aircraft, joined Coastal Command under Article XV of the Empire Air Training Scheme.

At the commencement of the Battle of the Atlantic the U-boat force had the upper hand, sinking Allied shipping faster than it could be replaced. Coastal Command strength improved with time; however, technological advances on both sides caused the momentum to swing between aircraft and U-boat. Much of the wartime experience of Coastal Command aircrews were tedious, flying large slow moving aircraft miles offshore, often in horrendous weather, and far from the public gaze. There were long periods between the sighting of U-boats, and some crews never spotted a U-boat during their entire tour of duty.

By 1942, the strength of the U-boat fleet had increased to 365, with at least 164 on patrol in the Atlantic. The battle had indeed become one of technological advances to gain the upper hand. The use of Leigh lights, powerful search lights fitted initially to Wellington aircraft disrupted the enemy's night haven for travelling on the surface, while Air to Surface Vessel Radar increase the probability of U-boat detection in any weather.

Battle of the Atlantic describes the various areas of the battle from encounters with Luftwaffe Junkers Ju-88 and

the very large Focke-Wulf Condor aircraft attacking and shooting down allied anti-submarine aircraft, to the very long-range patrols over the mid-Atlantic that denied the U-boat force its last remaining operational sanctuary. These only occurred later in the battle with the addition of modern, more capable aircraft.

The author provides a very human perspective of the men who flew the Atlantic and Bay of Biscay missions, their backgrounds, operational exploits, successes and losses. The reader is taken into the aircraft cockpits, describing the actions of the crew members in their defensive battles with attacking aircraft, and pursuing defiant U-boats.

Australians also served in other, different parts of Coastal Command - air-sea rescue squadrons, weather reconnaissance squadrons and photo reconnaissance squadrons. Weather reconnaissance actions required single aircraft operations deep into the Atlantic to enable accurate forecasting over Britain and Europe. Photo reconnaissance missions saw unarmed Spitfires flying lone missions over Berlin.

While the actions of Bomber Command attracted much of the public attention in Australia, even today, Coastal Command fought a battle that, had it been lost, would have halted the strategic bombing campaign over Europe. By March 1943, U-boats had sunk a staggering 3459 Allied and neutral ships in the Atlantic. Australian airmen served in more than 58 Coastal Command squadrons and over 400 Australians lost their lives, with more than 100 others wounded. Returning to Australia at the end of the war these veterans were given little recognition, and many openly criticised for not fighting the Japanese.

The author served in Royal Australian Air Force for 28 years. An experienced fighter pilot, John is a graduate of the Fighter Combat Instructors' Course. Promoted to Air Vice-Marshal in 2002 he was appointed Air Commander Australia and in 2005 was attached to the United States Central Command as Director of Coalition Air Operations in the Middle East theatre. He was appointed to the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal on retirement from the Air Force.

Battle of the Atlantic is well written and easy to read. The author provides an excellent overview of the Battle of the Atlantic including the excitement and terror of individual combat actions, not all of which were successful. It will capture the readers' attention and provide a much overdue reminder of the importance of an often-overlooked campaign and will suit a wide readership.

Bob Treloar