

BOOK REVIEW:

Viking Boys: Beaufighters, Bravery and Lost Airmen

by John Quaife

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No 455 Squadron, an Australian Article XV squadron formed under the Empire Air Training Scheme, was raised at RAAF Base Williamtown, NSW on 23 May 1941. Initially serving in RAF Bomber Command flying ageing Hampden aircraft, No 455 Squadron was the first RAAF squadron to bomb Germany when a single Hampden attacked Frankfurt.

Transferred to RAF Coastal Command, the Squadron was subsequently equipped with Beaufighter aircraft and tasked to attack enemy shipping, predominantly in the Norwegian fjords, and along with No 489 Squadron (RNZAF) became known as the ANZAC Strike Wing. No 455 Squadron flew flak suppression using cannons and rockets while No 489 Squadron were armed with torpedoes and cannons - a deadly combination of arms.

Viking Boys: Beaufighters, Bravery and Lost Airmen is an account of the Squadron's operational activities from 1943 until the end of the war as its aircrew sought out and attacked enemy shipping to disrupt the transport of raw materials and personnel enroute to Germany.

Substantial detail regarding the identities of Australian aircrew members is provided in the opening pages of the book requiring the reader's close attention. However, the author draws the reader into the book providing an interesting and absorbing account of operational successes and aircrew losses.

The conduct of anti-shipping attacks on the open sea and in the narrow confines of a fjord were perilous and early on resulted in significant aircraft losses. Aircrew learned quickly and engineered large scale attacks by 40 to 50 aircraft in a swarm to overwhelm the shipborne and land based anti-aircraft defences. There is an excellent description of the development of tactics, survival procedures and the skills required to concentrate formations of aircraft from several squadrons to complete these missions.

The dangers of the attacks and the determination in which they were driven home against heavily defended ports is well illustrated in the author's description of one such event: *One Beaufighter returned from the 12 September raid on Den Helder [Holland] with a metre of metal and a ships' wooden mast cap, complete with navigation light and electrical fittings, embedded in its nose.*

The author vividly captures the challenges, dangers

and adrenalin filled moments experienced by the aircrew. Description of the aircraft and their operations are simple and will be familiar to aircrew members while being easily understood by those without that experience. He describes complicated actions in the Norwegian fjords, as well as the routine activities and harsh conditions the aircrew and ground staff were subjected to on bases in Scotland and on the islands to the north. For example, he describes a Bellman hanger, used during by No 455 Squadron at RAF Dallachy, some of which still exist today on many RAAF bases, in a clear coherent manner that those unfamiliar with airfields and their equipment will be able to picture.

Viking Boys is the result of the author's experience on the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal tasked to review the cases of 13 personnel for consideration of an award of the Victoria Cross following the outcomes of the Valour Review in 2010. During the inquiry the author was made aware of the story of James Hakewill who was thought to have deliberately crashed his aircraft into a German escort to suppress anti-aircraft fire during an attack on a convoy in Orsta Fjord in 1944.

While travelling in Norway to research the book, the author recounts interviews and conversations with Norwegians who witnessed the Beaufighter attack on the convoy. While there he was given access to a diary belonging to a German sailor serving on board the escort vessel that was attacked by James Hakewill and he presents the sailor's view of being on the receiving end of Beaufighter attacks. It also includes a fascinating description of the sailor's experience as an Allied prisoner of war immediately following the surrender.

The focus of the final chapters of the book is the evidence provided to the Tribunal and the rigorous approach undertaken to determine the facts and to consider the public submissions concerning Hakewill's actions in Orsta Fjord.

Viking Boys is a fascinating account of one RAAF squadron's experience during World War II and the contemporary consideration of the actions of one of its pilots in Orsta Fjord on 5 December 1944. It will appeal to all interested in military history regardless of their own experiences.

Bob Treloar