



The Old Fliers' Group

Attached to the Royal Aero Club of WA (Inc).

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Last Meeting

Howard Wheatley was our *Speaker of the Day* at the June meeting. He told us of his World War II experiences, starting when he joined the RAAF in June 1942. He began his training on Tiger Moths at Cunderdin, then on to Avro Ansons at Gerladton in October and by mid-1943 had finished his training on Beauforts in No. 1 OTU at Bairnsdale in Victoria. His next move was to Nowra in NSW for torpedo practice.

In late 1943 Howard was posted to No.8 Squadron flying out of Vivigani airstrip on Goodenough Island on operations to the north-west of New Guinea. Partols were mainly along the sea lanes leading to Rabaul in New Britain. In order to avoid being detected by Japanese radar, the Beauforts were flown at “dot” feet – at night! (On one occasion he dipped a prop in the water, causing severe damage to the prop and the engine.)



Howard Wheatley (left) with his Beaufort crew in 1944.

Some members who attended the meeting were on the edge of their seat when Howard described a night operation into Simpson Harbour at Rabaul. After approaching the harbour at about 15 feet they climbed to 200 feet and, when within range of a Japanese ship, released a torpedo amid a hail of ground fire.

The Japanese had developed a radar controlled searchlight system that locked onto the aircraft, which became an illuminated magnet for ground fire. He then described how the cockpit blinds were pulled down to preserve night vision as he flew evasive manoeuvres, on instruments, to avoid the lights and the ground fire.

It was not possible to observe the result of such an attack, even the tail gunner was temporarily blinded by the searchlights so it was necessary to refer to later intelligence reports to learn of the damage assessment.

Howard related another story of how he ran into a severe electrical storm on the way home from a night attack on Rabaul. With fuel running low, his radio operator picked up a faint beam from Kiriwina, a US Air Force base on a small island. Luckily the Americans did not open fire on his Beaufort as he landed. He taxied into a parking bay but did not have to shut down his engines – his tanks were bone dry and the engines stopped without his help.

Later Howard flew patrols over the ocean to the north of New Guinea until his operational tour ended. He was then recommended to Central Flying School as an instructor, but before he could become established he received a telegram which invited him to join Captain Charles Snook at Airlines (WA) Ltd in Perth. He accepted the offer and in June 1944 became a civilian pilot.

Anniversaries

With the Royal Flying Doctor Service celebrating its 85th anniversary, your editor thought it appropriate to relate the story of Jimmy Darcy who was injured in a horse riding accident on Ruby Downs Station, to the south of Halls Creek in 1917 – in the days before the RFDS. Due to his deteriorating condition, the postmaster at Halls Creek carried out an operation on his kitchen table without surgical instruments and anaesthetics – with directions, by Morse code, from a doctor in Perth.

Also, the 70th anniversary of the Dambuster raid occurred on 16/17 May 2013. At the meeting it was appropriate to mention the historic raids on the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams. The “bouncing bomb” was used at the Mohne and Eder dams and was designed by Barnes Wallis. If members wish to read up on the events, it is well covered in the book by Paul Brickhill, titled *The Dambusters*.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Old Fliers Group will be at the Royal Aero Club starting at noon on Friday 28th June. Our *Speaker of the Day* will be John Wager who will talk on the aviation interests of Nevil Shute Norway, better known as Neville Shute, the author of *A Town Like Alice*.

A parking fee exemption has been arranged for the time slot 10.30 to 2.30 on the day of the meeting.

Hope to see you there.

Brian Hernan