

## **THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET IN 1945**

A Commonwealth effort and a remarkable achievement

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### **The Aim**

The British Pacific Fleet (BPF) was created with the aim of including British forces in operations against the Japanese mainland that would end the war in the Far East. The 'Quadrant' conference of allied leaders at Quebec in August 1943 had agreed that greater priority should be given to the Pacific War, whilst retaining the 'Germany First' principle but for much of 1944 Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff argued bitterly about how best to implement that decision. The former wanted to see the defeats of 1941/42 redeemed by the re-conquest of Burma, Malaya and the oil-rich former Dutch East Indies island of Sumatra<sup>1</sup>. The Chiefs of Staff conceded that a campaign in Burma was inevitable to support American ambitions to provide overland supplies to the Chinese army along the 'Burma Road' but argued that fighting on the littoral of the Indian Ocean would not be seen post-war as central to the defeat of Japan. On the other hand, a British fleet fighting alongside the US Pacific Fleet would be more economical in terms of manpower and would be seen post-war as a significant contribution to the defeat of the enemy.

British plans for the Pacific came into sharper focus after 'Quadrant' and the second Quebec Conference, held in September 1944 and code-named 'Octagon', set a timetable for the defeat of Germany in October 1944 and that of Japan twelve months later. In the event, Germany was not defeated until the spring of 1945 but it had become clear that if Britain wanted to play a part in the principal operations against Japan, the pace of American progress meant that action needed to be taken quickly. Time continued to be lost, however, by the acrimonious discussions between Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff that continued through the first eight months of 1944 but at the 'Octagon' conference the march of events made a decision imperative and Britain offered to send a balanced fleet including at least four fleet carriers to the Pacific by the end of the year. Two months after 'Octagon', American agreement in principle was reached that a British carrier task force would fight in the Pacific despite continued opposition from Churchill and the USN Chief of Operations, Admiral Ernest J King<sup>2</sup>. By then it was clear that USA had become the senior ally and the knowledge of where power now lay, especially in the Pacific, led to a degree of harmony in the decision-taking process that had been absent before.

Britain could not achieve the aim alone, however. After five years of total war she relied heavily on the Commonwealth for manpower, ships, industrial capacity and land for bases. The man chosen to command the new fleet had to be an outstanding diplomat as well as an able leader and tactician. Made up from elements throughout the British Empire, the BPF was to be subordinate to American orders in action, using USN signal procedures and codes. The man chosen to be Commander-in-Chief was Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser GCB KBE, the outstanding leader of his generation. He was responsible to

the Admiralty in London for the general direction the forces under his command; to the Australian Government for the dockyards, air stations, depots and barracks that formed his main base and to the individual Navy Boards of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa for the men and ships they provided him. Operationally he took his orders from Admiral Chester Nimitz the Allied Commander-in-Chief Pacific Ocean Areas. But because of his own seniority, he delegated sea command to Vice Admiral Sir Bernard Rawlings his second-in-command.

### **Creation of the base**

Before the BPF could enter the Pacific Theatre it had to establish a base complex to support every aspect of its operations. The major RN facilities at Singapore and Hong Kong had been over-run in the first months of the Japanese advance. The loss of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* at the same time and heavy commitments west of Suez negated any possibility of Britain sending a 'main fleet' to the Pacific in accordance with pre-war plans until the German fleet was destroyed. Australia was the only feasible location for the new fleet<sup>3</sup> but in the autumn of 1944 it lacked much that would be needed and was heavily committed to supporting US forces in the South West Pacific Area. Men and material would take time to travel the 12,000 miles from the UK and the Japanese mainland was 4,400 miles from Sydney so that intermediate bases closer to the scene of operations would have to be identified, set up and stocked. The RN plans in 1944 had assumed operations off the Philippine Islands but by March 1945 the BPF would be operating at nearly twice that distance with a consequent need for more logistical shipping. The time wasted by the Prime Minister prior to 'Octagon' was to limit the ability of the BPF to deploy once agreement was reached.

A mission led by Rear Admiral C S Daniel was sent at to the USA, US Pacific Fleet Headquarters at Pearl Harbor and Australia in early 1944 tasked with examining the USN fleet support organisation in detail and making recommendations<sup>4</sup>. It was made clear to him that the RN would have to be entirely self-sufficient with regard to naval, Victualling, armament and air stores and that, whilst furnace fuel oil could be drawn from shared bulk stores, an amount equivalent to that taken out would have to be put in by British supply tankers. Since most British ships together with their weapons and ammunition differed from American stock this was a sensible and reasonable approach but, ironically, by late 1944 the RN's carrier air groups contained more American than British aircraft but they had been so extensively modified that they differed from the USN standard with the result that they, too, were incompatible. Generously, the USN did offer Admiral Daniel a share in any excess capacity it had ashore and afloat in the combat areas and agreed to help with battle damage repair on an identical basis to its own ships.

Detailed planning began in May 1944 when Admiral Daniel and his team arrived in Australia. At first they did not know when the BPF would arrive or where it was to operate but by November they had produced a two hundred and fifty page administrative plan which was forwarded to the Joint Administration Planning Sub Committee (JAPSC) of the Australian Defence Committee. This body assessed the cost of what was needed in terms of the manpower and materials that would have to be provided by the Australian

Government to meet the Admiralty's requirements. The document included broad requirements for dockyards, port facilities and stevedores, naval air stations and air yards, barracks, workshops, transport, victualling, naval, air and armament stores depots and local-purchase facilities for a range of commodities on a massive scale. The result of the Australian deliberations was a document<sup>5</sup> which formed the basis for the development of the BPF's main base complex throughout 1945.

On 10 November 1944, Vice Admiral J W Rivett-Carnac was appointed as Vice Admiral (Q), known as VA(Q), with his headquarters in Melbourne. He had responsibility for the whole logistical support of the BPF including the activities ashore and ships of the Fleet Train. In December 1944 a headquarters was established in Sydney for the Flag Officer Naval Air Stations, Australia, Rear Admiral R H Portal, known as FONAS(A). His title was changed in 1945 to Flag Officer Naval Aviation Pacific, FONAP. He was responsible to the VA(Q) for the supply of replacement aircrew, aircraft and engines up to and including the combat area; the dissemination of information to enable the best distribution of scarce air material in Australia and the maintenance and repair of aircraft in air yards under his control. He was also responsible for training aircrew in Australia to meet the fleet's requirements and for providing the Commander-in-Chief with aviation advice when the carriers were at sea.

The air requirements alone were on a large scale. Some airfields, such as Nowra, were taken over complete from the RAAF and run by RN Mobile Operational Naval Air Base, MONAB, personnel sent out from the UK. Others such as Schofields outside Sydney were built as RN Air Stations from scratch but still manned by MONABs. A huge industrial complex was taken over near Brisbane and run as Transportable Aircraft Maintenance Yard, TAMY, which in the event proved to be under-employed and far from transportable. MONABs were intended, as the name implied, to be mobile but all ended up running fixed bases like their equivalents in the UK and elsewhere. One, MONAB 4, ran an air station on Ponam in the Admiralty Islands but this was built by the USN Construction Battalions or SeaBees and had become, effectively, a permanent base<sup>6</sup>. Fifteen airfields were operated or planned by and for the RN in Australia. The RAAF provided a wide range of common aircraft stores that proved useful to the Fleet Air Arm and provided transport which helped move aircraft from docks to airfields and back again. This was unglamorous but important work as was that of 300 Group RAF which operated Dakota and Liberator freight-carrying aircraft from Australia in support of the BPF. One of the Liberators was fitted out as a VIP transport for Admiral Fraser. Over 1,000 naval aircraft were assembled in the various airfields, modified to the latest operational standards and moved forward in replenishment carriers to support the BPF. Production-line techniques were evolved, an example of which is still in use in the UK's Joint Force Harrier. When the war ended sooner than expected, over 700 aircraft together with engines and equipment were taken to sea off the coasts of New South Wales and Queensland and ditched. They lie there on the seabed still.

### **Creation of the Fleet Train**

In the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean Theatres the Royal Navy had relied on an extensive system of bases to provide ships with fuel, ammunition, stores and repair facilities. The distances contemplated for operations in the Pacific, however, made it impossible for the main fleet to even consider returning frequently to a distant fixed base for replenishment. Consideration had been given to the need for depot ships capable of moving to a remote anchorage after the Abyssinian Crisis of 1937 which resulted in the construction of submarine, destroyer and aircraft depot ships which assumed even greater importance in the Pacific. In 1942 work started to convert five liners into heavy repair ships and from late 1943 the Admiralty began to prepare a list of ships that would be needed to carry logistical support from the Australian main base to the likely combat areas. It was made clear by the British Ministry of War Transport, however, that very few merchant ships could be made available and that the Admiralty would have to rely on the auxiliary shipping it already possessed.

The Canadian Government was able to provide a number of new ships based on mercantile hulls fitted out as repair, maintenance, accommodation and amenity ships. Many were converted from 'Fort' class merchant ships under construction in Canada and the extensive equipment fit varied to allow work on aircraft components, aircraft engines, escort ships, landing craft and coastal forces to be carried out. There were also tankers, store-carriers, tugs, harbour craft, hospital ships and floating docks but few were completed before VJ-Day and even fewer saw operational service. In July 1945 the Fleet Train comprised ten repair and maintenance ships, twenty-two tankers, twenty-four store carriers, four hospital ships, five tugs, eleven miscellaneous vessels and two floating docks<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps the most interesting auxiliary was the amenity ship *Menestheus* which featured a 350-seat theatre, bars and even a brewery capable of brewing 250 barrels of beer per week. The repair and maintenance ships were commissioned as HM Ships and proved to be valuable assets, some of which saw long service; the last of them HMS *Rame Head*, still technically the property of the Canadian Government, is being scrapped in 2009. Tankers and store-ships were manned by a mixture of Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) and Merchant Navy crews. The latter, drawn from all over the Empire and the Allied nations were a constant source of wonder to the USN which commissioned all its auxiliaries as warships with USN crews.

A Fleet Aircraft Maintenance Group was created which comprised the maintenance carriers *Unicorn* and *Pioneer* together with a number of specialist maintenance ships capable of repairing airframes, engines, instruments and equipment such as hydraulic and electrical assemblies. Additionally a number of escort carriers were used to ferry naval aircraft as freight from the UK to Australia and to carry fully operational replenishment aircraft from Australia to the fleet carriers in the operational areas<sup>8</sup>. The FAMG proved capable of carrying out nearly all the aircraft repair work needed by the BPF up to August 1945.

### **Task Forces 57 and 37**

The BPF was established on 22 November 1944, the remainder of the former Eastern Fleet being re-designated the East Indies Fleet continuing to be based in Trincomalee.

The new fleet was balanced and composed mainly of new ships, many of which had only recently arrived in theatre. There were representatives of all the Commonwealth navies including the Canadian cruiser *Uganda*, the New Zealand cruisers *Achilles* and *Gambia* and the Australian destroyers *Quiberon*, *Queenborough*, *Nizam*, *Napier*, *Nepal* and *Norman*<sup>9</sup>. Although the majority of ships were nominally RN, many had numbers of Commonwealth sailors within their ships' companies who integrated seamlessly into their duties. The destroyers *Quilliam*, *Quadrant*, *Quality* and *Quickmatch* which had so many RAN sailors that they considered to be Australian ships are examples.

The fighting core of the BPF was the 1<sup>st</sup> Aircraft carrier Squadron (1 ACS), commanded by Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian, which included all six of the *Illustrious* class armoured carriers in 1945 although not all were operational at any one time. The fleet included *King George V* class battleships, light cruisers and destroyers in growing numbers and it was arguably the most powerful British fleet ever deployed in the pre-nuclear era. The Commonwealth contribution was especially important in terms of the aircrew that made up the thirty-six naval air squadrons that served in carrier air groups by VJ-Day. By 1945 more than half the Royal Navy's aircrew were Commonwealth citizens either serving in the RN and its reserves or as members of the RNZN, RCN and RAN and their reserves on attachment. A quarter of all front-line aircrew were New Zealanders and as the war ended hundreds of RAAF fighter pilots volunteered to transfer to the RANVR for the Fleet Air Arm and were undergoing deck landing training in British carriers.

Although the BPF did not arrive in the Pacific until 1945 and could not match the USN's scale of under-way fleet support, it had gained some previous experience of strike warfare in the theatre. In 1943 HMS *Victorious* was lent to the US Pacific Fleet at a time when it had only one fleet carrier, the USS *Saratoga*. Having recently taken part in the Malta convoy battles, *Victorious*' fighter control officers had much to offer the USN in terms of tactics and technique and were instrumental in improving the USN's air defence organisation. The USS *Saratoga* was lent to the British Eastern Fleet in 1944 and her squadrons passed on the latest USN strike warfare techniques to the growing number of carrier squadrons in the Indian Ocean. When it arrived in Sydney in February 1945 the BPF had rapidly to assimilate the USN's tactics, signal codes and procedures. The ships even had to adopt pennant numbers allocated by the USN. They were greatly helped in this by the RAN, many of whose ships were already operating as part of the US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet and were, therefore, familiar with the different way of doing things.

Among the USN procedures adopted was the system of designated task forces and groups. Thus the BPF was designated as Task Force 57, TF 57, although it was only the size of a USN task group, TG. The US Fast Carrier Task Force was designated TF 58. The US used two strike fleet commanders in the Pacific during 1945 and, although the ships remained largely the same, the fleet's designation changed when the commander changed; one was usually ashore planning the next stage of operations while the other was at sea. Thus when Admiral Spruance had sea command his ships were designated the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet and when Admiral Halsey relieved him it became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet<sup>10</sup>. The BPF was part of these changes and was designated TF 57 during operations off Okinawa under

the former and TF 37 during operations off the Japanese mainland under the latter. The Fleet Train was designated TF 112.

The Admiralty intended the BPF to reach its full strength in October 1945 in time for Operation 'Olympic', the planned invasion of Japan. The arrival and training of new units such as the light fleet carriers of the *Colossus* class and the build-up of the Australian base and the size of the Fleet Train were geared to this end. An earlier build-up of fighting ships could not have been sustained by the number of tankers, store-ships and replenishment carriers available at the beginning of 1945.

## **Operations**

Before his fleet was ready to move into the Pacific, Admiral Fraser called on Admiral Nimitz in Pearl Harbor with key members of his staff. Nimitz asked for the BPF to strike at the important oil refineries in the Palembang complex in Sumatra as the fleet deployed from Ceylon to Australia. He had several reasons for doing so. Between them, the Sumatran refineries provided Japan with about 75% of the aviation fuel it needed and any reduction would have strategic significance. USAAF B-29 bombers had attacked the plants recently using high-level bombing techniques and had failed to score hits; tactical aircraft from carriers were expected to be more accurate. It must also be said that Nimitz wanted a demonstration of the RN capability to carry out sustained strikes at long range so that he could judge the value of the BPF to his command. Fraser accepted immediately and 1 ACS relished the chance to show what it could achieve. Models of the refineries were made in the carriers which helped operations staff brief aircrew on individual, specific targets and an 'air co-ordinator', Major Hay RM from *Victorious*, was used for the first time in line with USN procedures.

The refinery at Pladjoe was attacked on 24 January 1945 and, after delays caused by rain and low cloud, Soengi Gerong was attacked on 29 January after which the fleet proceeded to Australia. The results were most successful, considerable damage was achieved by the set-piece attacks; both refineries were put temporarily out of action and neither recovered to full capacity before the end of the war. The cost was high, however, with 16 aircraft lost to enemy action and a further 25 to deck landing accidents and engine-failures. Thirty aircrew were lost, some without trace and even today we have no idea what happened to some of them. The decision to attack the two refineries on separate days telegraphed the intention to return to the enemy who was better prepared for the second strike and the Avenger squadrons suffered in consequence. Some aspects of the Search and Rescue (SAR) organisation worked well and destroyers rescued a number of aircrew who ditched west of Sumatra. A submarine placed to the east of the island to rescue aircrew was not told of the delay to the original attack plan and had left the area when a corsair ditched near its briefed position on 29 January. Ominously, replenishment at sea (RAS) proved to be slow and difficult with none of the carriers able to take on the amount of oil they needed in the time available. Delays and the low stocks of oil remaining in the tankers led to a projected third strike being cancelled. Without modern, fleet tankers such as those in service with the USN with their robust rigs and

high pumping rates, slow replenishment was to be a recurring theme throughout the BPF's operations.

TF 57 was located and attacked by enemy aircraft on 29 January, probably as another result of repeating the first strike with the second. All were splashed by Combat Air patrol (CAP) fighters but casualties were caused by 'friendly' anti-aircraft fire which hit *Illustrious*. This was to continue to be a problem in the BPF with inexperienced gun-crews engaging low-level aircraft at close range across a force arranged in a circular disposition.

Aircraft losses were made good in Sydney in February. HMS *Unicorn* had arrived only days before the fleet with replacement aircraft and the first MONABs were ready after considerable help from the RAAF, just in time to provide shore-based continuation flying facilities for the carrier squadrons.

The final US decision to accept the BPF for operations alongside the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet was not taken until March 1945 after it had sailed from Sydney to Manus to work up. Despite late opposition, Admiral Nimitz had insisted that the BPF form part of his Central Pacific Command and was justified within hours when *Intrepid*, *Wasp* and *Franklin* were damaged, reducing the number of carriers available for Operation 'Iceberg', the landings on Okinawa. TF 57 operated to the south west of Okinawa tasked with preventing enemy aircraft from staging from Formosa to the combat area through airfields on the islands of Miyako, Ishigaki and Mihara in the Sakishima Gunto. The BPF planned to operate a cycle of two strike days followed by two days of replenishment with four USN escort carriers replacing them while they were absent. Strikes began on 26 March but the airfields proved unrewarding targets as the enemy was able to repair the runways, made of crushed coral, every night leaving the work of destruction to begin again at dawn. The Japanese were also adept at building 'flak traps', positioning dummy aircraft as bait to draw aircraft into attacking from particular directions where they could be caught in heavy cross-fire. Single passes at very low-level were the only antidote. The fleet's lack of night-flying capability was keenly felt and it was even argued that a Swordfish dropping bombs randomly from altitude at night might have disrupted the runway repair work. Some pre-dawn strikes by Avengers from *Indomitable* were flown hoping to catch Japanese 'early birds' staging through the islands.

Losses of men and aircraft were made good by replacements transferred from the replenishment carriers during RAS periods in relatively safe areas. During these spells, the carrier aircrew were mostly able to rest as defensive fighter and anti-submarine patrols were flown from the escort carrier *Speaker* at first, later replaced by *Ruler* in May. Following the US landings on Okinawa on 1 April the Japanese reacted strongly and launched a number of Kamikaze attacks, some of which were directed against 1 ACS. *Indefatigable* was the first to be hit by an aircraft that broke through the CAP and impacted at the base of the island. Despite damage and casualties she was able to operate aircraft again after repairs that took an hour. During the next month all the British carriers were hit and damaged to varying degrees including *Formidable* which replaced

*Illustrious* in May. Their armoured decks prevented them from suffering any critical damage and all were able to maintain their position in the operational 'line'.

The USN was impressed and on 8 April the USS *Hancock* was so badly damaged by a Kamikaze hit that she had to return to the USA for extensive repairs. Admiral Spruance requested that TF 57 strike at airfields in Formosa where it was believed that the most effective suicide units were based, considering that the armoured British carriers would be less vulnerable to counter-attack than their USN equivalents. Admiral Rawlings agreed readily despite the fact that his force had been scheduled to depart to Leyte Gulf for a replenishment period after only two more strike days off the Sakishima Gunto. Strikes against Formosan targets were carried out on 11 and 13 April and proved to be the fleet's most successful interdiction operations during 'Iceberg' with damage caused to airfields, aircraft on the ground, road and rail transport and at least 16 enemy aircraft shot down in air combat for the loss of 3 of its own<sup>11</sup>. As TF 57 withdrew from Formosan waters Admiral Spruance requested it to carry out more strike days against the Sakishima Gunto since the US escort carriers that operated in their absence had only about half the BPF's number of embarked aircraft and had not been able to maintain the same pressure against the islands. Despite the fact that the Fleet Train had no more replacement aircraft and was desperately short of everything, Admiral Rawlings agreed. The increased tasking showed that the BPF had been accepted as equals by the seasoned 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet and had moved from being a 'flexible reserve' which was requested to take action into an essential part of a coalition fleet under its commander's orders. After another strike day on 20 April 1945, TF 57 sailed for San Pedro Bay in Leyte Gulf to meet the Fleet Maintenance Group and replenish. It had been at sea on operations for 32 days continuously, the longest sortie any British fleet had undertaken since the days of sail.

On 1 May TF 57 sailed for further strikes against the Sakishima Gunto where it followed the same routine as before and continued to be subject to kamikaze attacks. *Formidable* was hit on 4 May and damaged after the battleships and cruisers left the screen to bombard airfields with gunfire. This considerably reduced the number of anti-aircraft guns in the screen to defend the carriers against the CAP. *Formidable* was damaged again on 9 May by a kamikaze and again on 18 May when one of her aircraft's guns were fired accidentally in the hangar, writing off 30 aircraft in the ensuing fire. She left for urgent repair work in Sydney on 22 May followed by the remainder of the BPF on 25 May, arriving in early June. During Operation 'Iceberg' the BPF had spent 62 days at sea with a break of 8 days in Leyte Gulf. Aircraft from five fleet carriers had flown 5,335 sorties and expended 1,000 tons of bombs, 500,000 rounds of aircraft ammunition and 950 three-inch aircraft rockets. 42 enemy aircraft had been destroyed in the air and over 100 on the ground had been claimed and, most importantly, the enemy had been prevented from staging aircraft through the Sakishima Gunto to Okinawa by day and 186 small vessels whose total tonnage was estimated at 30,000 grt were either sunk or damaged beyond repair. The cost of the BPF's first Pacific operations was not light, 160 aircraft were lost in the air, in accidents or to Kamikaze damage. 29 'flyable duds' were returned to the Fleet Air Maintenance Group in return for 173 replacement aircraft out of the 213 spare aircraft brought forward in replenishment and ferry carriers from Australia via Manus<sup>12</sup>. Forty-four officers and men were killed in ships, most in kamikaze attacks

and forty-one aircrew had been lost. All four remaining carriers needed dockyard repairs on their return to Sydney to make good two months' wear and tear as well as the damage inflicted by the enemy.

The only action by the BPF in June 1945 was Operation 'Inmate', a series of strikes by *Implacable* and a battle group that had recently arrived from European waters against Truk Atoll in the Caroline Islands. Once important as an advanced Japanese fleet base, these had been by-passed by the Americans and 'Inmate' was a training operation intended to work up the new air group to operational efficiency under Pacific conditions. On its completion, *Implacable* moved to Manus to continue her work-up and await the remainder of the fleet which joined her at the beginning of July. By then the US Pacific Fleet command had changed and the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet under Admiral Halsey. The BPF was re-designated as TF 37 and formed an integral part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet, a remarkable achievement after less than six months experience in Pacific operations<sup>13</sup>.

For operations off the coast of Japan itself 1 ACS now comprised *Formidable* as flagship and *Victorious*, *Indefatigable* and *Implacable*. *Indomitable* remained in Sydney for a refit after which she was to become flagship of the newly arrived 11 ACS comprising the new light fleet carriers *Colossus*, *Venerable*, *Vengeance* and *Glory*. Like *Indefatigable*, *Implacable* had two squadrons of Seafires in her air group, the two ships together embarking a total of 88 of these fighters. Hitherto, the Seafire had been employed solely on defensive missions because of its short radius of action but now that it was the most numerous single type, providing nearly a third of the total BPF embarked strength, it was essential that some means of extending its range be found. Fortunately, the two fighter wings, working quite separately, were able to improvise fittings to their Seafires enabling them to carry large, external fuel tanks with which they could carry out 'Ramrod' and strike escort missions as well as fleet CAP. Even by carrying more fuel outside, rather than inside the airframe, however, the Seafires still lacked the 'legs' of the superb Corsairs embarked in *Victorious* and *Formidable*, even when these American-built fighters were carrying a 1,000lb bomb load.

Operations began on 17 July but were hampered by bad weather which included typhoons. Despite this the Corsair squadrons dropped more than fourteen tons of bombs in two days. The familiar cycle of two strike days followed by two RAS days was followed and, with growing experience, things worked a little more smoothly. On 24 July, 6 Avengers, 2 Corsairs and 2 Fireflies found and attacked a small Japanese escort carrier believed to be the *Shimane Maru*, the only occasion on which RN aircraft attacked an aircraft carrier during the war. They left her afloat but on fire with her back broken to be sunk later by USN aircraft. 416 sorties were flown on that one day, 261 of them offensive. Targets included shipping in the Inland Sea and the interdiction of airfields and railways in the area between Nagoya and Tokyo. TF 37 withdrew to RAS on 30 July, a process which was slowed by further typhoons which caused a great deal of damage to the wooden flight decks of US carriers but elicited the reply "what storm" from Admiral Rawlings when asked by Admiral Halsey how his ships were faring, showing how the BPF's confidence had grown.

The Allied fleets were ready for action again on 3 August but were ordered to keep clear of southern Honshu until after the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August. Bad weather prevented flying on 8 August but strikes were launched against northern Honshu on 9 August. On this day aircraft of the BPF dropped a greater tonnage of bombs than the RN had dropped on any other single day in World War 2 and Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray DSC RCNVR earned the second VC to be awarded to a Fleet Air Arm pilot during the conflict. He was the senior pilot of 1841 NAS in *Formidable* and was leading the carrier's second bomb-armed fighter sweep of the morning, Ramrod 3A, when he saw the Japanese escort destroyer *Amakusa* anchored in Onagawa Wan and attacked it. Despite being hit and set on fire by flak, he hit the ship with at least one of his bombs which caused it to sink before crashing into the sea nearby and losing his own life.

By 10 August carrier aircraft were able to roam at will over Honshu destroying military installations, aircraft and what remained of the enemy's transport systems. On that day alone over 50 enemy aircraft were destroyed by TF 37 fighters out of a total of over 700 by the combined carrier task forces. Admiral Halsey now decided to stay beyond the planned last date for this phase of operations, which had never been given a code name, in order to pin down any Japanese air forces that might otherwise be deployed onto the enemy's new front against the Russians. The USN Fleet Train had grown to the extent that he could support such a change with relative ease but the BPF's smaller logistical group had insufficient fuel to keep the whole of TF 37 in action and there were no replacements for the general shortage of stores. Generously, the USN agreed to provide fuel for a token British force to be 'in at the kill' but *Formidable*, *Victorious* and *Implacable* had to return to Sydney. This left *Indefatigable* which had missed the first series of strikes and was, therefore, better equipped with stores to form a new Task Group 38.5 together with the battleship *King George V*, some cruisers and a destroyer flotilla. There was considerable disappointment in the other carriers when it was clear that the end of the war was near but the logistical logic was inescapable and the joyous reception the ships received when they returned to Australia later in August was more than adequate compensation.

Dawn strikes were launched from *Indefatigable* on 15 August and led to the last fighter combat of the war<sup>14</sup> when a flight of Avengers was intercepted by a dozen 'Zeros'. They in turn were taken on by 10 Seafires of 24 Naval Fighter Wing which shot down 8 of the enemy for the loss of one of their own, piloted by Sub Lieutenant 'Freddie' Hockley RNVR who parachuted safely to the ground but was murdered by Japanese troops at noon. At 0700 all strikes were recalled following the announcement of the cease-fire that ended the Pacific War.

British and Dutch submarines had operated against the Japanese from bases in the Indian Ocean and from September 1944 the 8<sup>th</sup> Flotilla moved to Fremantle, West Australia, where it was placed under the operational control of the Commander Submarines 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet. The USN had repair facilities for its own boats there and the British boats benefited from access to the RAN Victualling Yard and Armament Depot not to mention the extraordinary hospitality of the local population. In March 1945 the 8<sup>th</sup> Flotilla

moved to Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands together with its depot ship *Maidstone*. Its place at Fremantle was taken by *Adamant* with the 4<sup>th</sup> Flotilla. Both flotillas became part of the BPF on 1 April 1945, but continued under US operational control<sup>15</sup>. Submarines, backed by the operations of the allied surface fleets and their air arms formed part of a three-dimensional blockade of Japan which cut off the mainland from virtually all external supplies of raw materials, fuel and food. Regardless of bombing and amphibious assault, the blockade would have brought Japan to the point of starvation and collapse by the spring of 1946.

Mines laid by aircraft, submarines and surface ships formed another element of the blockade and the RN deployed three fast minelayers to the Far East but they arrived too late to see much active service. Considerable numbers of minesweepers began to arrive in the BPF by VJ-Day but saw most use post-war to clear the many minefields that were a hazard to the return of peace-time shipping. The RAN's *Bathurst* class minesweeping corvettes of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Minesweeping Flotillas were allocated to the BPF and used as part of the Fleet Train. Their main task was escorting replenishment tankers on passage to and from the US bulk fuel installations at Eniwetok. Four of these ships representing both Flotillas were with the RAN contingent in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945 to witness the surrender ceremony<sup>16</sup>.

As soon as hostilities ended ships of the BPF were used for a number of immediate tasks including the relief of Hong Kong where maintenance ships proved especially useful in restoring the run-down civilian infrastructure including power stations. Carriers landed their aircraft, filled the hangars with bunks and extra messing arrangements and carried former prisoners of the Japanese to Australia and Canada. They were also used to return troops and *Implacable* entered Sydney harbour on 15 November 1945 with 2,126 soldiers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division on board which it had brought from Balikpapan. Whilst on passage she had passed through the Prince of Wales' Channel in the Torres Strait at the tip of Cape York in northern Queensland. She was the largest ship to have done so at the time and for the next three days she sailed down the east coast of Australia inside the Great Barrier Reef, giving her 'passengers' a lasting memory. In 1946 the BPF remained a powerful force which 'showed the flag' with visits to Australian and New Zealand ports. Sailors from throughout the Commonwealth took part in victory parades and many other notable events before the fleet was run down.

## **Summing Up**

The British Pacific Fleet achieved its aim and ensured that a British admiral was present to sign the Japanese surrender document on board the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945. He was there by right with his flagship, HMS *Duke of York*, close by allowing him to act as host to notable allied leaders. In retrospect the BPF can be seen as a role model for the seamless integration of the Commonwealth Navies to achieve a strategic result greater than the sum of their individual contributions. They had played a significant part in the most powerful demonstration of Sea Power in the modern era. The mutually supporting three-dimensional blockade had brought Japan to its knees and reduced the large, and in some cases undefeated, Japanese armies in China and on island

bases into virtual prisoners unable to return and fight in defence of their homeland. Japanese air forces were unable to oppose the carrier-borne aircraft that operated at will over the heart of the Japanese Empire.

Contemporary fleet operations contain many features that are a legacy from the BPF, not least the ability to replenish under way and poise task forces for considerable periods at sea until needed. The ability to combine assets and communicate within a coalition force is so much taken for granted now that the fact that it was not always straightforward has almost been forgotten. The spirit of 'make do and mend' showed what could be achieved in a short time and was reflected in the British achievements during the South Atlantic Campaign in 1982. The BPF showed the United States that it had loyal allies that were capable of coming together to stand by it, not as a subservient force but as equals ready to learn but with their own ideas and high standards, even in the most intense and technically advanced form of warfare yet seen. This capability was demonstrated again only five years later in the Korean conflict and on many occasions since. I hope that it still has relevance in the twenty-first century.

In summary the achievements of the British Pacific Fleet were due to the Commonwealth in large measure and were both numerous and impressive by any yardstick. They were standards of which we can all be justly proud.

David Hobbs  
Twyford  
June 2009

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<sup>1</sup> H P Willmot. *Grave of a Dozen Schemes – British Naval Planning and the War against Japan 1943-45*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> David Stevens – editor. *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, second edition, Crow's Nest NSW, Allen & Unwin, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> David Hobbs. *Moving Bases – Royal Navy maintenance carriers and MONABS*, Liskeard, Maritime Books, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Potentialities of Australia as a Base for Royal Navy Forces*, JAPSC 1/44 dated 20 November 1944.

<sup>6</sup> David Hobbs. *Moving Bases*.

<sup>7</sup> D K Brown. *Nelson to Vanguard – Warship Design and Development 1923-1945*, London, Chatham Publishing, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> David Hobbs. *Moving Bases*.

<sup>9</sup> David Stevens – editor. *The Royal Australian Navy*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Smith. *Task Force 57 – The British Pacific Fleet 1944-45*, London, William Kimber Ltd, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> David Hobbs. *The British Pacific Fleet*, contained in 'The Forgotten Fleets' 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Papers edited by David Brown in 1995.

<sup>12</sup> David Hobbs. *A Century of carrier Aviation*, Barnsley, Seaforth Publishing, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thus the Royal Navy engaged successfully in both the first fighter combat in September 1939 and the last on 15 August 1945 in very different locations.

<sup>15</sup> W J R Gardner. *Submarines in the BPF*, Brodie Publishing, Liverpool, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> H P Willmott. *The Royal Australian Navy in the BPF*, Brodie Publishing, Liverpool, 1995.