

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF NO.1 PRU AND N0.87 (PR) SQUADRON

BY WING COMMANDER E.D. FLATY

1. No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit was formed at Laverton on 8 June 1942. The unit's role was to carry out long range strategic reconnaissance and tactical reconnaissance in the form of photography from high altitude using a camera fitted with a long focal length lens. The units initial equipment was Buffalo aircraft from which the armour plating and machine guns had been removed and installation of auxiliary fuel tanks and three F24 cameras. The unit had an initial strength of 8 officers and 35 airmen with six Buffalo aircraft. The unit's first commanding officer was SQNLDR L W Law.

2. During July 1942 training of pilots in navigation and aerial photography continued. Buffalo A51-2 crashed and burnt at Tallarook on 8 July with the loss of the pilot. The unit was allotted one Wirraway during July. The unit moved to Hughes Field (NT) during August and most of the month was expended in moving, settling in and familiarization in the new area. On 23 August the Japanese raided Hughes Field dropping approximately 150 bombs which resulted in the total loss of Buffalo A51-6 and Wirraway A20-599. At the end of the month aircraft strength was three Buffalos - A51-1, 3 and 5. Training in aerial photography continued during September resulting in the loss of Buffalo A51-5 at Derby on 25 September, again the pilot was lost.

3. Although handicapped, aerial photographic training continued in October with many NT airfields and installations being photographed for defense purposes. Towards the end of October four pilots were sent to Laverton for training on Republic Lancer aircraft with which the unit was to be equipped. On 30 October 1942 the unit received two Lockheed Lightning reconnaissance aircraft. By November 1942 the strength of the unit was 12 officers and 97 airmen. Two pilots were converted on to the Buffalo and two, including the CO converted to the Lightning. The unit flew its first operational mission when the Lightnings flew to the Tanimbar Islands, between 10 and 19 November, 5 operational flights were carried out by Lightnings, but due to the crash of one and unserviceability of the other further sorties were curtailed. On 20 November Lightning A55-2 crashed 2 miles west of Livingstone strip. The pilot lost his life and the aircraft was totally destroyed. On 27 November two Lancer aircraft A56-3 and 5 arrived from Laverton.

4. By December 1942 the strength of the unit had grown to 12 officers and 120 airmen. The unit completed its move to Coomalie Creek strip on 6 December, this was to be its permanent home for the remainder of its stay in NT. The remaining Lightning aircraft was unserviceable for the greater part of December mainly due to intercooler system problems and shortage of spare parts. Lancer A56-5 crashed on the edge of the runway due to brake failure on landing and along with A56-4 was allotted to No. 4 RSU (Pell) for repairs. Buffalo A51-1 was flown to Amberley for a 240 hourly and A51-3 was still unserviceable at Hughes strip.

5. Four operational flights were completed in January 1943 but aircraft unserviceabilities continued to plague the unit. Serviceability of Lancer and Buffalo aircraft improved in February 1943 with a good programme of Army support training being carried out. Lightning A55-1 remained unserviceable. The unit received a replacement Wirraway - A20-173. On 16 March a replacement Lightning A55-3 arrived and A55-1 completed a 240 hourly inspection. Operations were hampered by bad weather and unserviceabilities. but some useful local training and

photography was achieved. The unit had its best month to date during April when reconnaissance of all aerodromes on Timor was accomplished. The unit took over the daily met flight from No. 12 Squadron.

6. May 1943 was a busy month with the units Lightnings carrying out photo reconnaissance of Timor, Tanimbar and enemy bases in Dutch New Guinea. Two of the unit's Lightnings accompanied Liberators of the 319th USAF Squadron and a unit photographic officer flew in a Liberator during operations against enemy bases. The unit's two remaining Lancers, A56-3 and 4 were allotted away to 1AD. During June SQNLDR C.G. Lawrie took over command of the Unit from SQNLDR Law. Reconnaissance of Timor and adjacent islands was carried out, with three new enemy airfields being discovered. Buffalo A51-3 was allotted to 24 Squadron and flown out on 11 June 1943. Good results were obtained during July and some work done on mosaics, stereo pairs and experimental night photography using photo flash. The Governor-General, Lord Gowrie V.C. made a visit to the unit during August. FLTLT Everingham (photographic officer) received the MBE and PLTOFF Ruston received letters of commendation from General McArthur and Gen. Kenny for his participation as photographer with the 380th Group (USAAF) Liberators in the raids on Makassar and Belikpapan. The Lightnings discovered two new strips in the Koepang area and confirmed existence of a strip on Roti Island. On the night of 13 August enemy bombers attacked Coomalie dropping HE and incendiary bombs. Little damage was done due to the prompt action of the unit's men in putting the fires out. A further raid occurred on 20 August, but again no serious damage was caused.

7. Operations during September were restricted due to serviceability of the Lightnings, however the unit's three Wirraways worked hard and completed much local photography and training. A20-605 suffered damage when it over turned during landing at the Bathurst island Mission on 13 September 1943. The CAS, AM George Jones Accompanied by AVM A.T. Cole (AOC, NWA) visited the unit on 11 October 1943. Lightning A55-3 was ferried to Townsville to undergo inspection and as A55-1 was unserviceable all flying during October was with Wirraways. Several of the unit's photographic personnel were lent to the 380th Group to assist in setting up a photo section at Fenton. Prior to this all of the 380th Groups photography had been processed by 1 PRU. During November, seven operational sorties were carried out covering Timor, Kai, Tanimbar and Roti Island groups. A55-3 returned from Townsville and A55-1 was flown to Townsville. Bad weather hampered operations during December and time was mainly devoted to local photography and training of new crews. A55-3 was damaged when an undercarriage failure occurred while landing at Batchelor on return from an operation sortie over Timor. No operational missions were carried out during January 1944 due to unserviceability of the Lightning. Flying was restricted to local details using the unit's Wirraway aircraft. February saw a return to operations with missions being flown to Timor, Kai and Savoe Island. Coverage during March included Kai, Tanimbar and Damar Islands, Flores and Timor. Again coverage during April included Aroe Islands, Timor and Flores, Kai, Langgoer and Taberfane. Similar operations continued in May and the unit received advice that it was to be equipped with Mosquito aircraft. The first of these A52-2 arrived at Coomalie on 26 May 1944.

8. During June 1944, nine operational flights were completed in the Mosquito and four in the Lightning. The Mosquito suffered an engine failure while over Sourabaja (Java) and flew the 900 miles back to base on one engine. SQNLDR Lowrie completed his tour in June 1944 and SQNLDR Hermes was posted in to be CO. The operational tempo increased in June using both

the Mosquito and Lightning aircraft and Wirraways carried out extensive local work. A Wirraway operating from Halls Creek photographed an area 75 miles by 10 miles in the Ord River (WA) area. The Mosquito, using Truscott strip carried out a reconnaissance to Balikpapan and return, a round trip of 2235 miles. The aircraft was also sent to Biak to carry out photo reconnaissance in the Halmaheras and Phillipines. Other Wirraways operated to Broome, Derby and Port Keats. A second Mosquito A52-4 arrived during August 1944, and was detached to Noemfoor for reconnaissance for the 5th Air Force. The Lightning operated from Truscott strip for reconnaissance beyond Timor and Mosquito A52-2 used Truscott for missions to Balikpapan.

9. On 9 September 1944 No. 1 PRU ceased to exist and from this unit No. 87 Photo-Reconnaissance Squadron (87 PRS) was formed. September was a busy month for the new unit but was not without mishap. Lightning A55-1 crashed at Coomalie and was a complete write off. The pilot escaped with severe burns. Mosquito A52-4 on detachment to Noemfoor crash landed on a beach 40 miles west of Manakwari (DNG). The crew destroyed the aircraft by burning, and later after being located by a Lightning were rescued by Catalina. One Mosquito and one Wirraway carried out an unsuccessful search for two missing Beaufighters of 31 Squadron on 25 September. October saw the arrival of A52-6 to 87 Squadron and with A52-2, a busy month's activity included commencement of reconnaissance flights to the Celebes. Truscott strip was used extensively and one Mosquito was intercepted by Spitfires from Truscott when it was forced to return early because of fuel shortage and with its IFF unserviceable. Twenty five operational sorties were flown during November and target areas included Bali, East Java, Kangean Islands, Kai, Timor and Celebes. The squadron used Broome as a staging base for some of these flights. Wirraways continued in the local photographic and training role. The AOC NWA, AIRCDRE Charlesworth, AFC visited the squadron on 23 November 1944.

10. Command of the squadron changed on 20 December 1944 when SQNLDR Gamble took over from SQNLDR Hermes. Operations during December were seriously hampered due to bad weather and of the eight operations flown, only four were completely successful. Mosquito A52-26 was received on 6 December 1944. Weather conditions again disrupted operations in January 1945, however eighteen operational sorties were completed and targets included Celebes, Loembok and Sakala Islands, Tanimbar and Kai Islands, Timor, SE Borneo and Java. Both Broome and Truscott were again used for staging. Fifteen operational sorties were completed in February, but A52-7 was lost due to engine failure off the east coast of Java on 28 February. Two new aircraft A52-1010 and A20-165 were received. A20-165 replaced 'old faithful' A20-178 which was issued off for repair to 4 RSU after a crash landing on 17 January. This aircraft had been with the unit since March 1943. The crew of A52-7 were rescued and returned safely in early March. The starboard engine had failed but the aircraft was able to safely reach the Australian coast near King Sound where a successful ditching was made. The crew spent two nights in a dinghy before reaching shore, then walked for three days before being picked up by a mission native and taken to Lombardina Mission. Four new aircraft were received during March, A52-600, A52-602, A52-605 and A62-601, however A52-26 crashed at Coomalie on landing and was converted to components.

11. Nineteen sorties were flown in April 1945, five in relation to a Japanese convoy of one light cruiser and three escorts first reported on 1 April heading for Keopang. Mosquitoes shadowed the convoy and were on hand on the morning of 6 April when two squadrons of Mitchells and one of Liberators attacked. Heavy flack was encountered and two Oscars attempted to intercept but the

Mosquitoes increased speed to 400 miles per hour and escaped interception. Photos showed three direct hits on the cruiser. One new aircraft, A52-606 was received and A52-26 which crashed in March was officially written off. The CAS AVM G. Jones accompanied by AOC NWA AIRCDRE Charlesworth visited the squadron. May was a successful month with coverage being obtained of targets ranging from Java and Timor to the Celebes. Broome and Truscott were used for staging. Three new aircraft, A52-608, A52-604 and 609 were received.

AOC NWA AIRCDRE Charlesworth and SASO NWA AIRCDRE Knox-Knight visited the squadron. Twenty eight operational sorties were completed during June ranging over familiar targets to the north. Three aircraft were detached to Cocos Islands from 10 to 22 June. One aircraft A52-606 forced landed on a beach in the Cocos Group and was written-off but the crew escaped uninjured. Mosquito AS2-611 was received on 9 June 1945 but its life was short as it crashed and was written-off on 18 June. SQNLDR L.W. Law took over command of the Squadron from SQNLDR Gamble during July. Twenty three operational sorties were flown and three new aircraft, A52-610, 613 and 616, were received. Nine operational sorties were flown in August, up to the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945. Among the targets for the month were Celebes, Flores, Soembawa, Soemba and Timor. Two aircraft were detached to Tabuan to operate with 1st TAF until 25 August. Three new aircraft, A52-614, 618 and 619, were received during the month, to bring squadron strength to 13 aircraft. One new Mosquito, A52-603 was delivered in September. Forty two operational sorties were flown in September, both visual and photographic covering Timor, Flores, Sumatra, Tanimbar, Kai and Alor Islands. These flights were to assist occupation troops moving into these areas.

12. During October two new Mosquitoes, A52-9 and A52-608 were received after overhaul at de Havilland's. Two aircraft, A52-601 and 613 were allotted to Richmond for major inspections. No. 87 Squadron moved to Parkes, NSW during October 1945. The last operation from Coomalie was completed on 3 October when A52-613 carried out a photo mapping sortie over Timor. Several members of the squadron were discharged in November on termination of appointment. Very little flying was carried out after arrival at Parkes due to the interruption of the squadron move. The move of all men and equipment was completed on 19 November. No operational flying was carried out in December 1945 due to preparation for a detachment to be sent to Borneo. Three Mosquitoes left Parkes at the end of January for operations at Labuan. The detachment was recalled during March 1946. Following a crash landing, A52-1010 was allotted to Wagga for use as a training aid. Movement of personnel and equipment from the Labuan detachment continued in April. During May seven aircraft were ferried to Canberra for allocation to Survey flight. Further aircraft were ferried to Canberra in June and preparations began for the closure of Parkes. Parkes airfield was closed on 24 July 1946.

13. Aircraft, equipment and some personnel of the squadron were transferred to Survey flight at Canberra and 87 Squadron ceased to exist. However, on 1 November 1946 Survey Flight was renamed Survey Squadron, then on 8 March 1948 a further title change was made to 87 Survey Squadron and yet a further change to 87 (PR) Squadron on 1 December 1949. Throughout the post war years this unit carried out many photographic survey tasks, aerial photography virtually re-mapped the Australian continent between 1948 and 1952. No. 87 (PR) Squadron was finally disbanded on 30 August 1953, although it was December 1953 before the paper work was finally wrapped up.

## NO.87 SQUADRON

<u>Date</u>	<u>C.O.</u>	<u>A/C</u>
10/9/44	No.87 SQN formed at Coomalie Creek	
	Was previously known as No. 1 PRU The Squadron's initial equipment and personnel were those of No. 1 PRU, which ceased to exist as of this date.	
10/9/44	SQNLDR A.S. Hermes	BUFFALO LANCER
20/12/44	SQNLDR H.A. Gamble	LIGHTNING
28/7/45	SQNLDR L.A. Law	MOSQUITO WIRRAWAY
24/7/46	Squadron disbanded	
8/3/48	Renamed 87 Survey Squadron from 87 Survey Flight	
8/3/48	SQNLDR L.P. Bond	
30/4/48	FLT/LT R.A. Hosking	
1/12/49	Name changed to 87 PRU Squadron	
23/11/50	FLT/LT J.D. Guthrie	
13/4/51	SQNLDR C.H.E. Browne	
4/7/53	SQNLDR A.E. McKenzie	
23/9/53	FLT/LT L.O. Mindley	
16/10/53	F/O T.A. Slattery	



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