

I WALKED BACK

P/O Bruce Little, a Spitfire pilot, has had a rather exciting time . . .

LITTLE was one of the Spitfire pilots attacking Zeros which were trying to strafe Millingimbi airfield on May 10. While he was firing at a Zero at 9,500 feet, he felt explosive cannon shells hit his Spitfire's tail. He decided to return to base.

Little was rolling along the East-West runway when he saw 3 Zeros in V formation strafing along the North-South runway, altitude between 50 and 100 feet. Acting quickly, he opened up his engine and took off again.

The Zeros had turned and were making a line astern strafing run. Continuing his turn, Little was able to get in behind the last Zero. He closed to 500 yards—altitude 100 feet—and began firing. He kept shooting up to 300 yards. The Zero turned to port and came back on Little's tail.

Then began an incredible dog fight just above the trees, with both aircraft making steep and sometimes vertical turns. For about 10 minutes neither fighter scored. Little, making a steep turn very close to the ground, turned from watching the Zero and found himself heading straight for the ground.

There was no room for him to pull out. He tried to flatten out and hit the ground at nearly 200 mph.

"The machine somersaulted," Little said later, "turned and rolled three or four times."

The Zero flew away. Little released his chute and forced his way through the hood. He suffered minor abrasions but after inspecting the aircraft walked the 3 miles back to his base.

WINGS 20-7-43

SPITFIRE SOMERSAULT

by Robert Kendall Piper

Both wings were ripped off and the entire tail unit was gone. The propeller had spun away and the engine cowling torn free. Pilot Officer Bruce Little, after inspecting what little remained intact of his Spitfire, trudged three miles back through dense bush to Millingimbi airfield.

Bruce, while flying with 457 Squadron, had survived virtually unscathed from one of the most remarkable prangs during a dogfight in the history of the RAAF. It was also his first engagement with an enemy aircraft.

Australia began to receive its first shipments of the remarkable Spitfire from Britain in August, 1942. More than four hundred would arrive before the end of the war.

Introduced in a shroud of secrecy the Spitfire was initially code-named CAPSTAN. This possibly being derived from a well known cigarette brand smoked extensively by servicemen at the time.

Here now was a fighter with a rate of climb and high altitude performance that should be able to deal with the Japanese Zero. This was especially required for the regular raids against Australia's north-west and the air battles over Darwin that were then in full swing.

Six Japanese medium bombers of the SALLY type (twin engine Mitsubishi) raided Millingimbi on 9 May, 1943. In anticipation of further raids six Spitfires from 54 Squadron, then based at Livingstone in the Northern Territory, were flown late that afternoon to that drome. These supplemented two 31 Squadron Beaufighters already operating there on coastal patrol and convoy protection duties.

Millingimbi then was a small tree covered island some 250 miles east of Darwin and separated from the mainland by a narrow channel of water. A remote area it was strategically placed in terms of the Arafura Sea, Aru Islands and Dutch New Guinea to the north as well as convoys plying between Darwin and the east coast of Australia. At the time food was ferried in by aircraft with heavier supplies arriving by lighters from small steamers.

Spitfire pilots despatched to its defence were Flight Lieutenant Watson DFC, Flying Officer Hamilton, Pilot Officers Little and Morse as well as Flight Sgts. Watson and Batchelor. Fitters, riggers, instrument makers, armourers and a few general hands flown over in a 2 Squadrons Hudson completed the detachment. A plentiful supply of sandfly nets and long trousers accompanied the men because of the island's reputation for sandflies.

Millingimbi during the early morning of 10 May, 1943 was fine and hot. Five Spitfires scrambled after an alarm was sounded but the cause turned out to be two incoming Beaufighters, from a group of six,

returning from an abortive raid by 31 Squadron in the Aru Islands.

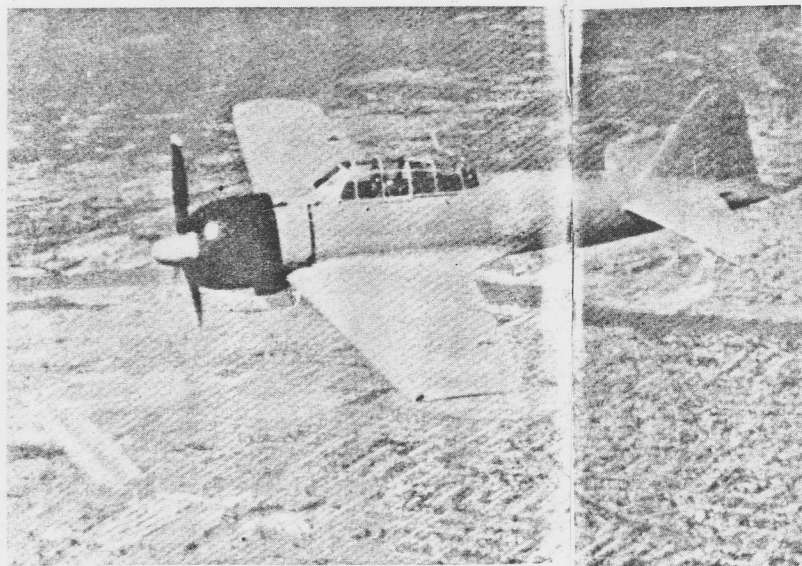
Flying Officer Hamilton's fighter, which was unserviceable, remained on the ground at this time. He was, however, using his aircraft as a command post to maintain contact with the others who were already aloft.

Nearby RAAF radar station No. 308 was tracking the movement of incoming planes on their screens. Messages were sent from there by telephone to the signals hut where the runways intersected. The information was then relayed from there by a chain of six men to Hamilton in the cockpit of his stationary Spitfire. He in turn passed it on to the airborne fighters. A rudimentary communication system with a unique layout to say the very least!

Flight Sgt. Batchelor, while climbing through 9,000', reported nine Zeros in Vic's of three. A general dogfight broke out shortly afterwards.

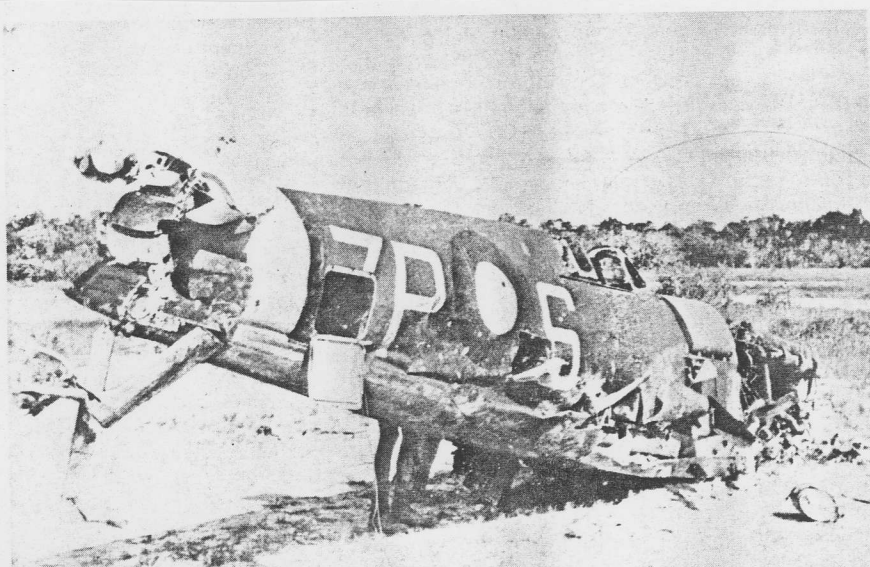
Pilot Officer Bruce Little, while firing at an enemy aircraft at 9,500', felt the shudder of explosive shells punching holes in the rear of his Spitfire. The tail and trim were damaged so he nosed over and dived back to base.

Bruce had just touched down and was rolling along the east-west runway when he sighted three fawn coloured Zeros with black cowlings. They were



Captured Japanese Zero being flight tested over Eagle Farm Brisbane in August, 1943

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strafing along the north-south strip while only 50' to 100' above the ground. The two recently arrived Beaufighters from the Aru Islands were their target and one caught fire (A19-72) while the other (A19-16) was badly damaged.

Knowing he would probably be next on the agenda Bruce slammed the throttle open and leapt into the air again. Circling he caught up to the last of the three Zeros which had turned and were now making their second run; this time line astern.

Continuing his turn Bruce tucked in behind the last enemy fighter. He closed to 500 yards, still just above the ground, began firing and kept it up until he had narrowed the distance to 300 yards. The Zero flicked to port and bounced back on the Spitfire's tail.

Furious combat now began. From right on the deck to just above the trees with both the Spitfire and Zero making steep and sometimes even vertical turns accompanied by dives and climbs. The violent manoeuvres continued for some ten minutes with Bruce managing to hold his own and his pursuer failing to score any hits.

Finally, while making a steep turn very close to the terrain, Bruce turned from watching the Zero and found himself heading straight for ground. Too late,



P.O. Bruce Little — Spitfire pilot 457 Squadron RAAF.

there was no room or time to pull out. He attempted to flatten his approach as best he could as the Spitfire struck the surface air scoop first at nearly 200 miles an hour.

Bruce remembers: "The machine somersaulted, turned and rolled three or four times. I retained consciousness throughout and when the Spitfire came to rest I was lying on my left side in the aircraft and could hear the Zero circling low overhead."

The Japanese pilot fired around the wreckage then, probably convinced the Australian could not have survived such a spectacular crash, flew away. At his departure Bruce released his parachute and harness forcing his way through the hood. He had abrasions to both elbows, scalp and forehead.

The Zero was later reported to have passed back over the drome with a rough running engine and heading north towards its base. It was not seen to crash near the island although an explosion was later heard from the direction in which the plane departed.

A store ship, MAROUBRA, was also attacked during the raid. Cannon fire from one of the enemy fighters set it on fire and the vessel became a total loss.

Two convoy Beaufighters were also fired on during the melee. It occurred while they were heading out towards the ships. Both made good their escape; one by diving away at full throttle towards the sea.

Official score for the day was one Zero destroyed and one damaged for Flight Sgt. Watson. Also one destroyed for Pilot Officer I.S. Morse. Bruce was credited with a "probable". His Spitfire ZP-S (A58-81) was the only one lost that day.

On 14, 17 and 18 August, 1943, the RAAF ran a series of in-flight trials near Brisbane between a Mark 11 Zero and a model 5C Spitfire. The former aircraft was a combination of several damaged fighters found and salvaged in January, 1943, by the Australians after they had retaken Buna. Reconstruction of the Zero had been carried out by the combined American and Australian group TAIU (Technical Air Intelligence Unit) under Major Frank McCoy at Hangar 7, Eagle Farm.

Flight Lieutenant C.R. Wawn flew the Spitfire while the Zero pilot was well known 75 Squadron personality Squadron Leader Les Jackson. The latter had flown Kittyhawks in combat against these type of enemy fighters in the New Guinea campaign.

The tests revealed that the Spitfire had an approximate advantage of 30 mph at 26,000' and gained speed slightly faster in a vertical dive. It also required a minimum speed of 250 mph to maintain manoeuvrability advantage.

At medium and low speeds the Zero was considerably more manoeuvrable and easily able to evade the British fighter and turn the tables on it.

immediately climbing away to maintain the height advantage.

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#Bruce Little returned to his old job with the Sydney County Council after the war. He retired in 1983 and now resides in the Sydney suburb of Manly Vale. The first part of this article would not have been possible without his recent information and photographic contribution.

Frank McCoy, the head of TAIU, later became a major-general with the post war USAAF. In March, 1983, he visited the author and RAAF Historical Section in Canberra.

In latter years the wreckage of A58-81 was recovered by well known Spitfire enthusiast and owner, Langdon Badger of Adelaide. He retrieved a Japanese bullet from one of the fighter's internal frames and retains it as a souvenir today. Recently the aircraft was traded to RAAF engineer, Wing Commander Geoff Trappet. The Spitfire remains are presently stored at the Latrobe Valley in Victoria for possible restoration or spare parts.