

5 SPITFIRES LOST IN FLIGHT HOME

ONLY nine of 15 Spitfires which took off from Labuan (Borneo) to return to Australia completed the 4000-mile 11 days' flight at a base near Brisbane.

Two of the escort of Beaufighters and Venturas also dropped out.

No one was hurt in the accidents that were responsible.

Most of the Spitfires, which comprised No. 457 Squadron, had been parked on the dusty Labuan strip without flying for several weeks, and pilots were expecting trouble from dust and corrosion.

Crews in the escorting aircraft navigated for the various sections of the Spitfires, while one Beaufighter acted as advance weather scout.

Another flew behind, to locate any pilot who went into the sea and radio to a Catalina, which also accompanied the formation over ocean routes.

The first leg of the journey, over sea to Zamboanga (Mindanao Island), was also patrolled by an R.A.A.F. rescue launch.

First accident occurred when one of the Venturas ground-looped during take-off at Labuan, and finished in the mud at the side of the strip.

Spitfire Hits Tree

All machines landed safely at Zamboanga except a Beaufighter, which swung off the strip in the cross-wind and bogged.

After delay for 24 hours due to weather, the formation took off for Morotai, dodging storms throughout the 600-mile trip.

Approaching to land, a Spitfire hit a tree, but recovered. When it touched down, a tyre blew out, and the plane ground-looped and crashed.

The take-off for Biak was made after two days' delay because of weather.

When 100 miles out to sea, a Spitfire pilot called over his radio: "My engine is failing. I will bale out."

He was picked up within two hours by the Catalina.

Bad weather drove the rest back to Morotai, where another Spitfire damaged its propeller. Twelve of the original 15 took off next day.

Next casualty was at Tadj, on the Northern New Guinea coast, where a Spitfire engine failed on take-off and the pilot crash-landed.

By the time the aircraft reached Finschafen, unserviceability had further reduced the number of Spitfires to nine.

After more weather delays, these machines completed their flight to a storage base near Brisbane. The journey had occupied 11 days.

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