

# Shilling Saved From The



If everyone does have a guardian angel then Keith Shilling's worked overtime on the 6th April 1945.

On an RAAF mission to harrass and destroy Imperial Japanese forces retreating from Timor, Keith Shilling proved that it is not only cats that have nine lives.

After his Liberator had been shot down in the Arafura Sea, he spent a hair-raising afternoon escaping death and avoiding capture before reaching the safety of Darwin.



Warrant Officer Keith Shilling... his guardian angel worked overtime.

In one fateful afternoon Warrant Officer Keith Shilling, an RAAF Wireless Operator with 24 Squadron, had two aircraft destroyed under him and a third attacked.

First his B-24 Liberator was shot down in flames by a Japanese fighter, forcing him to parachute into the sea. Then he was fired on by a passing enemy cruiser and nearly run down by its accompanying destroyer.

Picked up by a RAAF Catalina, this in turn was also set on fire by a fighter. Diving

Keith Shilling's Liberator goes down in flames on April 6th 1945... he parachuted to eventual safety.

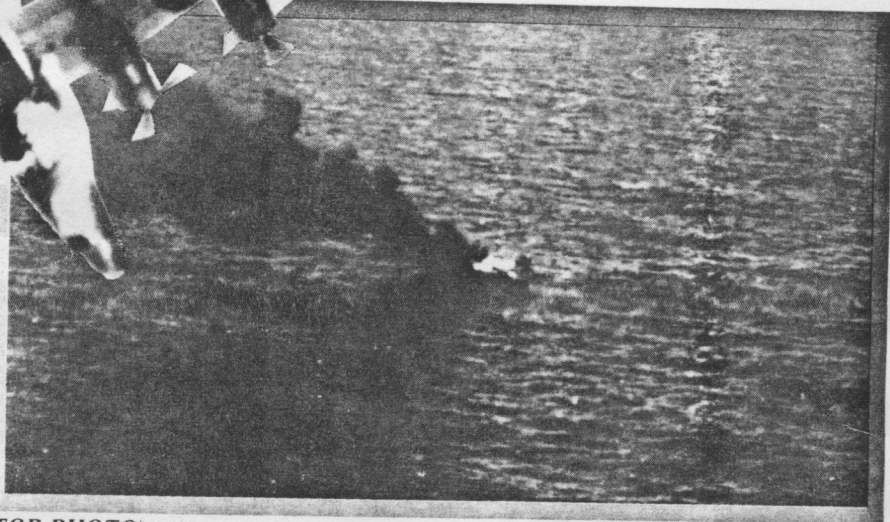


overboard Keith was retrieved by a second Catalina which, although also attacked, managed to carry him safely back to Darwin.

A special strike force of twenty Mitchells and nine Liberators had been especially assembled by the RAAF on 6 April 1945 to attack the Japanese cruiser ISUZU (5700 tons) and four smaller vessels evacuating troops from Koepang in Timor. The ships had first been detected two days earlier by an allied submarine, then shadowed by our Catalinas at night and Mosquitos by day.

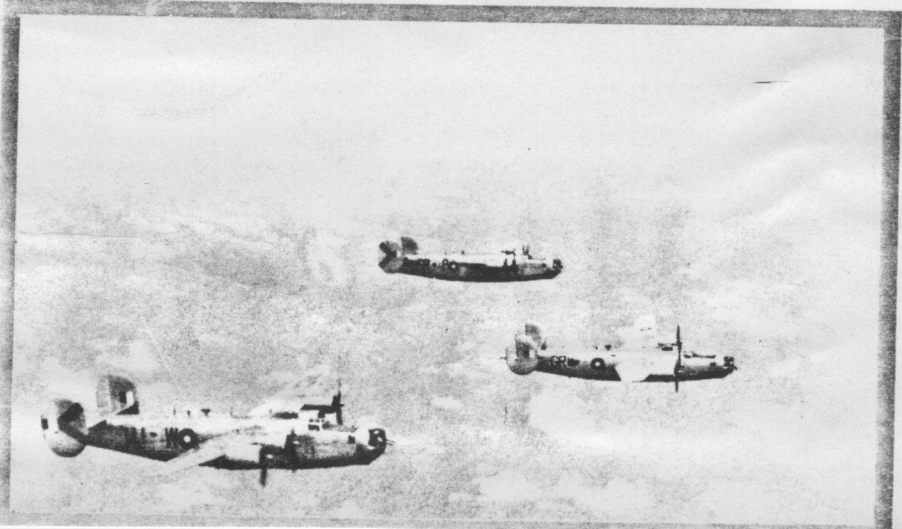
The Australian Liberators, which had departed Fenton (110kms south of Darwin) at 5am, made their first run at 12,000 feet over the ships at 10am. A second followed ten minutes later. Moderate anti-aircraft fire was experienced by the bombers which were in elements of three.

During the first run a level attack from the ten o'clock position was made by an OSCAR (Nakajima fighter). The pilot pressed home the attack, breaking the formation, and closed to within twenty feet of Flight Lieutenant Court. It was obvious that he was experienced and determined. There was no apparent damage to



(TOP PHOTO) The first, ill-fated, rescue Catalina blazes away on the water.

(BOTTOM PHOTO) Liberators of 21 and 24 Squadron in flight.



his fighter as it broke away.

Shortly after the fighter attack, Flight Lieutenant McDonald's Liberator (A72-81) lost height by approximately 50 feet, but still held formation. Smoke was issuing from the cockpit. The bombs were jettisoned and the nose wheel compartment opened. Two members were seen to parachute from this exit. Three jumped from the bomb bay.

The bomber immediately went up at a steep angle and appeared to reach the stall. Flames were sighted coming from the nose wheel compartment and forward bomb bays. Then the aircraft turned over on the port wing and plunged vertically towards the sea, losing about 6000 feet.

Recovering from the dive A72-81 again went into a very steep climb, stalled on the port wing and dived at 45 degrees towards the cruiser below. A few seconds later it exploded.

Meanwhile, on the second pass over the ships, another fighter made a head on attack from slightly below and broke away beneath Flight Lieutenant Ford's Liberator (A72-77), which sustained hits in No. 3 engine. Return strikes were observed on the OSCAR and survivors later claimed A72-77 shot him down.

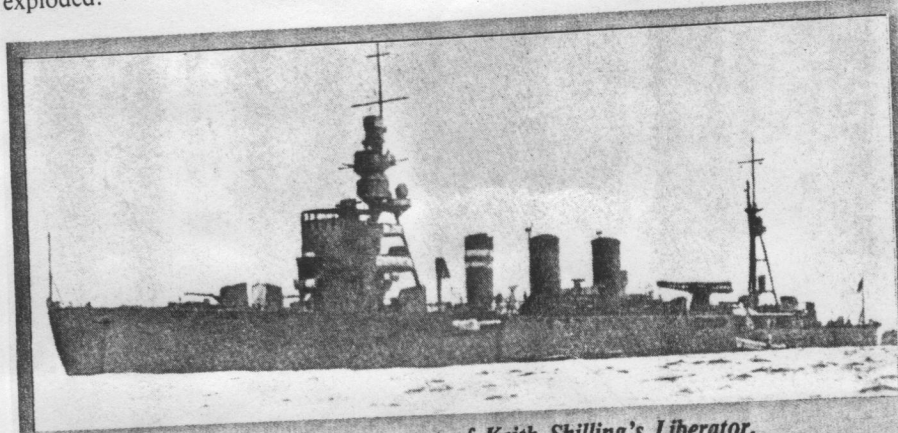
No. 3 engine then caught alight and flames burst out from the nose wheel compartment. Shortly afterwards the starboard wing caught fire and Ford motioned to Warrant Officer Vickers, the second pilot, to abandon the bomber. The back hatch was jettisoned and five members jumped. Ford kept the aircraft steady, then the Liberator rolled over and crashed into the sea, with the captain still at the controls.

Keith Shilling, sole survivor of the first Liberator flown by Flight Lieutenant McDonald, later recorded his account of

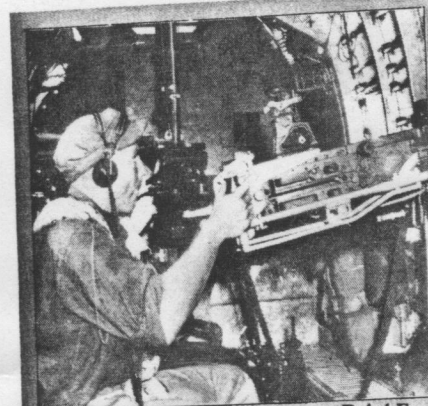
that afternoon as he recovered from shock and second degree burns to his back at the RAAF's No. 1 Medical Receiving Station, Darwin: "At about 0505 hours on the 6th April 1945, Flight Lieutenant S.L. McDonald in Liberator A72-81 took off from Fenton Strip to attack a Japanese cruiser and escort vessels reported in the vicinity of Soemba Island. I was first wireless operator in this aircraft.

The convoy was sighted at 0930 hours, 20 miles east of Soemba Island. Squadron Leader J.G. White, 21 Squadron, was formation leader with Flight Lieutenant Court as number two and Flight Lieutenant S.L. McDonald as number three. We went into attack formation with our flight as the third element.

On the first bombing run, at approximately 13,000 feet, two enemy fighters attacked from 10 o'clock level in line

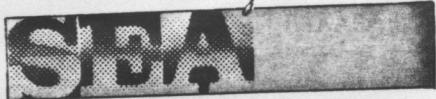


The Japanese cruiser Isuzu, the target of Keith Shilling's Liberator.



The waist air-gunner on an RAAF Liberator in action.

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astern, closing to within 50 feet and breaking away underneath. Cannon shells burst under the flight deck in the vicinity of the nose wheel and the auxiliary power unit. Fire broke out immediately and spread very rapidly. It was the first enemy fighter that got us. No hits were seen on the enemy.

The engineer (Sgt. W.J. Wignell) used the fire extinguisher which proved to be absolutely useless. The fire drove him into the bomb bays and I didn't see him again.

The Captain ordered the crew to bail out. The second pilot (Flying Officer K.R. Brown) escaped through the bomb bays. I followed about thirty seconds later. Two

minutes later another member jumped. He did not appear to have a parachute.

I went out the bomb bays head first, counted six, and pulled the release cord. The parachute opened immediately and I was pulled up with a terrific jerk. It took me about twelve minutes to come down during which time I counted six members parachuting from Flight Lieutenant E.V. Ford's A72-77. An additional member appeared to drop without a parachute.

A72-81 disintegrated about 3000 feet above the sea. It did not explode. A72-77 exploded on impact with the water. Enemy fighters did not attack parachutists.

I was using an American-type observer parachute with no quick release on the harness. I started to release the harness at 3000 feet. Of five clips two were still to be released when I hit the water.

On hitting the water the American life-

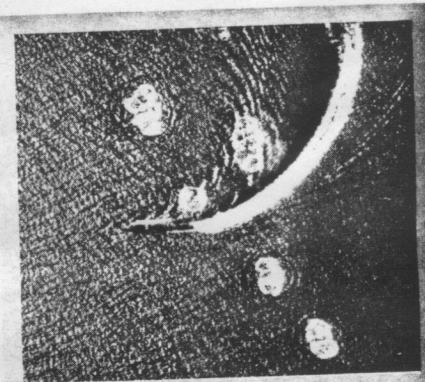
jacket (Mae West) kept me afloat while the remaining two clips were undone. My legs were entangled in the shroud lines and I had to cut away the lines with a bowie knife. I jettisoned my revolver and equipment on account of weight.

Although I had seen someone land about 50 yards away heavy seas prevented me seeing him. The seas were running at about 4½ feet. I then endeavoured to swim towards where I estimated the other members to be. I never saw any member of my crew again.

About 30 minutes later the enemy cruiser came to within 100 yards of me. She was heavily laden with troops, and equipment under tarpaulins was clearly visible. A machine gun opened fire at the position I had been making for. I deflated my "Mae West" and sank. At this time the bullets hit the water within six feet of me. The cruiser then passed on.



A Liberator of 21 Squadron drops its bombs.



The cruiser Isuzu takes evasive action.

Some fifteen minutes later an escort vessel of 1000-2000 tons passed within a hundred yards of me. This vessel was also laden with troops and equipment. The only armament I noticed was either four or six twin Bofors and numerous machine guns.

This vessel continued on for five minutes, turned, and came directly towards me, passing close enough for the bow wave to throw me sideways. I could hear voices from the deck. No attempt was made to pick me up or shoot me.

Some minutes later a Zero passed overhead low and appeared to be looking for survivors. I deflated my Mae West again and sank to avoid detection.

Ten minutes later seven Liberators circled low and after some five minutes dropped me a K-type dinghy which landed 50 yards away. Later I reached the dinghy and found the C.O.2 bottle had broken off and half the air had escaped. I plugged up the hole with one hand and hung onto the dinghy with the other. While doing this a Catalina arrived.

Twenty minutes later the Catalina taxied close enough to pick me up. Sgt. W.W. Sayer from Flt. Lt. Ford's crew was aboard having been picked up earlier. I was exhausted and cold. I had swallowed a lot of salt water. We taxied around and picked up Warrant Officer C.G. Vickers, also from Flt. Lt. Ford's crew.

The Catalina took off, landing again to pick up another survivor, whom I believe to be Flight Sgt. I. Faichnie. He was com-

pletely exhausted and was being pulled in over the gun blisters when the Catalina was attacked by a Zero from 12 o'clock. The aircraft caught fire immediately and sank three minutes later. No member of the crew or survivors were hit.

I had undressed, as ordered, and was going to bed in a bunk in the waist, then had been called forward for the landing and was in the navigator's position when the attack was made. The order was given to bail out and I made my way aft. On the way a fuel line burst above me pouring blazing petrol on to my back. This was extinguished by Sgt. Sayer who smothered the flames with a sleeping bag. I escaped out the port blister, naked, and with no Mae West.

I do not remember much for a few minutes and when I regained my faculties I was being kept afloat by two members of the Catalina crew, Flt. Lt. Bulma, Captain, and Flight Sgt. Scholes, Engineer. These two men had to let me go after 15 minutes owing to their Mae Wests coming undone. Flying Officer Becke helped me for the next forty-five minutes. Through the fortitude of these men I was saved from drowning.

A few minutes after the Catalina was hit, the air-sea rescue Liberator dropped two large dinghies and one supply canister. They landed 600 yards away. After an hour's struggle, nine of us reached the dinghy. One crew member and Flight Sgt Faichnie were floating some distance away, still alive. We secured the

second dinghy and supply canister and set off towards the other two, whom we never saw again.

Another Catalina was directed to us by the Liberator. It landed after half-an-hour's battle with heavy seas and wind. We were eventually picked up. One dinghy was cut in half by the port wing float. As the last survivor clambered aboard an IRVING (twin engine Nakajima fighter) was sighted making for us.

The enemy made his first attack as we were taking off, and scored no hits. Our return fire did no visible damage to him. A running fight ensued for twenty minutes. The attacks ceased and we headed for Darwin, reaching there about 2230 hours."

The night following the attack one of the smaller vessels in the Convoy was sunk by a submarine. An identical fate was shared by the cruiser ISUZU the next day. *Keith Shilling, now of Dianella in Western Australia, gave valuable assistance in the compilation of this story. In post war years he became a senior master (Manual Arts), retiring in 1983 to enjoy, as he puts it, "the life that was given to me so long ago, and which I appreciate so much".*

Acknowledgements to David Vincent, the author and publisher of CATALINA CHRONICLE. Bob Piper.

**Pictures**  
courtesy Australian War Memorial