



Education Services 2013

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(ABOVE) William Dargie, RAAF Kittyhawk squadron at Milne Bay, August-September 1942 (1969, oil on canvas, 154 x 275.3 cm AWM ART27628)

(LEFT) Bruce "Buster" Brown's Kittyhawk, "Polly". AWM REL/20242

(FAR LEFT) Distinguished Flying Cross awarded to Flying Officer Bert Grace for his skill during the Milne Bay operations. AWM REL40965.001

Defending Milne Bay, 1942 to 1943

Some days every pilot would carry out a mission or two ... the aircraft were going in and out all the time. The ground crew worked day and night in mud and slush to keep the aircraft flying.

Flight Lieutenant Bruce “Buster” Brown, No. 75 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF)

During the Second World War, 1942 was a significant year for Australia. Japanese forces continued their invasion and occupation of south-east Asia, and the first air raids on Darwin on 19 February led to fears that a Japanese invasion of Australia was looming. With British forces concentrating on the war in Europe, Australians began to feel isolated and vulnerable. The South-West Pacific Area came under United States control and General Douglas MacArthur was appointed as Commander-in-Chief. Together, the Australians and Americans set out to stem the tide of the Japanese advance.

The sheltered harbour of Milne Bay, lying on the southern tip of Papua, was of great strategic importance to both the Allies and the Japanese. Whoever held it had control of the sea lanes to Australia and Port Moresby.

During 1942, Milne Bay became home to a garrison of more than 8,000 Australian and American troops stationed there in anticipation of an amphibious Japanese landing. Also despatched to Milne Bay were Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons, RAAF, flying Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk fighter planes, as well as a force of Lockheed Hudson bombers, and later a squadron each of Bristol Beaufighters and Bristol Beauforts.

Just before midnight on 25 August, 2,000 Japanese marines landed 11 kilometres from the Allied airstrip. With the support of two tanks, and reinforcements of another 800 marines, they were at first successful in their advance, despite being outnumbered four to one by Allied forces. Contact between the Japanese marines and Australian and American soldiers resulted in fighting at close quarters. The Allies received strong air support from the RAAF squadrons, with Kittyhawks constantly attacking enemy positions during daylight hours.

On 30–31 August a major Japanese attack on the airfields was defeated, and they were driven back with heavy losses. Unable to launch a further attack because many troops were suffering from sickness and exhaustion, the Japanese commander ordered a complete withdrawal in early September.

The Japanese defeat at Milne Bay was a turning point in the war in the Pacific and a huge boost to the morale of the Australian forces.

During 1942, the threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia gradually lessened as the Allies won a series of decisive battles: in the Coral Sea, at Midway, on Imita Ridge, on the Kokoda Trail, and at Buna. But it would take three more years of hard and costly fighting before the Allies could claim victory in the Pacific.

Squadron Leader Keith “Bluey” Truscott, DFC and Bar

Keith “Bluey” Truscott commanded No. 76 Squadron during the battle of Milne Bay. He was one of the best known pilots in the RAAF, having been a popular Melbourne footballer before joining up. He was not regarded as a great pilot, and almost failed his course, but was aggressive and accurate at shooting. He was sent to Canada under the Empire Air Training Scheme before being ordered to England. Stories of his exploits, most of them over German-occupied France, were read widely in Australia and he became a national hero. He had been awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar during his service in Europe.

In 1942 he was posted back to Australia, where he joined No. 76 Squadron and in July of that year was deployed to Papua. No. 76 Squadron arrived at Milne Bay just before the Japanese landings, and Truscott took command in August after the previous leader was killed in action. He led his pilots in the desperate fighting, in appalling conditions, at Milne Bay and had a vital part in the local defeat of the Japanese.

In March 1943, performing a practice roll while escorting a Catalina flying boat, he misjudged the height of his aircraft and was killed when he crashed into the sea. Truscott was the RAAF’s second-highest-scoring ace of the Second World War, after Clive Caldwell. Each year the Melbourne Football Club remembers him when it awards the Keith “Bluey” Truscott Medal for the best and fairest player.

Squadron Leader Truscott steps out of the cockpit of his Kittyhawk while it is being pushed along the Marsden matting into a dispersal bay.
AWM026648



Bruce “Buster” Brown at Milne Bay, September 1943.
AWMOG0071

Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) Bruce “Buster” Brown, DFC and Bar, OAM

Bruce “Buster” Brown enlisted in the RAAF in 1940 at the age of 20. He trained in and flew Spitfires over Europe, before being recalled to Australia after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. He arrived at Milne Bay on 25 July 1942, attached to No. 75 Squadron, which was flying Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawks. On the side of the plane he normally flew, he painted the name “Polly” for his fiancée back home in Australia – even though it was considered back luck to put the name of a loved one on your plane. His fiancée’s real name was Olga, but as it was a German name, she was known as Polly. He flew in “Polly” from the first day he arrived in Milne Bay. The air strip had been built just a few weeks before Brown arrived, and he recalled:

The first airstrip at Milne Bay was probably the worst airstrip I’ve ever operated off in my life, and ever likely to. Initially it wasn’t so bad because it hadn’t had any traffic on it and it was newly laid and it consisted of steel interlocking matting. [But] the wet season was on and with all the traffic then that started to take place at Milne Bay the steel matting started to sink into the mud. So we had a greasy surface to operate off.

As part of No. 75 Squadron, it was Buster Brown’s job to provide close air support to the ground forces defending Milne Bay:

Every pilot was involved in this activity at some time or another, there were standing patrols over the base to intercept enemy air craft. There were long-range patrols from the base looking for the Japanese convoy which we believed was on its way.

Coastwatchers, or “spotters”, were responsible for gathering intelligence, often behind enemy lines, and reported on Japanese naval and aircraft movements. On 24 August they reported a Japanese convoy moving towards the bay.

A spotter up in the mountains had reported seeing at least six barges loaded with enemy troops coming down the coast from Lae and they’d gone in onto a beach at Goodenough Island to wait there to coincide with the main Japanese convoy coming in so it would be a mass landing at Milne Bay. And we attacked those barges and destroyed them all. So those Japanese troops were isolated there.

This marked the beginning of the battle of Milne Bay. Over the following days the Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons were constantly in the air, their ground crews working tirelessly to keep the planes operational.

The Japs had eventually advanced almost to where the second strip was being built. The Army would signal where they wanted us to strafe, or where their front line was at, with Very pistols [flare guns] – that’s how old fashioned the whole thing was. We’d know then to strafe in front of where we saw that Very pistol coming up, taking a risk, maybe, that we were in the right spot, [with] strafing and not hitting our own blokes.

This was the first time that a Japanese assault landing had been defeated in the Second World War.

Unpacking the painting

Examine the painting on the front of the poster. Look at the environment. What can it tell us about the climate and conditions? What difficulties would the men have faced there?

Conditions in the jungles of Papua were difficult for the Australian troops. Extreme heat and humidity, numerous insects, and outbreaks of tropical disease made life uncomfortable. Frequent heavy downpours turned the ground to mud. Three airstrips were built on mosquito-infested, hastily cleared coconut plantations. The airstrip was covered with Marsden matting made of steel to prevent aircraft from sinking into the mud.

Food was scarce and of poor quality. It was difficult to cook because of the constant damp and a shortage of firewood. Tents were overcrowded and there was no running water, so it was almost impossible to keep clean. Medical facilities were also basic, and not adequate to deal with severe injuries resulting from plane crashes. The sick and wounded had to be evacuated along muddy tracks.

How many men can you see? What are they doing? Why would one man be sitting on the wing of the aircraft?

The men are members of Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons of the Royal Australian Air Force. It was their job to provide air support to the ground forces in the defence of Milne Bay.

A P-40 Kittyhawk aircraft is taxiing in after landing. When on the ground, the nose of the aircraft sat up so high that the pilot’s visibility was limited. The crewman on the wing is giving directions to the pilot. Waiting ground crew prepare to refuel and re-arm the aircraft as quickly as possible.

The artist included several aircraft in the painting to highlight the urgency and fast tempo of the air operations. From the time a radio call warned that Japanese Zeros were on their way, it would take only five minutes for the airmen of Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons to be in the air in response.

Where are the Japanese?

Within a week of landing on 25 August, the Japanese soldiers had reached the edge of the eastern Allied airstrip.

How did the campaign end and how significant was the action at Milne Bay?

The combination of determined ground troops and close air support proved too much for the Japanese forces. Eventually, on 6 September 1942, the Japanese were forced to retreat. Of the approximately 3,000 Japanese troops who had landed, around 1,300 were evacuated. The rest had died. Of the Australians, 373 were killed or wounded in the fighting.

The Japanese defeat at Milne Bay was their first defeat on land. It denied them the use of a naval and air base from which to support their attempts to capture Port Moresby via the Kokoda Trail.

RAAF squadrons remained at Milne Bay into 1943. They carried out attacks on various targets in the region, including in New Britain and Lae.

Flying boots worn by Keith “Bluey” Truscott. AWM RELAWM54732



Learning activities for classroom use

- Find definitions for these key words:
 - Allies, garrison, amphibious, squadron, combat
- Research the differences between the various aircraft used in the campaign: Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk, Lockheed Hudson bomber, Bristol Beaufighter, Bristol Beaufort bomber, Mitsubishi Zero.

3. From what you have learned about the living conditions at Milne Bay, do you think the Australians faced greater risks from these, or from the enemy? List your reasons.

- If you were involved in the defence of Milne Bay, would you rather have been involved in ground combat or in the air? Why?

5. Look up Milne Bay on a map. Why was it of such strategic importance?

6. Go to the Australian War Memorial’s website, www.awm.gov.au, click on *collection* to research the following bravery awards from the Battle of Milne Bay:

- Flying Officer Bert Augustus Grace, No. 76 Squadron, RAAF, Distinguished Flying Cross (shown on front)
- Corporal John Alexander French, 2/9th Infantry Battalion, Victoria Cross

7. Go to the National Archives website, www.naa.gov.au click on *name search*, look up *under* Air Force Personnel records....

Bruce Brown
Keith Truscott

Research one of these airmen and present your findings to the class. Use his service record to answer the following questions:

- What was his full name?
- What was his service number?
- Date of birth
- What was his occupation before he enlisted?
- Who was his next of kin?

8. Go to the Australian War Memorial’s website, www.awm.gov.au, click on *people*, then *Roll of Honour* and look up:

Stuart Munro, No. 75 Squadron
George Inkster, No. 76 Squadron

Click on the *Roll of Honour circular* to answer the following questions:

- rank
- age
- occupation
- place of burial
- where each was from

Go to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, www.cwgc.org, and look them up. Where are they buried now? Is there a Milne Bay War Cemetery listed on the Commission’s website?

Enrich your students’ learning

Before you visit the Australian War Memorial, book a facilitated program for your school group. Aligned to the Australian Curriculum – History, these programs provide a much deeper learning experience for visiting students.

Facilitated programs are designed to suit your classroom and curriculum needs. Trained educators draw on personal stories represented by the displays in the galleries and by real artefacts. Make the most of your visit by discovering amazing tales of Australian wartime history and the significance of commemoration.

Bookings are essential for all school groups visiting the Memorial, whether you are choosing a facilitated program led by Memorial staff, or a teacher-guided tour.

All school bookings are made at

www.awm.gov.au/education/bookings

For further assistance, and for your school password to book online, please email the Memorial’s Education booking officer at school.bookings@awm.gov.au

Teacher’s excursion checklist

Log on to www.awm.gov.au/education and read about the Memorial’s curriculum-based programs to choose the program that best suits the needs of your students. Book your visit online and record your booking reference number.

Arrange your transport. A risk assessment guide is available from the NCETP website www.nceptp.org.au. Ensure that there will be adequate supervision by teachers and other accompanying adults; one supervising adult to accompany each group of 15 students. Students are to remain with supervisors at all times in the Memorial.

Before your visit, talk to your group about behaviour that is appropriate for a special national place of remembrance and commemoration.

Link your classroom activities to your impending visit. Bring your PACER paperwork for validation and stamping.

If your group numbers change, please email the variation to school.bookings@awm.gov.au, quoting your booking reference number. Cancellations should be made **no less than five working days** before you scheduled visit.

On arrival at the Memorial, please enter via the schools entrance, which can be located on the map on the Memorial’s website. Remember to leave all school bags on the bus.