SERGEANT PRING
AND THE
'CALCUTTA' HURRICANE

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FOREWORD

I was born in 1947, well after World War Two had ended, but I heard the story of the Japanese bombing raids on Calcutta from my father, and held in my hands a piece of metal he had taken off a crashed Japanese bomber. Some childhood memories simply endure, one does not know why : I still remember the way my father said 'Sergeant Pring' when I asked him who shot down the three Japanese bombers in one night.

Some fifty years after I had first heard his name, finding myself with time on my hands, I decided to satisfy a dormant childhood curiosity and find out more about Sergeant Pring. The internet led me to David McMahon's story 'Hurricane Over Calcutta', and I was startled to learn that Pring lost his life in air combat above the city, and was interred in the Bhowanipore cemetery, not far from where I grew up. Not only that, but Pring was a Beaufighter ace! For most of my life I had been reading about air combat and air aces, and here was one of that fabled tribe buried in my own backyard and I did not know it!

From then on I became involved in researching Maurice Pring. I thought it unfair that a man who had once been a hero to Calcutta should have been forgotten by the city, and as a 'Calcuttan' it was up to me to undo the wrong. In the course of my studies I became aware of other men who fell in battle the day Maurice died. I have tried to do justice to them, although I confess my knowledge about them is very limited and unsatisfactory.

I also discovered that a major 'character' in the Pring story was the truly rare and obscure aircraft he was flying at the time of his death, the ill-fated radar-equipped Hurricane II C (NF) single-seater night-fighter. I have taken the liberty of giving this unwanted offspring of the famous Hawker Hurricane family the sobriquet of the 'Calcutta' Hurricane as this aircraft spent almost the entirety of it's brief operational career in 176 Squadron defending Calcutta. Angus Hamilton, who served in 176, wrote that the Hurricane II C (NF) was '… a classic case study that should be documented but probably never will be'. I have at last corrected that omission.

The story of Pring's last flight has the poignant inevitability of a Greek tragedy. He was not on duty. He had already completed his tour of operations and was due for home leave. He was not a Hurricane pilot. His Squadron C.O. was against his going up. But on that day Fate was the hunter, and Fate decreed the final paradox : that death should come out of the noonday sun to the Englishman whose metier was hunting the enemy in the dark.

This essay is dedicated to Flying Officer A. M. O. 'Maurice' Pring, DFM, and the Hurricane II C (NF), the 'Calcutta' Hurricane.

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Siliguri, India
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Others who helped are mentioned in the 'Notes on Sources' at the end of this essay.
CHAPTER ONE

CALCUTTA

War came to Calcutta on the night of the 20th December, 1942 (1).

The Japanese had overrun Burma by April 1942, chasing the tattered remnants of British-Indian and Chinese troops across the jungle-clad hills of the Indo-Burma border, but they were not strong enough to push on into India. But Calcutta lay well within the range of their bombers, and what the people of the city had been fearing ever since the fall of Burma came to pass on the 20th of December. A force of eight Imperial Japanese Army Air Force (IJAAF) Ki -21 Type 97 medium bombers, code-named 'Sally' by the Allies, scattered their bombs over the city. They damaged the oil plant at Budge Budge, located on the Ganges river a little South of the city, and one eyewitness reported a hole in the road opposite the Great Eastern Hotel, but the physical damage inflicted on the city was trivial compared to the devastating blow to the morale of the inhabitants: approximately one-and-a-half million people panicked and fled, among them a majority of the conservancy workers from upcountry villages. The effect on the civic services was catastrophic, and there were serious fears of an epidemic caused by the mounds of rotting garbage that accumulated. The IJAAF bombers returned on a number of occasions on the days that followed, notably on Christmas Eve. The December 24/25 night raid by 10 Sallys (some from 14th Sentai) achieved a scattering of bombs over the Chowringhee- Bentinck Street- Dalhousie Square area of Central Calcutta and caused some loss of life, thus considerably dampening the Yuletide cheer.(1)(2)(3)(39)

India may have been the 'jewel in the crown', but as far as combat aircraft was concerned it had traditionally been the Imperial dustbin. The Bolsheviks in the Kremlin did not seem inclined to disturb the peace, and barring Russia the geographical neighborhood of India did not have any other air threat. So it was logical to put obsolete and obsolescent types out to grass in India where they were perfectly adequate for punitive raids against the restive Pathans of the North West Frontier. The situation did not change with the start of World War Two. The war was a continent away, and India was drained of troops to serve in North Africa.

But all that changed with dramatic suddenness once the Japanese thunderbolt fell on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In the samurai version of blitzkrieg, the Japanese swept away the ill-prepared colonial regimes of East and South-East Asia, speedily altering their image from rather comical orientals to cunning, brave and ruthless warriors. At sea the Royal Navy's vaunted battleships went down under air attack, and the ABDA fleet was blown out of the water by cruiser guns and the dreaded 'long lance' torpedoes. On land a large but inadequately trained and incompetently led British army in Malaya was humiliatingly forced to surrender at Singapore to a smaller Japanese force. And in the air the 'sahibs' who had been pompously dismissive about Japanese air power discovered to their dismay that Japanese aircraft were not copies of outdated Western types but extremely effective original designs,
and they were flown with aggressive elan by very skilled pilots who had honed their fighting edge in the skies of China and Khalkin Gol. In particular, the Mitsubishi A6M Type 0 'Zero' fighter flown by pilots of the Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force (IJNAF) proved to be an outstanding aircraft that quickly gained a fearsome reputation. The Zero and its IJAAF cousin, the equally nimble if less well-armed Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa fighter (codenamed 'Oscar') swept the skies of Asia clean of all opposition barring Chennault's American Volunteer Group (AVG). For the Royal Air Force and other opponents of the Japanese, it was, as Messers Shores, Cull and Izawa named their authoritative account of this period of the air war in Asia, 'Bloody Shambles'.

In the battle for Burma, the RAF and AVG inflicted losses on the IJAAF but failed to stop it, and after the disaster of the Sittang the British-Indian and Chinese forces were forced to conduct a long retreat. By April 1942 Burma had fallen: wearing seven-league boots, the Japanese had accomplished the incredible feat of arriving at the Eastern border of India, 6000 kilometres away from Japan, in just five months.

Suddenly India was desperately vulnerable, and Calcutta was wide open to Japanese air attack. To strengthen India's air defences, a number of Hurricane squadrons were rushed out and a radar network set up. A Ground Controlled Interception (GCI) station was built at Deganga, North East of Calcutta. A Filter Room was set up in Calcutta. A number of new airfields came up, particularly in Eastern India. The most famous and visible one of these airfields was a 1100 yard section of the Red Road, between Chowringhee and the Maidan. It was not an easy strip to operate from due to the camber of the macadamized road surface and the ornamental balustrades that flanked the road on both sides, and there were occasional mishaps, but the pilots enjoyed using hotels and restaurants on Chowringhee like the Grand Hotel or Firpo's as their Ready Room, and the sight of fighters operating from the heart of the city did much to improve the morale of the citizenry.(2)(4)(11)

And morale did need improving, for the news was not good. To add to the successive disasters of Malaya, Singapore and Burma, there was the tremendous scare of the arrival of Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's formidable fleet in the Bay of Bengal and neighbouring waters in April 1942. Aircraft from Nagumo's fleet, which had wreaked havoc on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, made short work of those unlucky ships of the Royal Navy which had not succeeded in fleeing West towards Africa, savaged the harbours of Ceylon after brushing aside the Hurricanes and Fairey Fulmars that tried to oppose them, sank some 24 merchantmen by naval and air attack, and dropped the first bombs on India in WW2, hitting Kakinada and Vishakhapatnam on 6th April 1942. (2)(4)

They missed a plum target due to lack of intelligence. Some 250,000 tons of merchant shipping was sheltering in Calcutta port, which was already coming within range of Japanese airfields in South Burma. The Japanese had occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in March 1942, and by April moved around 18 Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' long-range flying boats of the Toko Kokutai to Port Blair, aircraft easily capable of reconnoitring Calcutta. In a desperate bid to blind the enemy, two Lockheed Hudson bombers from 139 'Jamaica' Squadron flew from Chittagong to Akyab on 14th April, refuelled there, and then made the
long overwater flight to hit the flying boat base. The low-level strike destroyed 3 aircraft and
damaged 11 others. The raid was repeated on the 18th. Pressing home their attack at a
height of only 30 feet, the Hudsons destroyed 2 more aircraft and damaged 3, but this time
they were intercepted by Zeroes. Only one Hudson, badly damaged, returned. The crew of
the other Hudson, no. V9221 flown by Sgt. G.H. Jackson, were taken prisoner. But they had
crippled the Japanese long-range recce force, and some 70 merchantmen succeeded in
safely sailing out of Calcutta and dispersing.(5)(6)

[Postscript regarding the crew of Hudson III no. V9221, from www.rafcommands.com forum
thread ‘Hudson loss, 18th April 1942, Port Blair’ : Sgt.s G.H. Jackson, A. Flower and P.W.G.Hall
were prisoners of war at Rangoon. Jackson and Flower were tragically killed in an Allied
bombing raid on 29th November 1943. Hall survived the war. Sgt. J.R. Frehner is listed as
killed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on 18th April 1942 but has no burial
site and is commemorated on the Singapore War Memorial, column 415.]

Luckily for the British, the Japanese Imperial Headquarters decided against pushing ahead
into India after considering it. Ironically, one of the key Divisional Commanders in Burma who
voted against the invasion of India in 1942 was Renya Mutaguchi, who two years later would
do exactly that in far more adverse circumstances, over-riding the protests of his own
Divisional Commanders, and destroy his Army at Imphal and Kohima. The Japanese had
achieved their strategic objective of isolating China by cutting the Burma Road, and were
content to let their western front fall quiet while they digested their gigantic conquest and
prepared for the coming struggle for the Pacific with the colossal might of the United States.

Calcutta’s luck had held in April, but it ran out in December 1942. The defending Hurricanes
took off, the ack-ack guns fired noisily, but though Wing Commander Tony O’Neill, the
Commanding Officer of 165 (Hurricane) Wing, claimed to have damaged one Sally on the
23rd, and actually shot one down on the Christmas Eve raid, a success widely publicized, it
was clear that Calcutta was virtually defenceless at night.(3)

But there was a defence against night raiders, something Britain had developed by painful
trial-and-error in the flaming nights of the Blitz. As the Japanese bombers harassed Calcutta
the Commander-in-Chief India, General Archibald Wavell, sent a request for night-fighters to
London. (16)
CHAPTER TWO

AIRBORNE INTERCEPTION RADAR AND THE HURRICANE II C (NF)

AI RADAR

The story of the British development of radar is too well known to be worth recounting, but the development of Airborne Interception radar (usually called AI radar) is less so, and a brief summary is necessary to set the context. Once the practicability of radar had been established, those involved in British radar development became aware that defeating the day bomber threat with the help of radar would inevitably force the enemy, by then clearly identified as Germany, to switch to night bombing. They were also conscious that the complex ground-controlled interception method then being developed for RAF day fighters (later called the Dowding System after Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, who would lead RAF Fighter Command to victory in the Battle of Britain) would not work at night, because visibility at night was measured in yards rather than in miles as in daytime, and ground controllers simply could not bring a fighter sufficiently close to the enemy aircraft so as to enable the pilot to see it. The only practical solution was to put a radar set in the fighter itself, so that once it had been guided by the ground controller to the proximity of it's target it could detect the enemy aircraft on it's onboard radar screens and complete the interception.

In 1936, Edward 'Taffy' Bowen, a member of the staff of the Radio Research Station, took up the task of developing an airborne radar set. It was a stiff challenge, because Bowen's team (Gerald Touch, Sidney Jefferson, and Perc Hibbert) would have to reduce the wavelength from the 10-13.5 metre of the Chain Home radar to between 1 to 2 metres, and reduce the pulse width from 20 microsecond to 1 microsecond. The first AI set developed was far too heavy and large. During 1937 the use of a RCA valve and a major redesign brought the wavelength down sharply to 1.25 metres. It was found that increasing the wavelength to 1.5 metres increased the sensitivity greatly, and the scientists settled for this.

On 17th August 1937 the AI set first flew in Avro Anson no. K6260, and worked successfully. In early September the Royal Navy held an exercise to evade detection by 48 aircraft of Coastal Command. In weather so foul that the exercise was scrubbed, Bowen's Anson detected the ships by radar, and then returned safely to base, again with the help of radar. Tizard was overjoyed, and this led to the development of Air to Surface Vessel (ASV) radar.

In 1938, worried by the delay in development of the twin-engined Westland Whirlwind fighter, the Air Ministry accepted a proposal by Bristol to build a stop-gap heavy fighter adapted from the Beaufort torpedo-bomber. The Beaufighter flew in July 1939, and quickly proved suitable as a night-fighter. It's roomy fuselage could take the radar set and observer, and 4x20 mm cannons and 6x .303 machine-guns gave it the kind of pulverizing firepower one needed in night combat where engagements were very brief. Underpowered at first, two 1500hp Hercules sleeve-valve radials got it's speed up to a barely adequate 307mph in service trim.
AI Mark 1 flew in May 1939. It was quickly superseded by the Mark 2, and then the Mark 3. Because of its size and weight and the need for a radar operator (called an observer in the RAF), radar could be carried only in relatively large, multi-seat aircraft. The Bristol Blenheim light bomber up-gunned with a 4x .303 mg belly pack was chosen. Dowding disliked it (as he did the Defiants and Bostons that came later) for being too slow. But nothing better was available, and in early August 1939 the Air Ministry placed a rush order for AI Mark 3 sets to equip 60 aircraft. Six AI Mark 3 Blenheims reached 25 Squadron before the end of the month.

AI Mark 3 sets were unreliable, and led to grumbling and distrust by aircrew. The development of the EF50 valve and the entry of EMI in radar research/manufacture came as a boon. EMI's engineers led by A. D. Blumlein managed to reduce the outgoing pulse width significantly, which directly led to reduction in the radar's minimum range from the 1080 feet of the AI Mark 3 to 400 feet. This was vital as a Blenheim night-fighter had to get within 600-800 feet of its target for its machine-guns to be effective. The new set, called **AI Mark 4**, was the first really effective radar set and had the following features:

| Wavelength / Frequency | 1.5 metres/188 – 198 MHz |
| Peak pulse power       | 10 Kilowatts             |
| Range                  | Max. 3.5 miles at over 18000' / Min. 400 feet |
| Weight                 | 118 lbs.                 |

One problem of the Mark 4 was that the relatively long wavelength caused the radar pulses to go out in lobes in different directions. The downward lobe generated 'Christmas tree' shaped returns from the ground of such strength that they swamped the set, rendering the radar unusable below 10500 feet or so. The set really worked well at 15000 feet or more.

A Blenheim night-fighter scored the first radar-guided victory in July 1940. By September 1940, just as the Battle of Britain was won and the mauled Luftwaffe was beginning the night Blitz, a trickle of Beaufighters and AI Mark 4 sets began to enter service. The first Beaufighter victory using AI came on 19th November 1940. As the bugs got ironed out of AI sets and the aircraft (which suffered from gun recoil problems initially), the toll taken by Beaufighters went up steadily.

But there weren't enough Beaufighters. So Boulton-Paul Defiants, failed day fighters turned night-fighters, some equipped with the AI Mark 4, had to soldier on: they were relatively successful. Less so were radar-equipped Douglas Bostons which were too slow. Many were additionally fitted with the Helmore Turbinlite so that they could approach German bombers and then light them up for the accompanying Hurricanes to have a bash at it. It didn't work – the Hurricane pilots got dazzled as the light came on, and the Germans either shot out the light or took quick evasive action and got away. The RAF lost 32 aircraft for a single confirmed victory, achieved by a 253 Sqn. Hurricane *without using the light!* Some Hurricanes went up at night, trusting to luck and 'Eyeball Mark One', and a few of them reaped success – the outstanding pilot Flt. Lt. R. P. Stevens DSO, DFC and bar, scored 14 victories before he died on a night intruder mission. But he was the exception to the rule that day fighters sent up at night were more of a danger to themselves than the enemy. It would be two years and more before Hajo Herrmann would devise effective *Wilde Sau* tactics that would see German day fighters exact a real toll from RAF bombers – but only under favourable circumstances. (41)
The night Blitz reached a peak on the night of 10-11 May 1941, when 700 acres of London was laid waste and 1436 people killed, and then gradually faded away as Hitler moved East against Russia at the beginning of June.

THE HURRICANE II C (NF)

The Hawker Hurricane had given stalwart service during the Battle of Britain, shooting down more enemy aircraft than it's partner, the sleeker Supermarine Spitfire. It was easier to repair, a better gun platform, and had a stronger, wider-tracked undercarriage. But it was designed and built in the tradition of the venerable Hawker Fury, and the airframe had basically reached it's development limit. Despite the installation of a higher-powered engine, the Merlin XX of 1390 hp, the Hurricane II was by 1941 no longer able to compete on level terms with the later marks of the Me. 109 and the potent new Focke-Wulf 190.

So what was to be done with the enormous manufacturing capacity geared to make the Hurricane? It was decided to keep on building it for everything bar day interception. The Hurricane's rugged construction enabled it to serve in a multiplicity of roles – fighter-bomber, night intruder, tank-buster, catapult-launched/shipboard fighter, photo-recce aircraft etc. Development continued, strengthening the aircraft and increasing firepower. The Hurricane II B had 12 x .303s, the II C (first flown in February 1941) had 4 x 20mm Hispano cannons, and the II D tank-buster had 2 x 40 mm cannons. The II C did about 336 mph max. at altitude.

To combat the night blitz, there was a proposal to equip single-seaters like Spitfires, Hurricanes and Typhoons with AI radar to serve as night-fighters. The idea probably received a boost after Stevens' success - 'Just think, if Stevens had a radar what he could have done!' In the event the plan was really carried out only for the Hurricane.

Twin-engined aircraft are preferred as night-fighters because the outgoing signal from the radar aerial in the nose is unobstructed. In single-engined aircraft, the engine in the nose means that the antennae have to be placed in less-than-ideal locations causing problems. These problems had been solved at the time of installation of radar in single-engine multi-seater fighters like Defiants and Fulmars. But putting radar into a single-seater meant having to do without the observer. The solution to this difficulty was found in stages.

In the AI Mark 5 radar the observer had two tubes. The left tube gave the range, and had a strobe spot which had to be manually kept superimposed on the target echo. The right tube gave the altitude and bearing of the enemy, and fed the 'pilot's indicator' tube. The pilot's tube had two vertical bars and a U-shaped notch like a rifle's backsight. The night-fighter's own position was the U notch, and the enemy aircraft appeared as a spot of light, which grew 'wings' that got wider as the distance closed. The pilot had to bring the spot of light to the bottom of the U to put the enemy dead ahead. The enemy's 'wingspan' touched the vertical bars when the range was down to a thousand feet. At 500', the lower range limit for the radar, the 'wingspan' widened to touch two smaller marks outside the vertical bars.

Sources claiming Hurricane Mark II aircraft were fitted with Mark 5 sets in late 1941 are wrong, as the observer has to adjust the range tube for the 'pilot's indicator' tube to function. In fact extant literature reveals a fair degree of confusion regarding the AI Mark 5 and Mark 6.
The definitive single-seater radar, Al Mark 6, had the 'automatic' range strobe, which kept the strobe spot superimposed automatically on a target echo of sufficient strength, thus dispensing with the need for an operator. This was clever technology that later led to a patent. Now the pilot could 'see' the altitude, azimuth and range on the 'pilot's indicator' tube in the cockpit without having to continually adjust the set. (22)(8)

The Mark 6 sets weighed 134 lbs. Peak pulse power was 10 Kilowatt, and maximum and minimum ranges were 2.5-3 miles and 500 feet respectively. The sets were complex and hard to maintain in good service trim. Moisture build-up in the wing bollards of the azimuth and elevation aerials caused the radar to 'squint'. The automatic strobe found it difficult to 'stick' to a weak target or a rapidly evading one. Using the 'pilot's indicator' effectively required considerable skill and practice. But the biggest shortcoming was described in an Air Ministry publication written in September 1943 (first published 1946) as the pilot's

'... difficult task of watching the tube and looking out in the darkness for the enemy.'

Elsewhere in the same book the unknown author commented about the Mark 6 that

'... Experience showed, however, that an operator could be a great help to a pilot during an interception'

possibly referring to the experience of 264 Squadron discussed below. I cannot believe that the unnamed author was unaware that this devastating observation undermined the very raison d'etre of the Al Mark 6, which was built to enable a night-fighter pilot to dispense with an observer! (22)(23)(7)

The basic problem was one of physiology. The pupil of the human eye adjusts its size to suit the level of light, but it does so slowly. That is why when we move from a bright room to an ill-lit one we feel we are in the dark, but after some time we can see. Pilots operating at night had to spend time in the dark to let the pupils of their eyes dilate to the fullest extent in order to acquire 'night vision', the ability to discern details in the dark, and good night vision was the key to successful night interception. But night vision would be quickly destroyed the moment the pilot looked at something much brighter than the dark sky – such as a radar screen; and till it was regained, which took time, he would be unable to see his target even if it was right in front of him. In fact, in such a situation, the night-fighter pilot tracking an enemy bomber stood a better chance of being shot down by an alert rear-gunner than shooting the bomber down!

Sgt. Horace R. Macaulay, radar technician who worked in 1942 on a Mark 6 fitted Hurricane (probably BN288) at Telecommunications Flying Unit (TFU), RAF Defford, was so convinced that this was a fatal fault that he wrongly believed the type never went into production. (23)

264 squadron at West Malling began receiving 313 mph Defiant Mark 2s equipped with the Al Mark 6 in late September 1941. Following the RAF’s lead, the Admiralty tried out the Mark 6 on a Fairey Fulmar II, but rejected it in favour of the Al Mark 4. In October a 264 Defiant detected a Do.217 at under one mile range – but it crashed without the Defiant firing its guns! Bad weather in November-December kept enemy activity down, but experience gained showed the Al Mark 6 had a very short range and the Defiants were too slow. Four firm
AI contacts in March 1942 'ran away' from the Defiants. On the night of 17th April '42 the AI Mark 6 was finally 'blooded' when a Heinkel He.111 was shot down by P/O Stuart and F/O Maggs. This was not a conclusive demonstration of the feasibility of pilot-operated AI, for in the two-seater Defiant the turret gunner could search the dark sky while the pilot 'flew' the screen.(7)

Following the C-in-C Fighter Command's visit to 264 Squadron on 1 January 1942 it was decided that AI Mark 6 would be installed in 12 Hurricane II C aircraft, which would then be known as Hurricane II C (NF). It appears from file no. AIR20/5230 in the Kew archives that at one time there was a proposal to form three squadrons of radar-equipped Hurricane II C night-fighters for deployment in India, the Middle East and the U.K.: obviously the decision was taken to proceed on a lesser scale.(7)(20)(22)

During the night blitz standard Hurricanes were converted to ersatz night-fighters by fitting flame shrouds on the exhausts. These aircraft were then referred to as Hurricane (NF). The RAF used (NF) as a functional designator, and because of this Hurricane II C (NF) could mean either a II C fitted with flame shrouds being used as a makeshift night-fighter, or a II C fitted with AI radar, a horse of an entirely different color! I really don't know why they did not call the latter aircraft Hurricane II C (NF/AI).

In early 1942 a Hurricane II C was experimentally fitted with AI Mark 6 radar, probably at RAF Hurn. A little later boffins at the Telecommunications Research Unit at Malvern made a broadly similar installation of the Mark 6 set in Hurricane II C no. BN288, which became the prototype Hurricane II C (NF). This aircraft had a Type 69 transmitting dipole from a Mosquito, Type 29 unipole arrays from the Defiant night-fighter, and vertically polarised azimuth dipoles from the Fulmar night-fighter. The location of the transmitting dipole outboard of the cannons on the left wing required the landing light to be shifted inboard. The 4-inch diameter radar screen was placed in the position of the undercarriage indicator, which in turn went to the position occupied by the clock. The clock was dispensed with.(23)(20)(34)

BN288 was test-flown by the TFU for 30 hours and the FIU for 27 hours. Their report of 7th June 1942 praised the Mark 6's performance, but hinted at a problem by stating

'...inexperienced pilots are not recommended to fly an AI-equipped Hurricane in bad weather at night'.

which is an oxymoron, as inexperienced pilots are not recommended to fly ANY aircraft whatsoever in bad weather at night. What TFU/FIU were really hinting at was that, as late as July 1942, the Hurricane II C was considered 'still very unpleasant to fly'.(8)

Paralleling the development of the AI Mark 6 was the set that would render it obsolete, the AI Mark 8. The discovery of the cavity magnetron had led to the creation of the centimetric radars, so called because they operated in wavelengths measured in centimetres. The limited-production Mark 7 set with 9.1 cm. wavelength had been rushed into operations in 1941 in some four squadrons of Beaufighters or so, and given excellent results. It's successor, the AI Mark 8, was already in production from the middle of 1942. It's peak output of 25 Kilowatts gave it a 5.5 mile maximum range, twice that of the Mark 6. The integrated transmitting dipole
-cum- receiving aerial at the focus of a three-foot diameter parabolic mirror emitted a focused, narrow beam (like that from a focused torch) that rotated spirally, covering a cone with an apex angle of 90 degrees. The entire assembly was placed behind a transparent perspex nose cone. (22)

Because the Mark 8 did not send out a strong downward pulse, it was much less affected by ground returns. The display was a single CRT with a radial sweep. It showed range, location (=elevation and bearing) and IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) response. The Mark 8 was a technological leap, a generation ahead of the Mark 6: it made the Mark 6 obsolete. (22)

The need for Hurricane night-fighters in Home Defence was also coming under question. The Beaufighter had proved adequate, particularly those with centimetric radar. The Mark VI F version with 1675 hp Hercules VI engines had a 'clean' top speed of 333 mph, almost equal to the Hurricane II C's 336 mph. While speeds of both aircraft would go down after installation of radar due to weight and drag increase, the performance penalty would have been greater for the Hurricane which had less engine power, and it is probably safe to say that in full service trim the Beau VI C (NF) was as fast or faster than the Hurricane IIC (NF). And by April 1942 157 Squadron was already flying the AI Mark 4 equipped NF II, the first night-fighter version of the superb De Havilland Mosquito. With a 'clean' maximum speed of 370 mph it was far faster than the Hurricane, and lethally armed with 4x20mm cannon and 4x.303 mgs.

Given the unresolved doubts about the practicability of the pilot using the radar while flying night combat, and the performance inferiority of both aircraft and radar set compared to equipment already in service, there was no reason for persisting with the Hurricane II C (NF). Yet, inexplicably, persisted with it was, though with a distinct lack of urgency: someone was being very chary about cancelling the order for a dozen aircraft. Was it because the AI equipped single-seater idea originated from or was backed by someone Very High Up – like Churchill? (8)(22)

The decision to go ahead with the limited manufacture of the Hurricanes had an unexpected result: unnoticed by anyone, the otherwise undistinguished Hurricane II C (NF) entered the record books of aviation history as the first radar-equipped single-seater night-fighter. (50)

In November 1942 Hurricane II C (NF)s were delivered to Fighter Command for operational trials. Six went to 245 'Northern Rhodesia' Squadron at Charmy Down, and six to 247 'China-British' Squadron at High Ercall, both being squadrons picked for conversion to Typhoons. 245 used them for convoy patrol and did not see combat. 247 pilots, among whom was Flt. Lt. Derek Brocklehurst, were 'coached' about the AI Mark 6 radar by Mark 6 expert F/O H. A. 'Tony' Blondal before they received their aircraft on 23rd November. They found the aircraft felt 'top-heavy' and difficult to handle, especially when mounted with long-range fuel tanks required to give extended patrol endurance. The actual max. range of the Mark 6 turned out to be c.5000' (1 mile) rather than 2.5-3 miles. The radar was calibrated to the estimated wingspan of the target, and a target of different wingspan made the echo grow faster or slower than normal. If the target was at an angle or crossing it was difficult to hold on the four-inch sized screen. (11)(21)(34)
P/O Ken Gear of 247 said the Hurricane II C (NF), overloaded with radar and long-range tanks, felt as if it was 'flying through mud'. Gear set out late one evening on an interception at low level, but despite being on track the Hurricane was unable to close the target as it was doing only around 180 mph [presumably IAS - JS]. The Controller asked if he could increase speed, so Gear 'pulled the tit' and went on to emergency overboost. This overheated the engine, but otherwise made no difference, the exasperated Controller reporting that the target was still pulling away. (34)

247 achieved no success with the Hurricane II C (NF). The Luftwaffe were using fast aircraft like the Junkers Ju.88 for raiding, and the Hurricane night-fighter were not quick enough to catch them. The question about the feasibility of single-seater pilots using radar while engaging in night combat remained unanswered. (34)

Less than a month after the Hurricane II C (NF)s had arrived at 247 Squadron, the C-in-C Fighter Command, Air Marshal T. Leigh-Mallory, wrote on 19th December 1942 to the Under-Secretary of State for Air on the topic of night-fighting. Part of his letter read as follows:

….10. There are many limitations to the useful employment of single-engined fighters at night, and even if Mark VI AI can be made to give results comparable with the AI fitted in the twin-engined aircraft, I am convinced that other factors will militate against the effectiveness of these aircraft. The Hurricanes with which these squadrons [3, 245 and 247 – JS] have been equipped in the past are too slow for operating against the more modern German bombers, and the Typhoons which they are already receiving are unsuitable for flying on dark nights except for experienced pilots. The large nose of the Typhoon restricts the view forward while landing and taking off. I propose to allocate these three squadrons to a primary role of day fighting.

11. I recommend that one Typhoon be fitted for testing the Mark VI AI and the twelve Hurricane aircraft already equipped be transferred elsewhere. The Mark VI AI may be found to be more suitable overseas.(34)

The Government evidently concurred with Leigh-Mallory's recommendations. One Typhoon fitted with the AI Mark 6 was indeed built, but that was all : the experiment was not adjudged a success. And in view of the demonstrated ineffectiveness of the AI Mark 6 Hurricanes in the U.K., it was decided to send the 12 Hurricane II C (NF)s to India!(8)

Imperial habits die hard.
AI Mark 6 pilot's screen showing enemy aircraft slightly higher and to the right (J Sircar).

Experimental Hurricane II C fitted with AI Mark 6 radar, probably at RAF Hurn, early 1942 (Mike Dean courtesy Horace Macaulay).
Artist's impression of Hurricane II C (NF) [J. Sircar].

Artist's impression of pilot's panel of Hurricane II C (NF) [J. Sircar].
CHAPTER THREE

176 SQUADRON AND MAURICE PRING

Flown by skilled night-fighter pilots like John Cunningham, the Beaufighter had defeated the Luftwaffe's night bombers by late 1941. The improved Beau Mark VI F did 333 mph 'clean', and carried either the AI Mark 4 or the superior AI Mark 7/Mark 8 centimetric radar. By 1942 Beaufighters were carrying the fight to the enemy, flying night intruder missions over enemy bases. A number of Beau night-fighter squadrons went out to the Middle East. One such squadron was no. 89 based at Abu Sueir in Egypt, which had a detachment flying intruder missions out of Luqa airfield in Malta. As an immediate response to the outcry that arose after the December raids on Calcutta, culminating in an appeal from General Wavell, 89 Squadron was asked to detach a flight of Beaufighters to India to defend the city.\(^{7}(9)(11)\)

A nucleus of experienced 89 Squadron ground crew were flown out to Calcutta. Eight Beaufighters (or five - sources differ\(^\ast\)), a mix of Mark 1F and 6F types (89's Beau 6Fs then had AI Mark 4* radar), and their crews were gathered at Abu Sueir to form 'A' Flight, 89 Squadron. The flight departed Abu Sueir on 10th January and arrived at Dum Dum on the 14th January 1943. That very same day this detached flight of 89 Squadron was renamed as a new RAF squadron, no.176! The 89 Squadron men, who had come expecting a brief deployment in India before returning to their parent unit in the Middle East, were not amused when they discovered they were now stuck in India – their reactions varied from 'betrayal' (LAC Carl Norman) to 'Admin balls-up' (Flt. Lt. George C. Nottage). \(^{(9)(11)(13)}\)

In fact Nottage was right. Air Ministry had decided to form 176 Squadron as a Beaufighter unit, possibly for Long Range Patrol/General Reconnaissance (LRP/GR). The ground crew reached Bombay in November '42 and were sent to Drigh Road, Karachi pending arrival of aircrew and aircraft. When the detached 'A' flight of 89 Squadron arrived at Calcutta they were hastily labelled as 176 Squadron! The confusion then prevalent may be judged from the fact that five Beaufighter crews (apparently not trained for night-fighting) were gathered at Edku, Egypt, told they were 176 Squadron, and sent off in five non-nightfighter Beaus for India on 28th Jan.'43. On arrival at Jodhpur on 6th February they discovered that 176 Squadron had already been formed! They were later sent to other units. \(^{(11)(19)}\)

So 176 Squadron became the first night-fighter unit in India. Wg Cdr Tony O'Neill was appointed CO – perhaps because he had flown Beaus in night combat. The motto of the new squadron was *Nocte custodimus* – 'We keep the night watch'. The squadron letters AS were never applied to aircraft. The squadron badge was made in November 1946, six months after 176 was disbanded! You can see it in the Air of Authority website : the U. K. Ministry of Defence did not reply to my request to reproduce the badge! \(^{(7)(9)(35)}\)

\(^\ast\) Most sources incl. *The History of 89 Squadron* says eight but Tony O'Neill in *Beaufighter Aces* says five.\(^{(11)(9)}\)

\(^\ast\) Tony O'Neill in *Beaufighter Aces* says AI Mark 8 but *Canadians on Radar in South-East Asia 1941-1945* says AI Mark 4 (pages 98,103,281,338). Angus Hamilton,176 radar hand, confirmed this to me. Photographs of 176's Beaufighter 6Fs in *Beaufighter Aces* show snub noses with arrowhead aerials typical of AI Mark 4 Beaus. \(^{(9)(11)}\)
176 may have been a newly minted squadron, but its aircrew were already old hands at the night interception game. One pilot, the diminutive Australian night-fighter ace Flight Sergeant Charles Crombie, had already scored nine confirmed victories. Another rising star was a slim, six foot tall Englishman with a boyish, smiling face, born in Ealing, West London to Arthur Benjamin Pring and his wife Doris Lilian Pring (nee Garrett) on November 1, 1921. He wore the uniform of a Flight Sergeant, and his name was Arthur Maurice Owers Pring. (10)

Pring’s father was an electrical engineer, and spent many years of his service career in South America and Canada. In 1935 he and his family were at Halifax, Nova Scotia where he was working with the Cable and Wireless Company. They returned to England in 1936 and settled at Berkhamsted, first at 22, Boxwell Road and later at 38, Ashlyns Road. Maurice Pring joined Berkhamsted School in April 1936 as a day boy and passed out in 1939. (10)

Pring was studying at Chelsea Polytechnic and was a member of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) when he was called up in 1940 and selected for night fighter pilot training (service no. RAFVR 1258998). On completion of training he was first posted to 604 Squadron (Beaufighters). By June 1941 he was in 125 Squadron (Defiants, then Beaufighters), and in early 1942 he was transferred to 89 Squadron based in Egypt (Beaufighters). Here he teamed up with his observer, Warrant Officer C.T. Phillips. (9)(10)(12)

Pring damaged a Heinkel He.111 on the night of 3/4 July and achieved his first victory on the night of 4/5 July 1942 – another Heinkel over Suez. Posted to C Flight at Malta, he destroyed two bombers, an Italian CANT Z1007 bis and a German Heinkel He.111, over Castelvetrano airfield, Sicily, on the night of October 12/13,1942. On the night of the 19/20 October he added a Junkers Ju.88 to his tally – his fourth victory. Two nights later he claimed a He.111 as damaged – postwar research shows his victim was possibly a Fiat BR20M of the Regia Aeronautica’s Gruppo 88 which was so badly damaged that its crew baled out and the plane crashed at Nisceni in Sicily. At that point Pring’s score stood at four victories (plus two probables), but somehow officially he was credited with only three victories. (9)(12)(14)

During World War 1 the French first used the term ‘ace’ to describe a skilled pilot, and it speedily caught on among the Allies, coming to mean a pilot who had five or more victories in aerial combat. On 14th January 1943, Pring was just one victory away from becoming an ace.

176 Squadron was not formed a day too soon, and achieved the rare distinction of seeing action the day after it had been raised. The IJAAF came back to Calcutta on the night of 15th January 1943. When the raid warning came Pring and his observer W/O Phillips headed towards their Beaufighter 1F no.X7776 'M' together with armourer LAC Carl Morgan. As they neared it they were brought up short by a sharp 'Halt!' from an African soldier guarding the aircraft. Asked by the sentry to give the password, the bewildered trio realized they did not know it, and prudently retreated when the guard operated the rifle bolt to chamber a round. Luckily they found the officer in charge of the guard detachment in a nearby tent, and were eventually allowed into their aircraft just before the order came to scramble! (9)(13)

Airborne at about 2145, Pring was guided by GCI Deganga to the raiders who had already dropped their bombs causing 'little damage'. In brilliant moonlight, the three unpainted Sallies of the 98th Sentai seemed to 'gleam like silver fishes' to F/O 'Red' Gray and Flt. Sgt. Mould,

The following account of the combat in Pring’s own words was published in the Niagara Falls Gazette of New York, USA on January 16, 1943:

“The first plane I saw had it’s navigation lights on*, but I wasn’t fooled. We had been scrambled out of bed for this show and I knew that bloke was not one of ours. We made a swift pass, shooting him to the ground. Another pass, and number two burst into flames. About 200 yards ahead the third Jap was trying desperately to get away but I got him in my sights. He went into the ground shooting flames like the oil gushers you Americans tell me about.” (10)

The story broke widely, first in the local papers of the 16th, both English and vernacular, and then worldwide. The official communique said Pring had been flying a 'British fighter', not specifying the actual type to keep the arrival of the Beaufighter secret (the Army Intelligence officer showing a Turkish delegation around Dum Dum on 21st January was instructed to describe the Beaus as 'obsolete bombers'). This led to the widespread impression that Pring had been flying a Hurricane, the only fighter the populace were familiar with. Even my father the late Pradipta Kumar Sircar, a profoundly knowledgeable aviation enthusiast, told me Pring was a Hurricane pilot. However, Pring's above account of the combat reveals that he was not in a single-seater Hurricane: he inadvertently used the plural 'we' twice! (13)(10)

The Courier-Mail of Brisbane, Australia of 18th January 1943 reported on page 1 under the prominent heading MALTA HERO BEAT JAP AT CALCUTTA that Pring was one of the heroes of the defence of Malta, scoring three victories (with two damaged) and being awarded the Maltese Cross. It said the second bomber had opened fire on Pring before being shot down. It also said he was engaged to a Miss Ray Davis of Aylesbury, and had declared that "I would be happier to get a letter from her than to shoot down three Jap planes on three nights running."

[The official communique about Pring's feat mentioned that he had three victories earlier, which made his present confirmed score 6. However, Andrew Thomas’s authoritative Beaufighter Aces of World War 2 [Osprey Book of the Aces 65, 2005] credits Pring with 7 confirmed victories (+2 probables). In personal communications Andrew was kind enough to give precise details regarding Pring’s victories, quoting Aces High by Christopher Shores and Clive Williams [Grub Street 1999]. There is no doubt that 7 is the correct figure.](9)(10b)(14)

Pring must have been very pleased to join the elite rank of fighter aces, but he cannot have anticipated the instant fame that came his way. The Statesman, the leading English daily of Calcutta, carried the account of the combat the next day together with a big war loan advertisement featuring Pring with the legend “Lend to be free. Be like Sergeant Pring, put all your efforts behind the fight against the enemy. Bravo Pring.” The powers-that-be had found in the photogenic fighter pilot their poster boy. This particular advertisement was repeated on a number of occasions thereafter. (13)

* It was thought that the other bombers were following the flight leader who carried the only skilled navigator.
Undeterred by the losses suffered on the 15th, the IJAAF mounted another raid with three Ki-48 'Lily' light bombers of the 8th Sentai on the night of January 19, 1943. The raiders ran into Charles Crombie and his observer W.O. Raymond Moss in Beaufighter 6F no. X8164 'G' above Budge Budge at around 2045. This time the Japanese gunners were not caught napping, and they set Crombie's starboard engine on fire. Despite this Crombie destroyed two bombers, ordered Moss to jump as flames streamed from his wing, and continued attacking, managing a third for a probable. He baled out with his clothes burning seconds before the Beau's fuel tank exploded, landed in a swamp, and made his way back to Dum Dum. Postwar research appears to show that Crombie actually shot down only one Lily, piloted by Sgt. Major H. Sato, which came down near Falta, South of Calcutta. The other two bombers took violent evasive action, diving almost to water level, and returned safely to Magwe. 

[A piece of duralumin from the crashed Lily lay for decades among the junk in our garage till it was used to block a hole much favoured as a passage by our neighbourhood rats. We could hear them gnawing away for days at that piece of metal with their formidable incisors before they gave up – possibly due to toothache?]

Pring was immediately decorated with the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) and Phillips with the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) – Pring did not get the DFC because class-conscious Britain gave DFCs only to Warrant and Commissioned Officers! Ironically, he was commissioned as Pilot Officer effective 21st January (new service no. RAFVR 143237)! 

[Crombie won an immediate Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Moss the DFC for their action. Crombie also got the DFC in May 1943 for his service with 89 Squadron in the Middle East. He left for Australia in July with his score standing at 11 (plus 3 probables), and survived the war, only to die tragically while air-testing a Beau on 26th August 1945.]

The savage mauling inflicted by Pring and Crombie led to the suspension of Japanese raids against Calcutta for eleven months, a welcome respite. The Japanese thought faulty flame dampers were partly responsible for the losses, which they ascribed to Hurricanes. The grateful British residents of the city treated 176 Squadron to an all-ranks dance at Firpo's on Saturday, 13th February, where both ladies and liquor were plentiful. Those who had fled in panic after the December raids came trickling back.

Pring became the toast of Calcutta, being much in demand in civil and military dinners. The 'slim young man with a clean-cut look' gained a fan following long before the term became current, particularly among children and the teenagers, his boyish good looks doing no harm at all. Carl Morgan in his memoirs recounts an anecdote that is illustrative: on 21st January Pring, Morgan and others went by 'gharry' (vehicle) from Dum Dum to Calcutta. Pring wanted to buy a .22 rifle for hunting in the jungles around camp, and went to a gunshop in the
Chowringhee area. He found one fitted with a telescopic sight that he liked. On being told the price, he regretfully remarked that it was beyond his budget, and he would have to go for something more modest. A well-dressed Indian gentleman who was present in the shop then asked him if he was the Sergeant Pring who shot down three Japanese bombers in four minutes. On Pring answering in the affirmative, the gentleman asked the shop owner to pack the weapon and 2000 rounds of .22 ammunition for Pring, and paid for it. He then took Pring in his Rolls-Royce to the Police Commissioner for a gun license (which Pring did not require as a member of His Majesty's Forces), and finally to Firpo's for a 'slap-up meal' before dropping him at the 'gharry pick-up point' for going back to Dum Dum! (10)(11)(13)

But a rarer distinction awaited Pring: his photograph was chosen to appear on an Air Force recruiting poster targeted at Indians. The choice appeared to have been dictated in part by the happy rhyming of Pring with Singh, for the poster featured Pring and the Indian Air Force pilot F/O Harjinder Singh. The text of the 'Pring and Singh' poster began -

“This is

PRING

The Flight Sergeant who shoots them down quickly. A cool nerve, a clear brain, and unlimited 'guts', that's what it takes to make an ace pilot like Pring. -----”

This was followed by a matching piece beginning “This is

SINGH...”.

In February 1943 176 Squadron moved from Dum Dum to Baigachi, a newly-constructed airstrip some 25 miles North East of Calcutta, where they were honored by a visit from the Governor of Bengal – a film of the visit is preserved in the Imperial War Museum [ID: MWY 5]. The men lived in Baigachi camp, two miles away from the field. Life was uncomfortable. There was no electricity. The heat and humidity made people suffer. Men were laid low by malaria, dysentery and snake-bites. The single, unfenced runway was lit by portable kerosene flares, and at night the 'cow patrol' truck had to race down the strip to chase wandering cows away and set up the flares before aircraft could operate. Despite these precautions two aircraft were written off after colliding with cows – luckily the crews were unharmed. The cows were less fortunate. (9)(11)(13)

Keeping radar sets working in the high humidity was a struggle – a set could go unserviceable between the morning's Daily Inspection and the afternoon's Night Flying Test. The dark paint scheme of the aircraft (non-reflective jungle-green camouflage above, black underside) soaked up heat like a sponge, so ground crew began work very early in order to finish before metal parts became too hot to touch. Noon temperature in the observer's compartment of a Beaufighter was once measured at 140 degrees Fahrenheit (54 degrees Celsius)! (11)
Flight Sergeant Maurice Pring [Photo J A O'Neill courtesy Andy Thomas].
Mitsubishi Ki 21-2 'Sally' bombers (Warbird Resources Group)

Beaufighter 6Fs of 176 Squadron being readied for night standby, Baigachi, early 1943. Pring sometimes flew X7682 'A' on the right. [Photo P G Hill courtesy Andy Thomas].
CHAPTER FOUR

A PASSAGE TO INDIA - AND A MINOR MYSTERY

245 and 247 Squadrons converted fully to Typhoons in January 1943, giving up their unloved Hurricane II C(NF)s. Once the decision was taken to ship these aircraft to India, if the usual practice was followed, they would have gone to No. 5 Maintenance Unit at Kemble in Gloucestershire for total airframe overhaul and fitting of zero-timed engines, and then to 52 Maintenance Unit at Cardiff for packing for shipment in big wooden crates. The entire process took time: R4118, now gloriously airborne again, took nine months to reach Bombay from Kemble in 1943-44. (47)

In contrast the Calcutta Hurricanes took four months or less, for by May 1943 or earlier the crated Hurricanes had arrived at 320 Maintenance Unit Base Repair Depot, Drigh Road, Karachi, where no one knew what was to be done with them. Among them was HV710, a 247 Squadron veteran. Around the same time No. 1 Squadron, Indian Air Force (it became Royal only in 1946) was moving to Risalpur in the North-West Frontier Province after brief stints at RAF Bairagarh (Bhopal) and RAF Chharra (Aligarh, UP). No.1 IAF was at that time commanded by Sqn. Ldr. S. N. Goyal, and mounted on somewhat worn Hurricane Mark Is and IIs. (14)(18)

Air Britain's records for HV710 show 3, 247 and 1 IAF as operators of this particular aircraft, which was struck off charge on July 5, 1945. Now, why would No.1 Squadron IAF, a day fighter unit, be handed over a radar-equipped Calcutta Hurricane? The noting about HV710 going to 1 IAF is wrong, possibly data relating to some other aircraft stuck onto HV710. Additional proof of this mix-up is that HV710, which was destroyed on 5th December 1943, is shown as being struck off charge on 5 July 1945! (21)

The pilots for the Hurricane night-fighters had meanwhile arrived in India, and were at a loose end in the absence of their mounts; among them was Flight Lieutenant Derek Brocklehurst, who had been transferred from 247 Squadron to 176. F/O Blondal, the Al Mark 6 expert, also landed up at 176, and became the well-loved Radar Officer 'Blondie' in charge of the squadron's radar unit. The missing Hurricanes were finally traced to Karachi in May 1943, and erected at 320 MU. Flt. Lt. Brocklehurst carried out test flights at 320 MU, and recorded the serial numbers of the aircraft he flew there as :

HV709 , HV710 , HV979, HW415, HW426 , HW432, HW435, HW485, HW541

He flew two more of these Hurricanes, KX359 and KX754, at Baigachi. That made a total of 11 aircraft. Which was the twelfth one? (11)(14)(18)

*Fighter Squadrons of the RAF and their Aircraft* by John D.R.Rawlings [Macdonald's, 1968, revised ed.1976] has the serial no. HW341/'O' for a Hurri II C (NF) serving in 176 Squadron. **But HW341 was part of a block of numbers never allotted!** Andy Thomas's article on 176 Squadron [*Aviation News*, 30 Oct.-12 Nov.1987] gives the twelfth aircraft as HW431/'O' – but this was a Hurricane II B, not a II C, and served only in 1564 (Met) Flight in Libya!
In Edward Bishop's *Hurricane*, Volume 93 [Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990], p.137, I found HW415 ("O") given as a 'tropical NF Mark IIC' serving in 11/43 with No. 176(F) Squadron, Baigachi: 'O', that hardy perennial, appears again, but at least this time it's attached to an actual 176 machine! Baffled, I re-read everything, and found a post which mentioned KX765. Malcolm Barrass kindly checked it out, and found it was an aircraft that went to Russia – but KX764 went to 176 Squadron! So the mystery of the twelfth aircraft was solved at last! (21)

By 24th June 1943 all twelve of these machines had joined 176 at Baigachi as the Hurricane Flight. The squadron had a new CO by then, Wg. Cdr. H.C. Goddard, 'Tony' O'Neill having been invalided home in May with jaundice. The Beaufighter Flight (A Flight) was commanded by Sqn. Ldr. Nottage, and Brocklehurst, described as 'a pleasant and cheerful person' 'built like a football player' commanded the Hurricane Flight (B Flight). (3)(11)(14)

The Hurricane aircraft were assigned squadron letters, some of which are known:

HV709/'L', HV979/'M', HW435/'N', HW415/'O', KX359/'Q', HV710/'S'

KX754 also is given as 'N'. But Norman Franks in *Spitfires over the Arakan* [William Kimber, 1988] identifies HW435 as being N on 5th December 1943. (18)

Perhaps to compensate for the performance penalty imposed by the weight of the radar set and the drag of the aerials, these aircraft were not fitted with tropical air filters which created high drag. In addition 176 stripped them of armour to lighten them. They wore RAF A.1 roundels rather than SEAC ones, and were probably painted like the 176 Beaufighters, matte green/brown camouflage above and matte black below. Pring, a naturally 'keen type', learnt to fly the Hurricane, although as a Beaufighter pilot he need not have done so: as he had flown Defiants earlier with 125 Squadron it would not have been difficult. (20)(29)(11)

The hope of the Air Ministry in London that the Calcutta Hurricanes would prove their worth against the relatively slower Japanese aircraft in the more benign weather conditions of sunny Bengal proved illusory. The bombers kept their distance, and the Hurricanes saw no action.

There is an anecdote about Pring dating from around this time. Apparently he went after a 'bogey' and forced it down. It was an American bomber with it's IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) switched off. The American bomber crew thought being forced down by the famous Maurice Pring was a great joke and asked him to join them for a convivial get-together, which he did. American aircraft often failed to respond to IFF interrogation, and this led to the tragic shooting down of a B29 by a 89 Sqn Beaufighter near Chittagong on 20th Dec. 1944. (11)

Pring's promotion to Flying Officer came through on 21st July 1943. In August the Beaufighter 1Fs of 176 were replaced by 6Fs. 176 sent detachments to Madras and Ratmalana in Ceylon to offer protection against raids, and a Beaufighter from Ratmalana flown by Flt. Sgt. L. Atkinson and Flt. Sgt. W. Simpson scored the next victory for 176, shooting down a Mavis flying boat coming from the Andamans on 11th October 1943 after a long chase. The next day 'Bluey' Halbeard belly-landed a Hurricane at Baigachi after losing a wheel. (15)(7)(9)(11)
Rare photo showing Calcutta Hurricanes at Baigachi, circa May 1943. No radar details visible.[ Photo J A O’Neill courtesy Andy Thomas].
In August 1943 fighter Spitfires arrived at last in India (photo-recce Spitfire Mark IVs of No. 3 PRU Flight (Calcutta) / 681 Squadron had been operating from Dum Dum since October 1942). These were only Mark 5Cs, but were still welcome as they could intercept and destroy the Mitsubishi Ki-46 'Dinah' recce aircraft which had hitherto generally flown too high and too fast to be caught by the Hurricanes. 607 and 615 Squadrons gave up their Hurricanes and converted to Spitfires, followed by 136. From October onwards these units began moving forward from Calcutta to the Chittagong - Ramu area - 136 was the last to go on December 1, flying from Baigachi to the 'Lyons' strip at Ramu - to assist in operations over the Arakan and provide a forward defensive screen against Japanese air incursions. Pilots of 152(Hyderabad) Squadron arrived at Baigachi in November 1943, but without aircraft – their Spitfire VIIIIs were yet to arrive.

The Spitfire defensive screen tactic appeared to succeed, but the wily Japanese were not quite done with Calcutta yet. They planned the next raid well.

Dinahs had been watching the supply buildup through Calcutta port for the Burma fronts – the second Arakan offensive started on Nov. 30. 5th Air Division (Hikodan), the apex IJAAF formation in Burma, had been planning since October for a daylight strike at the congested Calcutta docks to disrupt the flow. They calculated correctly that the forward movement of fighter squadrons was at the expense of Calcutta's fighter cover. The operation was rehearsed in Malaya. To add weight to the blow, they got the IJNAF to join them. Mitsubishi G4M 'Betty' bombers of the 705th Kokutai flew in from Padang in Sumatra. The 331st Kokutai, normally stationed at Sabang in Sumatra to protect the refineries of Palembang, flew under the command of Lt. Cdr. Hideki Shingo from Sabang to Tavoy on the 3rd, and to Magwe in Central Burma on the 4th to join the raid, fixed for 5th December.

With the Spitfires gone to the Arakan front, Operations had asked 176 on 4th December if their Hurricanes could intercept a fast, high-flying Ki-46 Dinah which had come over that day. To enable the Hurricane II C (NF)s to climb high enough and fly fast enough to do so if the Dinah reappeared on the 5th, they were stripped of radar to lighten them.

In the morning of Sunday, December 5th, two Beaufighters of 176 scrambled after a Dinah which flew out of range. No.79 Squadron probably flew off in their Hurricane II Cs from Alipore for Chittagong : I say probably because the 'Airmen's stories' article on T. C. Parker in the Battle of Britain Memorial site says "These (79) moved out on 5th December, but that same day 67 Sqn. intercepted a raid....". Shores says nothing of 79 moving, merely mentions that it scrambled late and did not engage. But if 79 was at Alipore when the first raid alert came in why did they fail to engage any of the raids within the next two hours or more?
The clear, sunny day promised to be peaceful – until warning came in of a large raid. The Japanese had launched their strike, and for the first and only time in their bombing campaign against Calcutta, they were coming in daylight and in real strength. In the IJAAF first wave were 18 Ki-21 Sallys (9 each from the 12th and 98th Sentai) protected by no less than 74 Oscars – 20 from the 33rd Sentai, and 27 each from the 50th and 64th Sentai. 20 Oscars from the 204th Sentai covered the take-off and withdrawal. In the IJNAF second wave, which set out 20 minutes later, 9 Mitsubishi G4M 'Betty' bombers of the 705th Kokutai were escorted by 27 Navy Zeroes from the 331st Kokutai.

The story of this raid has been told in detail by air historians like Christopher Shores [Air War For Burma] and Norman Franks [Spitfires over the Arakan]. The Japanese had two Dinahs drop 'chaff' to confuse the Allied radar, and other Dinahs feinted towards Silchar. Meanwhile, using their inherent long range ability and carrying drop tanks, the Japanese main force flew West from Magwe far out into the Bay of Bengal before turning towards Calcutta. (18)(24)(43)

The raid was first detected at 0930 and interpreted as aimed towards the Chittagong area. The earliest to scramble were eleven Hurricanes of 258 Squadron led by Flt. Lt. Arthur Brown (27) from Dohazari (SW of Chittagong), and ten Spitfires of 136 Squadron from the 'Lyons' strip at Ramu. 258 intercepted, and W/O P. I. Hickes claimed to have set a Sally on fire. Brown, whose aircraft seemed to be flying oddly, was heard to say he was attacking, but then went missing. Japanese sources confirm the loss of a 98th Sentai 'Sally' flown by 2nd Lt. K. Nishimori in this attack. (24)(27)(32)

136 Squadron turned back due to shortage of fuel after gaining visual contact with the distant enemy formation. Flt. Lt. Eric 'Bojo' Brown of 136, who missed the recall signal due to a radio malfunction, flew on and was the only Spitfire pilot to attack, claiming a Sally: the bomber was damaged but not shot down. On the way back he ran out of fuel and had to crash-land on Sandwip Island. (24)(27)

27 Spitfires scrambled by 607 and 615 squadrons and 17 Hurricanes by 60 and 261 squadrons from bases in the Chittagong - Cox's Bazar - Ramu area failed to find the Japanese. Now it became clear that the raiders were heading for Calcutta, and there was nothing to stop them except 67 and 146 squadrons (and 79?), and the depleted Hurricane flight of 176. Maj. Gen. Kirby feels this situation came about because of the failure of the controllers to position the RAF's considerable fighter strength properly: perhaps he fails to do justice to the skilful planning of the raid by the Japanese. (24)(25)(27)(32)(43)

August Hansen, a Dane who served in Calcutta as a Customs Officer at the time, recounts a story that was widely believed, that the Japanese were aided by spies who kept them informed of the state of the city's fighter defences: in his version a man who claimed to be half Chinese and worked at the Wireless Telegraphy department of Fort William was later caught and found to have been surreptitiously sending messages to the enemy. He was stood up against a wall and shot. What is indubitably true is that the Japanese raid took place precisely when the fighter cover over Calcutta was at its lowest ebb. (1)
Four Hurricanes led by Flt. Lt. Derek Brocklehurst went up around 1030 after the first wave, but were recalled and landed back around 1100. It is not explicitly stated why they were recalled, but it is reasonable to suppose that the size and strength of the raiding force being known by then, the risk of committing night-fighter pilots flying converted night-fighters was considered unacceptably great. (24)(25)

Scrambled at around 1050, the newly-arrived 67 Squadron led by Sqn. Ldr. T. C. Parker took off from Alipore in 12 ex-Middle East Hurricane IIBs, and joined up with 9 aircraft from 146 Sqn. at Baigachi. They intercepted the IJAAF first wave roughly around 30 miles East of Calcutta and tried to get at the Sallies, but could not penetrate the fighter screen. Flt.Sgt. Albert Corston, a Canadian pilot in the four-plane lead section of 67, had ducked down in his cockpit to try to get his radio headset working: when he raised his head and looked around he found what he thought were a pair of Zeros (they were Oscars) on his tail! He saved himself by a steep dive, pulled out low as his glycol spewed out and his engine ran rough, and pancaked in a paddy-field. So did Corston's section leader P/O S. M. Wilson. Another pilot of his section, P/O Aubrey Fraser Bond RCAF (22) of Toronto flying LB569 'K', was shot down and killed. Oscar pilots loved the accuracy of their nose machine-guns and used them to shoot up the unprotected coolant systems of their enemies. (24)(43)(44)(25)(42)

146 Squadron got bounced by Oscars and lost one Hurricane: Flt. Lt. R. Evans, RAAF, baled out of HV983 after his engine was shot up by a pair of Oscars. F/O A. B. Summers, RCAF, escaped by diving after sustaining damage, and W/O F. M. Horne, RCAF, crash-landed in HL802 at Taki. Between them 67 and 146 claimed one Oscar shot down (by the New Zealander F/O Gordon Williams of 67), and four enemy aircraft damaged. However, Japanese sources do not confirm Williams's victory claim. (24)(25)(26)(28)

33 Sentai Oscar pilot First Lieutenant Tameyoshi Kuroki, a 16-victory ace, claimed a Hurricane, but was so severely damaged that he contemplated a suicide dive; ultimately he did get home. Another victory was claimed by Capt. Koki Kawamoto of the 50th Sentai. 33rd and 64th Sentai pilots claimed eight Hurricanes destroyed and two probables. (24)(26)

[The raid had an interesting aftermath for 67 Squadron. On Monday the Calcutta papers were scathing: 'Where was the RAF? Were they having the day off?' Incensed by what they saw as unmerited criticism, 67 decided to teach Calcutta's gin-drinking 'boxwallahs' a lesson. There was an important race at the Calcutta Race Course next weekend, and as it got underway Hurricanes from 67 proceeded to do a thorough low-level 'beat up'. The horses scattered, the race finished in the slowest time on record, and carping comments ceased.] (32)

As 176's Hurricanes refuelled at Baigachi, there was another raid warning: the IJNAF second wave was coming in 45 minutes after the first wave, and they had achieved tactical surprise. It seems the IJNAF formation flew a slightly more roundabout course than the IJAAF, which explains why the time gap between them had increased from 20 to 45 minutes – the cruising speeds of Sallys and Bettys were very similar. The IJAAF had approached Calcutta from the East or ESE; the IJNAF came from due South. Ed Morgan, posted at the Diamond Harbour 'Chain Overseas Low' radar station AMES 544, remembers that when the 50+ radar echo was
initially detected at the maximum range of about 100 miles and reported to the Filter Room at Calcutta, the latter at first took it to be a formation of American bombers with their IFF switched off. As the blip closed in Morgan stepped out of the radar hut to see eight Bettys going past overhead towards Calcutta! He is positive he saw eight – he said it looked like an aircraft was missing from one of the vics. He also watched the same eight coming back a little later after dropping their bombs on the Calcutta docks.(11)(24)(25)

67 and 146 Squadrons, heavily engaged by the first wave, had shot their bolt. 79 Squadron had been scrambled belatedly, according to Shores, failed to engage the IJAAF raid, and was apparently unavailable for going after the new threat. Only 176 was left, and in desperation Operations committed them, Beaufighters, Hurricanes and all.(24)(25)(29)(44)

Four 176 Beaufighters led by Flt. Lt. Peter Hill took off around 1130. As they climbed slowly to intercept the Beau crews like Peter Lee could hear various aircraft in trouble, obviously the Hurricanes engaging the IJAAF raid. Operations, realizing belatedly that the Beaufighters were not able to climb higher than 21000 feet, mercifully recalled them before they became sitting ducks for the Japanese fighters.(29)

Five Hurricane II C(NF)s scrambled ten minutes later, around 1140. Brocklehurst led in Hurricane HV979 'M', followed by redheaded 21 year-old Flt. Lt. G.R. 'Bluey' Halbeard from Wolverhampton in HW435 'N', the Canadian P/O Andy Whyte in HV710 'S', W/O E.R. Harris in KX359 'Q' and F/O Pring in HV709 'L'. Maurice Pring, who was really a Beaufighter pilot and about to go on home leave, had pleaded to be allowed to join for a last trip in a Hurricane, and the squadron CO, W/C Goddard, had in the end reluctantly agreed to let him go. Carl Morgan says Goddard's parting words to Pring were "Very well Pring, be it on your own head."(11)(13)(14)(25)(31)(29)

Spitfire VIIIs of No. 81 Squadron, an unit transferred to India from the Middle East, apparently flew in from Delhi and landed at Dum Dum around midday, but their CO refused to scramble stating his pilots were tired and in no fit state to undertake air combat. (17)

Remembering what Operations had asked on the 4th, Brocklehurst, Pring and the others were initially under the impression that they were going after a lone Dinah coming over for post-raid recce. They were tragically wrong. GCI vectored 176 onto the IJNAF Bettys, and gave them no warning about the presence of fighters high above the bombers. As they dived from about 20000' at the Bettys at 18000' they were bounced by the Zeroes of the 331st Kokutai, a thousand feet above them and coming out of the sun.(25)(17)

Raked by 20mm cannon and 7.7 mm machine guns, Pring, Halbeard and Whyte went down. Pring's aircraft was seen to fall in flames with no sign of a chute and Halbeard disappeared. Only Whyte, who either baled out or crash-landed (versions differ), turned up on foot three days later. Brocklehurst went into a spin trying to out-turn the Zero which had shot him up, recovered at low altitude, and limped back to Baigachi, but his aircraft was a write-off. Only 'Curly' Harris, who had dived away, escaped unscathed. It was bloody shambles once more. (11)(13)(17)(25)(29)
331st Kokutai claimed six victories, and were awarded four confirmed victories and two probables, all fighters. Of these Warrant Officer Sadaaki Akamatsu, a very colorful character who finished the war as Lt. (junior grade) with 27 victories and boasted of '250 victories when sober and 350 when drunk', alone claimed four victories over Calcutta on this day. He was prone to overclaiming, but he was also an amazingly skilful pilot who flew 6000+ hours in fighters and came through the war unscathed. It is certain that he savaged the hapless Hurricanes of 176 on this day. Akamatsu was looked up to by his junior squadron-mates, and it is possible that his wingmen stood by while he made the firing passes. Ensign Masao Taniguchi (final total 14 kills) flew in this raid, and Warrant Officer Hiroshi Okano (final tally 19 victories) may also have done so, but I do not know if either of them made any claims.(37)(40)

People got up on their roofs to watch the Japanese fighters put on an astonishing display of aerobatics to drive home their unchallenged air superiority and demoralize the populace. The Sallys dropped 5x100 kilo HE bombs each on the King George V docks at 1147, and the Bettys at 1232. The total weight of bombs delivered was only about 12 or 13 tonnes. If we compare this to the 5 tonne bombload of a Main Force Lancaster area-bombing Germany, it would appear that the Japanese 'punch' was ridiculously light given the effort involved. (38)(24)

Although officially damage was described as 'light', Eastern Air Command confidentially conceded that the accurate bombing had inflicted 'considerable damage'. 3 merchantmen and 1 Naval vessel were hit and 15 barges set on fire. Fires in the dockside sheds were quickly brought under control, though not before two sheds were gutted.(1)(24)(26)(30)(36)(16)

The official figures of around 500 civilian casualties (over one-third killed), and 14 military ones (1 fatal) understated the real civilian death toll, estimated to be around 350. The high number of casualties was blamed in part on non-observance of Air Raid Precautions. There was some exodus from the city, but nothing on the scale seen a year earlier. The volume of cargo handled by the port dropped sharply for some weeks as more than 10000 of the daily work-force of 15000 dock labourers stayed away. (1)(36)(16)(46)

The RAF initially thought only IJAAF fighters like Oscars and Tojos had come over – only when they found the drop tanks jettisoned by Zeros did they realize what the pilots of 176 had come up against.(24)

176 Squadron reacted to the tragedy that had overtaken their pilots with sadness mixed with anger: the Canadian radar technician Bob Matheson spoke for many when he said he was 'very critical of the decision to send night fighter pilots in Hurricanes out to oppose Zeros.' W/C Goddard was deeply grieved at the loss of Halbeard and Pring.(11)(13)(29)

It is necessary for the sake of completeness to analyse the reasons for the debacle that overtook the Calcutta Hurricanes. Numbers were against the 176 pilots, and altitude. The Zero was the better dogfighter. Their only escape lay in spotting the Zeros early and diving steeply. The Hurricane dived better than the lighter-built Zero, which suffered control stiffness at high speed and could pull less Gs.
Why did they not see the Zeroes? I think this was because of a combination of factors. The initial assumption that they were after a Dinah left the pilots mentally unprepared for desperate combat – Pring went for a 'joyride'. GCI's failure to warn them about the presence of enemy fighters contributed to their lack of wariness about the 'Hun in the sun', though they already knew that Oscars had come in the first wave. At midday in December the Southern declination of the sun automatically placed 331 Kokutai, coming from the South at a higher altitude, up sun to the Hurricanes of 176 climbing from the North. But the crucial thing that sealed their fate was a mismatch of skill.

Bob Matheson was right when he laid the blame at the door of those who decided to commit night-fighters and their pilots to a daylight battle. A night-fighter pilot needs good night vision and spatial orientation and skill in night flying and instrument flying. He operates alone and must have the temperament to fly long patrols. He does not instinctively check above, behind and below him constantly by waggling his wings, peer into the sun, avoid flying straight and level for long, and cover his wingman's six - key requirements for day fighter pilots. Willing and brave though they were, the pilots of 176 simply did not have the skills they needed for fighter-vs-fighter combat in daylight against well-flown Zeroes.
Mitsubishi A6M3 Model 22 'Zero', 1943 (Wikipedia)

Sadaaki Akamatsu (Wikipedia)
CHAPTER SIX

AFTERMATH

After an air search by Beaufighters of 176 a ground party set out on December 8th to reach the area West of the Hooghly river where Pring and Halbeard were supposed to have gone down. Pring's burnt-out machine was located in tall grass, and his body found on the 10th. He had been badly burned about the face but had managed to get out of his crashed aircraft and crawl away before he died. No trace was found of Halbeard or his aircraft. (13)

Maurice Pring's body was brought back to Baigachi, and laid to rest on Sunday, December 12 in the Bhowanipore Cemetery. He rests in Grave no. 113, Plot L. At Berkhamsted he is commemorated in the town's WW2 Roll of Honour in front of the Church of St. Peter on High Street, and the Roll of Honour of Berkhamsted School on the wall of the school chapel. (10)(13)

Near Pring in the Bhowanipore cemetery lies Aubrey Bond. Arthur Brown and Geoffrey Halbeard have no resting place: their names appear on the Singapore War Memorial, where all missing aircrew of South East Asia are commemorated. (31)(42)

Calcutta grieved for it's dead and wounded, among them it's fallen hero, the 22 year old Englishman it had taken to it's heart. No one mourned Pring more sincerely than the thousands of children and teenagers who had idolized him. We are privileged to hear three voices out of the past speak of Maurice Pring, and what he meant to them.

During those many regular air-raids we usually listened to All-India Radio. The reception was not as good as commentary was frequently interrupted by pops, shrieks and whistles caused by atmospherics. Our hero was an Indian Air Force Hurricane pilot by the name of Pring. He was Squadron Leader who, night after night, shot down Zeroes in fierce combat. We used to listen to his exploits with bated breath; we became an integral part of this man who was up there fighting our battles for us. It was rather like listening to a soccer match in the sky. We reacted to his every valiant move and kill with rapturous joy.

He became the focal point of a Zero attack in the early hours of one morning. As we sat in the flickering glare of a lamp, we stared at one another in utter disbelief - through the static came the unmistakable whining of Pring's death dive - the end of our friend. There was a silence that seemed to last for an eternity. We all cried unashamedly. The poignant wail of the all-clear broke the unnerving quiet, it's initial bellows slowly becoming a series of muffled moans."

Ron M. Walker, 'My Wartime Childhood in Calcutta, India', BBC: WW2 Peoples War: Article ID A 2780534 recorded in October 2006

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Forget the errors and impossibilities and appreciate the impact Pring had on the mind of a boy of 7, the way his image as a “Knight of the Sky” imprinted itself indelibly. This is reminiscent of the adulation lavished upon Georges Guynemer in France and Albert Ball in Britain during WW 1! Did the cunning Brits put on a radio play with Pring as hero? It sounds plausible!

And observe the tremendous aura of the Zero – all Japanese aircraft are Zeroes as far as the public is concerned, though the Zero only appeared once over the city during the entire War!

“Hello again -
I need to know, as well, if there was a RAF billet on or near Kyd Street, and would somebody remember the name of the young airman who brought down three Zeroes (?) in a single night? I believe he was subsequently killed.
Thanks for any help received -”

Sally, 20 March 2007

“I think he was called Squadron Leader Pring, Hurricane pilot for the Indian Air Force in WW2. He would lead the Zero attacks and was killed in one of those attacks. He was the hero of all the kids living in our area.”

Joyce Munro, 20 March 2007

“Thanks very much for that – now that I read it, the name is familiar! Can you recall please, if I am right in thinking that he earned his 'hero' status by bringing down three Japanese planes (fighters) in a single night and was the first air raid on Calcutta on 4th December? I used to have a Statesman photograph of him – now long lost.
Your help is much appreciated.

Sally, 21 March 2007

[These e-mails are from INDIA-BRITISH-RAJ-L archives of March 2007 in Rootsweb.]

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Here again we encounter the same inaccuracies – a Squadron Leader in the Indian Air Force flying Hurricanes against Zeroes etc. But let us return to the core value of these e-mails: sixty four years after his moment of glory and his death, two old ladies are trying to remember details about the young pilot they idolized! One could think of fates worse than that.

Calcutta can truly lay claim to two air aces.

One, Flight Lieutenant Indra Lal Roy, DFC (posthumous) flew with the Royal Flying Corps in World War One. Like a meteor, he achieved brief but blazing glory while flying a SE5a with 40 Squadron, scoring 10 victories (2 shared) in only fourteen days before being shot down and killed in 1918, before he had turned twenty.
This schoolboy-turned-warrior hero lies buried at Estevelles Communal Cemetery in the Pas-de-Calais of France, far from the city where he was born. He has a road named after him at Calcutta, and in 1998, eighty years after his death, the Indian Post and Telegraphs Department issued a Rs 3.00 stamp bearing his likeness and that of the SE5a.

The other man, Maurice Pring, was not born here, but achieved his renown in the darkness of Calcutta's night skies, and met his tragic end in the blaze of noon in the same skies while defending the city. I think that entitles Calcutta to claim him as her own – but she has forgotten him. 

Sic transit gloria mundi.

------------------------------------------

Although surviving Hurricanes of 176 were refitted with AI sets, Air Command South East Asia (ACSEA) must have belatedly realized the whole thing was a blunder, and within a month the Calcutta Hurricanes were gone. Beaufighters replaced them, and the Hurricane pilots retrained to fly Beaus. (11)(14)(18)

IJAAF air strength in Burma declined sharply as two bomber and three fighter units were transferred out in January 1944: the remaining bomber strength (15 light bombers and 9 Sally heavy bombers) was insufficient for continuing a strategic air offensive, and raids on Calcutta died away. (7)(9)(14)(30)

In 1944 ACSEA decided on a policy of rationalisation to utilise scarce repair/maintenance resources for current high-performance aircraft. The policy adopted for the Hurricane II C was 'to strike off any aircraft which are uneconomical to repair and ensure rapid turnover to prevent deterioration in storage'. It was the end of the road for the Calcutta Hurricanes. (47)

HV709, HV710, and HW435 had been destroyed and HV979 written off on 5 December 1943. HW432 stalled and crashed on Christmas Day, 1943 just after taking off from Chittagong. HW426 and HW485 were struck off charge on 31 March 1944, HW415 on 5 October 1944, and HW541, KX359, KX754 and KX764 on 14 October 1944. (18)(21)

Thus ended the brief, tragic history of the Hurricane II C(NF) – a technology demonstrator needlessly built despite unresolved doubts about its combat capability; hurriedly exiled to a distant theater like an embarrassment covered up; unnecessarily deployed on active duty in preference to better, proven aircraft; and suddenly thrust into a combat situation neither it nor its pilots were meant to face. I cannot readily remember another such unfortunate aircraft.

© JOYDEEP SIRCAR, 2015
Pring’s headstone
APPENDIX 1

RAF ROLL OF HONOUR, CALCUTTA RAID, 5TH DECEMBER 1943

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>BOND,</th>
<th>BROWN,</th>
<th>HALBEARD,</th>
<th>PRING,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| AGE (DATE OF BIRTH) | 22 (20 Aug 1921) | 27 | 21 | 22 (1 Nov 1921) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERVICE NO.</th>
<th>RCAF</th>
<th>RAFVR</th>
<th>RAF</th>
<th>RAFVR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J/19439</td>
<td>102062</td>
<td>102540</td>
<td>143237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIT</th>
<th>67 Sqn.</th>
<th>258 Sqn.</th>
<th>176 Sqn.</th>
<th>176 Sqn.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


| BURIAL/COMMEMORATION | Plot O, Row D, Grave 19, CWGC, Bhowanipore Cemetery, Calcutta | Column 423, Singapore War Memorial, Kranji War Cemetery, Calcutta | Column 423, Singapore War Memorial, Kranji War Cemetery, Calcutta | Plot L, Grave 119, CWGC, Bhowanipore Cemetery, Calcutta |

NOTE: One more pilot was lost on this day, F/O Ganasundaram Daniel of No. 6 Sqn., Indian Air Force, missing in Hurricane II B HV436 on a Tac Recce sortie. His name appears on column 431 of the Singapore Memorial.
Japanese Army doctrine saw the air arm as an adjunct to the Army, a tactical force meant to carry out operations to help attain Army goals. The Japanese had gone over to the defensive in Burma after April 1942, so the Burma Area Army (BAA) did not encourage the Fifth Air Division (5AD), the apex IJAAF formation in Burma, to undertake a strategic bombing campaign against India. Then why did they begin bombing Calcutta in December 1942?

I think the answer lies in the British offensive in the Arakan launched on December 17, 1942. BAA could see that an increasing flow of war materiel was coming through Calcutta. The city also contained many military headquarters. This convinced BAA to allow 5AD to mount a series of light raids on Calcutta to disrupt the British build-up and strike a blow at morale (Indian support for the war was at a low ebb – the Quit India movement had started in August 1942). By my count, there were seven night raids in this period, as tabulated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Enemy aircraft</th>
<th>Result etc.</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20/21 Dec</td>
<td>8 Type 97</td>
<td>Budge Budge oil tanks set on fire</td>
<td>Royal Air Force 1939-1945, Vol. III, p.297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Ki-21 II 'Sally'</td>
<td>Massive exodus of people [1.5 million?]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/22.12.42</td>
<td>2 (Sally?)</td>
<td>Only slight damage</td>
<td>Indian Affairs Vols.1 – 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/23.12.42</td>
<td>3 Sallys</td>
<td>Two Sallys damaged, [Aggt. casualties in first 3 raids: 23 killed, &lt;100 injured.]</td>
<td>Indian Affairs Vols.1 - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10?)</td>
<td>caused 12+ fatalities. W/C O'Neill shot down 1 Sally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/28.12.42</td>
<td>'A few' (2?)</td>
<td>'Small fires started '</td>
<td>N.Y. Times 28.12.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Sallys?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/16.1.43</td>
<td>3 Sallys</td>
<td>'Little damage and few casualties.' British communiqué claimed raid was in retaliation for bombing raids on Akyab. All shot down by Pring/Phillips c.70 miles E. of Cal after bombing</td>
<td>Niagara Falls Gazette (NY), 16.1.1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19/20.1.43</td>
<td>3 Ki-48 'Lily'</td>
<td>1 shot down by Crombie/Moss S. of Budge Budge (original claim 2+ 1 prob.)</td>
<td>Air War for Burma by Christopher Shores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Royal Air Force 1939-1945, Vol. III, p.297 gives the aggregate upto end December 1942 as 'twenty three sorties on five occasions'; this would mean 8 on 24/25th, and 2 each on 21/22nd and 27/28th.
Raiding resumed on 5th December 1943, although planning had begun earlier, in October. The reason was the same – to impede the Allied buildup for the forthcoming multi-pronged offensive in Burma and create alarm and despondency among the citizenry. The British Second Arakan offensive had already begun on 30th November 1943.

The last raid on Calcutta was on 24/25 December, 1944 by a few Sallys, one of which was damaged by a Beaufighter from 89 Squadron at Baigachi flown by F/Os Devine and Curtis. (11)(33)

The Salls the IJAAF were using were able to carry a maximum bombload of around 1000 kilos. The Japanese Army never developed very heavy bombs – the heaviest were 500kg. Other HE bombs ranged between 50 to 250 kg, and incendiaries between 15 and 50 kg. It appears that the bombloads during the above raids were a mix of light 1kg anti-personnel bombs, incendiaries and lighter HE types. The Howrah Bridge, Central Calcutta and the docks were supposed to be favourite aiming points.

I would like to end with an amusing anecdote from the Canadian radar technician Angus Hamilton, who at the time (December 1942) was living and working at La Martiniere school in Calcutta with a nameless radar repair and maintenance unit that later became No.3 RIMU:

….One night a friend and I were having dinner at Firpo’s when the sirens went. The waiters all disappeared. After waiting for sometime we left, too. I heard stories of customers taking over the bar and giving out free drinks, but I wasn't a recipient and could never confirm the story. (11)
NOTES ON SOURCES

1. Bombs on Calcutta, gypsycholar.com/31618historiceventsjapbombst.html


3. Obituary notice of Group Captain Tony O'Neill in The Telegraph (UK), 15 June 2008

4.(a) Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3, Vol. II by George Odgers [Reprint 1968], Chapters 16 and 25, for details about Red Road airstrip, Charles Crombie etc.(b) Wikipedia entry on Charles Crombie (c) Obituary of Group Captain Frank Carey in The Telegraph (UK) of 9th December 2004 mentions Carey's use of Firpo's (a very posh restaurant) as his 'Ready Room' for the Red Road airstrip.


7. 27 Squadron and 176 Squadron histories at (a) Air of Authority, www.rafweb.org (b) Royal Air Force Air Historical Branch (c) History of War website. 264 Squadron history by the Air Ministry in www.jedsite.info/elgg-community-websites/raf264sqn/history1.html

8. The Life and Times of A. D. Blumlein by Russell Burns [The Institution of Engineering and Technology, 1999].

9. Beaufighter Aces of World War 2 by Andrew Thomas [Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 65, 2005]

10. Biographical details about Pring are mainly from personal communications from Mrs. Jenny Sherwood of Berkhamsted. Some additional details are from (a) Commonwealth War Graves Commission certificate about Pring, and (b) item about Pring in Niagara Falls Gazette, Niagara Falls, NY, USA of 16th January 1943. The latter also contains the official communiqué issued after Pring's victories on 15th January night.

11. Canadians on Radar in South East Asia 1941-1945 by Angus Hamilton in www.rquirk.com/cdnradar/cdnseacradar.htm. There are extensive excerpts from The History of 89 Squadron RFC/RAF, ed. Joe Warne [89 Squadron Re-union Club, 1989]. Other items are from reminiscences of Angus Hamilton and Ed Morgan personally communicated to me.


14. Personal communications from Andrew Thomas regarding Pring's victories, serial nos. and squadron letters of Hurricanes that went up on 5th December 1943 etc. Also his article on 176 Squadron India's Night Guardians [Aviation News, 30th October-12th November 1987.]


17. Dix Noonan Webb auction notice with notes on Pring and archived sale price.

18. Copy of Flt. Lt. Derek Brocklehurst's log showing aircraft of 176 Squadron flown by him received from Andrew Thomas.


20. Technical details of AI Mark 6 equipped Hurricane IIC no. BN288 are from National Archives file no. AVIA7/2676, given by Ken Annett aka Waldo.Pepper in various posts on the net [e.g. ‘12'O'Clock High’ website (forum.12oclockhigh.net), AviationBanter.com website, 'Waldo.Pepper Radar Pages' blog]. Summary of contents of Kew archives file no. AIR20/5230 received by him from Ian White sent by Ken to me as personal communication.

21. Information about Hurricane IIC(NF) aircraft serials mainly from Malcolm Barrass with some inputs from Darryl Gibbs. Use of aircraft for convoy patrol by 245 from Malcolm Barrass.

22. The EF 50, the tube that helped win the War by Ronald Dekker in www.dos4ever.com, and Introductory Survey of Radar, Part II [AIR Publication 1093D, Air Ministry, June 1946, reprinted October 1947].

23. Air Interception Radar in World War II Night Fighter Aircraft by Horace R. ('Red') Macaulay. Horace also got me the photograph dug out of old files by Mike Dean.

24. Air War for Burma by Christopher Shores, Grub Street, London, 2005

25. Brocklehurst's recollections of 5th December 1943 from (a) notes made by Andrew Thomas and sent to me as a personal communication (b) Air Enthusiast, Issues 121-126 [Pilot Press, 2006].


27. Spitfire Aces of Burma and the Pacific by Andrew Thomas [Osprey Aircraft of the Aces no. 87, 2009]


29. 176 Squadron RAF Nightfighters by Peter Lee in BBC Series WW2 People's War – Article ID A 2740394.


32. Leslie Chippett's memories are from My Dad's Memories of 67 Squadron on the Arakan
33. Second World War Timeline in New Zealand History Online, www.nzhistory.net.nz gives date of last air-raid on Calcutta as 24th December 1944.


36. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette of December 7, 1943 quotes the official casualty figure. The Pacific War Day by Day by John Davison, p.90 gives the figure of 350 dead. Encounter, Vol. 8, 1957 says 'nearly a thousand dock-workers'.

37. Sadaaki Akamatsu's claim appears in Henry Sakaida's Imperial Japanese Navy Aces 1939-1945 [Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 22]. His fighter hours are given as 8000 in www.PacificWrecks.com review of Sakaida's book and 6000 elsewhere. The entry on Sadaaki Akamatsu in the French site www.cieldegloire.com is the most comprehensive of all.

38. Wings of the Phoenix [HMSO 1949] , p.43 mentions 'fancy flying' and 'aerobatics' by the Japanese over Calcutta


40. Japanese Naval Aces and Fighter Units in World War II by Ikuhiko Hata and Yasuko Izawa [Naval Institute Press, 1989]

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45. History of No. 3 PRU (Calcutta) in www.airrecce.co.uk/WW2/units/RAF_Sqn2.html

46. For effect of raid on dock labour (a)Ways of war and the American experience in the China-Burma-India theater, 1942-1945 by James M. Erhman, Kansas State University [Kansas State University, 2006] (b) Military Review, Vol.25, p.93 [US.Army Command and General Staff College, 1945]

47. Hurricane R4118 by Peter Vacher [Grub Street, 2005]

48. Memories of F/O T. C. Parker in www.bbm.org.uk , the Battle of Britain Memorial website

49. History of 152(Hyderabad) Squadron in the Squadron website www.152hyderabad.co.uk.

50. For proof of the Hurricane II C (NF) being the first single-seater night fighter in the world, see article in my blog www.jsircar.blogspot.com.