

A SPITFIRE OVER DARWIN



Robert Taylor's painting, dedicated to the Spitfire Memorial Defence Fellowship, depicts the Mk Vc tropicalised Spitfires of No 1 Wing RAAF returning from a scramble over the city of Darwin in early 1943.

On the 17th February 1943, Flying Officer William Torrens Hinds was posted to Darwin with 54 squadron of the RAF flying Spitfires out of Parap airfield defending Darwin against Japanese attacks. He was ex 234 Squadron and came from the UK with a half kill tally.

Born at Ashford, Kent in the UK on the 15th December 1921, the son of William Geoffrey Hinds, traveller, and Doreen (nee Kenny) of Gillett's Grange, Smarden, Bill was educated at Harvey Grammar School, Folkestone, and at the King's School Canterbury from September 1936 to July 1940, where he was in Meister Omers and won his colours for Athletics. On leaving school he joined the RAF Volunteer reserve and rose to the rank of Sergeant. He trained as pilot in Canada and was commissioned a Pilot Officer on the 15th August 1942 and promoted to Flying Officer on his posting to Australia.



Flying Officer William "Bill" Torrens Hinds

This is a story from the 1943 air campaign over Darwin, when the Darwin Spitfire Wing or also known as the 'Churchill Wing' took on the Imperial Japanese Forces.

The Spitfire Wing, or No 1 Spitfire Wing RAAF, comprised three squadrons – No 54 Squadron RAF and two RAAF squadrons serving with RAF Fighter Command in

Britain, Nos 452 and 457. These were sent out to Australia in early 1943 to satisfy a 'promise' made by Churchill. All three were average squadrons, typical of RAF Fighter Command at the time, comprising young men with average flying and fighting skills. Many of the more experienced pilots had also transferred out the Squadron.

Despite the much vaunted superiority of the Spitfire, low hours of experience, questionable command decisions and tactics and mechanical problems with propeller constant speed units (propeller pitch), glycol coolant leaks and engine wear due to the dust and constant cannon failures (freezing at altitude) were common. These aircraft also differed from the standard Spitfire Vc in that they had been fitted with a Vokes air filter beneath their nose to reduce the amount of sand and dust which entered the engine, which also reduced their performance by around 30 mph.

At the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941 the RAAF did not possess any modern fighters in or near Australia. Following the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942, which caused heavy damage to the military installations at the town and ships in its harbour, the Australian Government began to urgently look for fighter aircraft. As the Australian aviation industry was not capable of producing fighter aircraft at the time, the government sought assistance from the United States and Britain. While the US Government responded by providing the RAAF with what became a steady flow of P-40 Kittyhawk aircraft, Britain was initially unable to allocate fighters to Australia due to its heavy commitments in the North African Campaign and elsewhere.

Churchill finally, and reluctantly, agreed to send aircraft and 3 squadrons to Australia however delays in shipping Spitfires to Australia disrupted No. 1 Wing's formation. In late June 1942 the British Government diverted all but six of the initial 48 aircraft to Egypt to reinforce the three RAF Spitfire squadrons there. A shipment of 43 Spitfires left England on 4 August and arrived in Australia in late October, and further deliveries continued to be made until June 1945.

The deployment of Spitfires to Australia was kept secret so that the Japanese were not alerted to their presence, and the Australian Government directed that the aircraft be referred to as Capstans (after the brand of cigarettes) and their Merlin engines as Marvels. General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of Allied forces in the South West Pacific Area, agreed that the Australian Government could choose when to announce the presence of the Spitfires, but warned against exaggerating the impact they were likely to have.

No. 1 Wing was formed at RAAF Station Richmond on 7 October 1942. Many of the squadrons' most experienced pilots had been posted to other units before they departed Britain, and only 37 of the 95 pilots in the wing as at May 1943 had previously seen combat. Following its formation, the wing undertook training in the Richmond area until late December 1942. Its performance during these exercises was hindered by a lack of previous contact between the Australian and British pilots which was exacerbated by the three squadrons being based at different airstrips in the Sydney region. A number of accidents occurred, resulting in the deaths of four pilots.

As Flying Officer Bill Hinds was not posted to 54 Squadron until the 17th February, 1943, he was not at Richmond but came direct to Darwin, arriving on 27th April 1943.

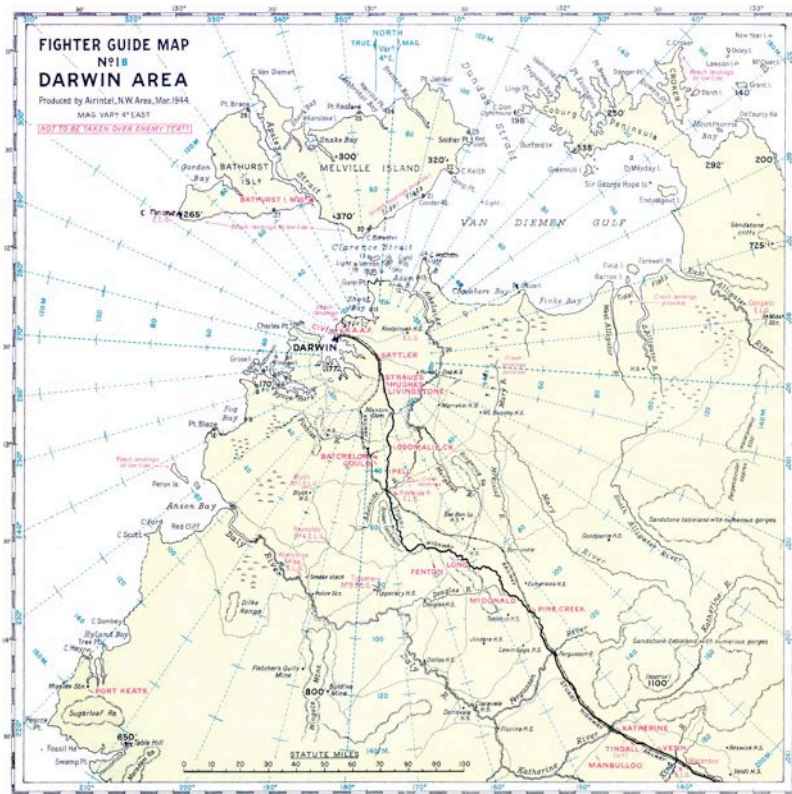
Wing Commander Robert "Bob" W. Foster, DFC, AE was a Flight Lt with Bill's Squadron and advised that Bill was not on the "Stirling Castle" when 54 Squadron sailed from Liverpool but along with a steady stream of pilots joined 54 Squadron later as replacements. Bob explained that Bill would have proceeded separately 'the long way' through America (a safer route) and then on across the Pacific to Australia. Losses weren't as high as first expected so at times there were more pilots than planes to fit them in.

No 1 Fighter Wing, RAAF moved to the Darwin area with three Spitfire squadrons, No 54 RAF at Darwin, No 452 RAAF at Strauss and No 457 RAAF at Livingstone, during January 1943. There were 95 pilots in the Wing of whom only 6 had any experience, 37 had some combat background and the rest were new to operations. They had 70 Spitfires and 700 ground staff. Its initial commander was Group Captain Allan Walters and the wing leader was Wing Commander Clive "Killer" Caldwell. The Spitfires had their first major clashes with the Japanese in March 1943. (A total of 245 Mk V Spitfires came to Australia and 117 were lost in Darwin with more than half due to accidents.)

Birthdays, anniversaries, notification of awards, and any other reason or excuse, resulted in a party in the officers' mess. On the 27th April 1943 – *"Four nursing sisters, including the Matron from Darwin Hospital, visited the camp for tea. F/O Yerby, P/O Hinds, F/Sgt Huggard and Sgt Spencer, all RAF, the first named an American from an Eagle Squadron, joined us from the South."*

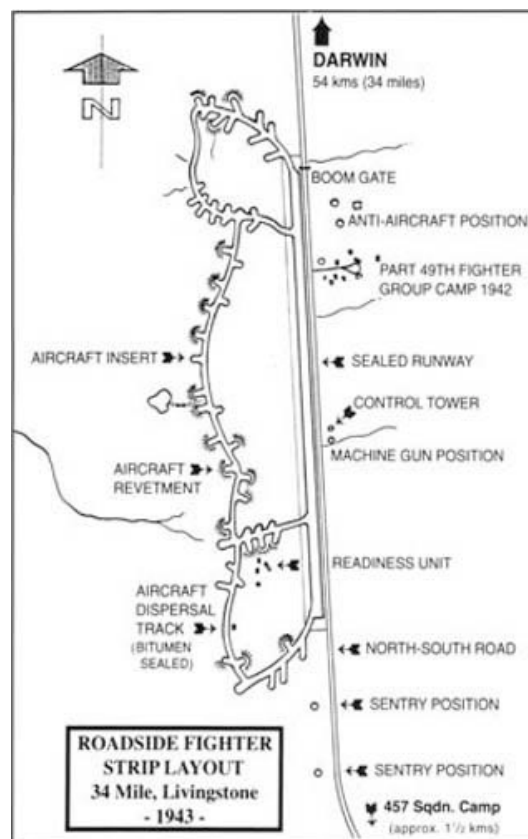
In June 1943, Bill Hinds wrote a letter to the Headmaster of his old school King's:-

"The nips don't visit regularly enough to get in some real practising. To keep us company at night mosquitoes, sandflies, large spiders, lizards and cockroaches have their frolics, not to mention the odd snake which occasionally uses a flying boot for his evening nap. My impression after geography lessons at school was that Australia was a large very uninhabitable place, where the cities were small and old fashioned. I was surprised to find that Adelaide for instance was the most perfectly planned and prettiest city I had ever seen. Also it has the best cinemas I have encountered outside New York. This country holds endless possibilities for agriculture, engineering and irrigation, and I am, if possible after the war, going to stay out here to see what I can do. Imagine my surprise when I saw in the "Kentish Express" way out in the bush here, that the school had been awarded a shield for Life Saving. I bet Mr Goodburn is bucked."





Parap Airfield 1941, where 54 Squadron RAF were to be based in January 1943. The main runway in the middle-distance running left-right, is now a main road called Ross Smith Avenue (two lanes in each direction with a wide median strip). The road running from the bottom of the photo up to the runway is called Parap Road. Houses on the left (west) of the road were DCA (Dept of Civil Aviation) houses. The building (hangar) with the curved roof was the main hangar and still exists and is known as the Qantas hangar. The large building to the right (east) past the water tank stands was the main passenger terminal and later became the Ross Smith Hostel for PMG staff and public servants.



Livingstone, where 457 RAAF Squadron were based. No 452 RAAF Squadron were based at Strauss, also a roadside strip

On the 6th July 1943, prior to interception of an enemy formation of around 27 bombers and 23 fighters that were to attack the US Liberator base at Fenton, Flying Officer William Hinds aircraft engine overheated due to an oil pressure drop and glycol coolant leak, forcing him to land near the beach at Fog Bay near Port Patterson. He was un-injured but the aircraft was so severely damaged that it was only useful for component parts. (Spitfire Type F.Vc RAAF Ser A58-31 RAF Ser BR495).



FO W Hinds probable forced landing location on the 6th July 1943 is at Fog Bay 12.44S, 130.23E just east of current Dundee Beach. He possibly attempted landing in the clearing shown.

The Spitfire engine was cooled by a mixture of 70% water and 30% glycol which enabled the engine to operate at higher temperatures and with smaller radiators. When the aircraft were shipped to Australia the glycol coolant was drained but no corrosion inhibitor applied so that the pipes corroded and now leaked glycol.

The raid on the 6th July 1943 was the last in strength over the Darwin area. Three raids in August were all at night and resulted in no casualties or damage. The Japanese were not intercepted on any of these raids but four Japanese reconnaissance aircraft were destroyed in mid August.

No. 1 Wing fought its last major engagements during September and November 1943.



On the 12th July 1943 Flying Officer Hinds flew Spitfire RAAF Ser A58-45 RAF Ser BR539 DL-X . Pictured here very late 1942 or early 1943 when marked as "X" 54Sqn RAF before DL-X added (Note the Vokes air filter beneath the nose)



On the 2nd September 1943 Flying Officer Hinds flew Spitfire RAAF Ser A58-155 RAF Ser EF560 camouflage then marked DL-M, Pictured here later in 85Sqn RAAF service in natural metal, as SH-H

On the 7th September the Japanese sent a twin engine reconnaissance aircraft heavily escorted by 21 fighters. The first warning of this reconnaissance in force came at 8.30 am when the enemy planes were 180 miles from Darwin. Twelve aircraft of No 457 were ordered to go to exit points to intercept them. Radar operators thought at first that only one aircraft was coming, but soon it was clear that many were on their way, and a total of 48 Spitfires took to the air led by Flight Lieutenant Bob Foster. While the Spitfires of Nos 54 (Candy) and 452 (Troppo) were near Port Patterson the pilots saw 21 enemy aircraft 16 miles west of Sattler and at a higher altitude. The enemy fighters attacked before these Spitfires could gain a height advantage. In the affray which followed one enemy fighter was destroyed and two probably destroyed. A Spitfire pilot, Flying Officer William Hinds, was shot down and killed, while two others, Squadron Leader Ron MacDonald, commander of No 452 (Troppo), and Pilot Officer Paul Tully, also of No 452 (Troppo) were shot down but escaped by parachute. A cannon shell from a Japanese fighter exploded in the cockpit of MacDonald's machine and he suffered serious burns before baling out. He was found later near Tumbling Waters and returned to the RAAF Medical Receiving Station in a Tiger Moth aircraft flown by Squadron Leader Fenton. Immediately after this clash, No. 457 (Skeeter), which had been airborne earlier and had a height

advantage, carried out a successful attack on the enemy aircraft, shooting down four Zekes (Zeros) and damaging others. All Spitfires from 457 (Skeeter) squadron returned undamaged to base. During this raid the Japanese used radio jamming for the first time so that the Squadron's had difficulty communicating. The ground station's radio transmitter was completely interrupted by a loud scream or whistle, which made it impossible for further orders to be passed to the aircraft. Consequently, they encountered the enemy unexpectedly and in the most disadvantageous position contributing to the death of F/O Hinds. (The problem they had with the radio reception was initially thought to have been the accidental jamming down of a key in one of the Spitfires but Murimitsu Sasaki who was in one of the Ki-46 Dinah's confirmed they had dispensed thin strips of aluminium to blanket the radar. According to Bob Alford's research this was the first time over the NWA)

A. Fighter Sweep & Recce. 7/9/43

B. F/Lt H.W. Foster D.F.C., No. 54 Squadron R.A.F., DARWIN.

C. Red 1.

D. 0917 - 1010.

E. Approx. 0945 hrs 7/9/43, S. of Middle Arm, Port Darwin.

F. Spitfire VC.

G. Interception.

H. Approx. ⁰⁹⁴⁵ 1010 hrs, 28,000 feet, S. of Middle Arm, Port Darwin.

I. 12 Spitfires in sections line astern. Enemy approaching 2000 feet above at 3 o'clock.

J. Approx. 25 ZEKES, large formation in center, with vics of 3 on either side. The large formation being probably of 3 vics in line astern.

K. Nil

L. Nil

M. Nil

N. Yes

O. Did not fire.

P. Belly tank carried & jettisoned. Ample margin.

Q. No camouflage or markings observed.

R. Nil report.

S. Visibility 20-30 miles.

T. Own O.K. Tiger bad.

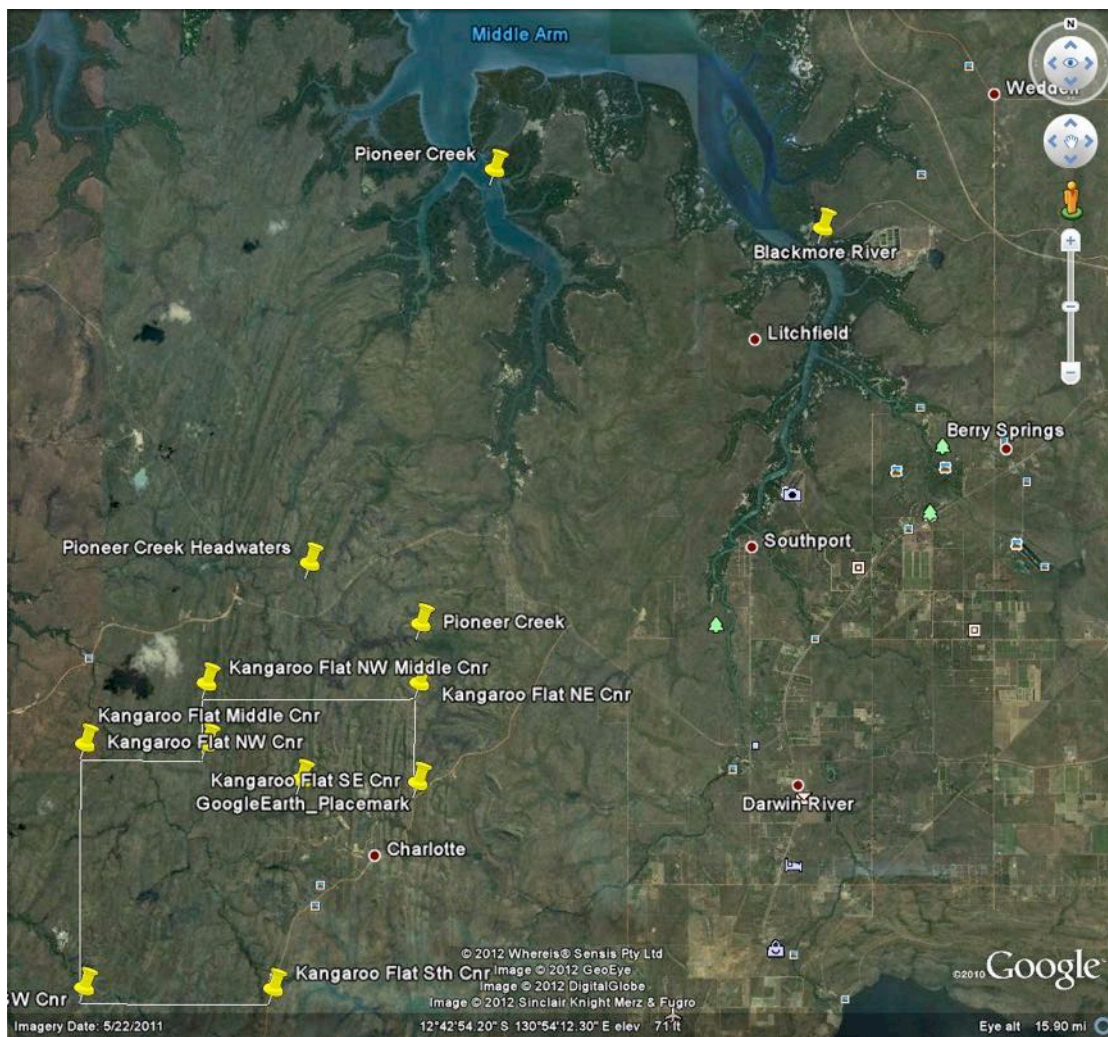
U. Squadron were scrambled and ordered to rendezvous at 6000 feet. Skeeter Squadron were already airborne, and Candy and Troppo Squadrons were ordered to rendezvous and gain height to 25,000 feet., Candy leader (this pilot) to lead the wing. The rendezvous was effected & Troppo & Candy climbed east to 9000 ft when they were informed of 8+ enemy aeroplanes approaching 30 miles NW of Pt. Charles, probable target Darwin. At 12000 ft the wing was ordered to proceed to Port Patterson at 30,000 ft. Candy & Troppo turned about and flew westwards, crossing the main road at Strauss at 20,000 ft. About this time Tiger's R/T became very poor and I could not receive him. While still flying W at 25,000 ft I observed approx 25 ZEKES on a course slightly S of E at 3 o'clock 1 mile away 2000 ft above us, in a position just south of the Middle Arm of Port Darwin. I continued course for about 30 seconds, and then observing the enemy turning in up-sun behind us, I ordered a turn-about so as to meet the attack. We turned, climbing flat-out in an endeavour to get up-sun and above the enemy. At this time I observed a mock dogfight at 2 o'clock from me slightly below, and then saw 7 or 8 ZEKES climbing sound and behind on our starboard rear quarter. I continued climbing as long as possible, but as the ZEKES were still above us & starting to attack I ordered my Squadron to break. I broke down violently from a ZEKES attacking from 3 o'clock & was followed by my No.2 (Sgt Whalley). We then climbed up N of Darwin to try to regain contact but observed nothing further.

..... *H. Foster* F/Lt
Temp/Commanding, 54 Squadron R.A.F.

..... *H. Lawrence* F/O
Intelligence Officer,
No. 54 SQUADRON R.A.F.

F/Lt Bob Foster's account of events on the 7th September 1943

Flying Officer Paul Tully of 452 Squadron, who was also shot down, recalled that he believed there was a problem with the radar vectoring and the majority of the Spitfires were scrambled too late, some 1 hour or more after the first radar sighting, and this is why they were unable to get to altitude in time (a Spitfire can reach 20,000' in 7 minutes). Paul recalled that they were not high enough and had just been ordered to drop their belly tanks and were bending down (looking down) and reaching into the cockpit to release the drops tanks whilst turning around to come back to the West when they were jumped from over the top. The first he knew was when he saw his squadron leader Ron Macdonald receive fire and as he decided to get out of the way he was also hit before he could do anything about it. He did say that there were 3 aircraft hit initially and then he also spoke of a 4th aircraft being hit, which doesn't seem to have been recorded.



Kangaroo Flats Army Training Area and Pioneer Creek Area where Bill Hinds crashed on 7th September 1943

Flying Officer Bill Hind's aircraft had crashed about 20 miles SSE of Darwin (Parap) and 15 miles west of the Strauss airfield in the vicinity of Pioneer Creek, and initially was posted as missing until his burnt out aircraft was found the next day.

"8/9/43 - An aircraft believed to be that of F/O Hinds has been located by the Army, and a cigarette case and some plates and other small pieces from the crash reached here late tonight. A bush fire, no doubt started by the crash, made further salvage impossible. The aircraft was burnt out and it is reported that there was a body in it"

“10/9/43 – The crashed aircraft reported on the 8th is now confirmed as that of F/O Hinds and his death in action is thus, also, unhappily, confirmed. He was 21 years old and a native of Kent, an old boy of King’s School, Canterbury. He joined the RAF direct from school and after training in Canada under the Empire Air Training Scheme was posted to 234 squadron and then to us, arriving here on 27th April last”

Due to the bush fire started by the crash, Flying Officer Hind’s body was unable to be recovered until the 13th of September. The body was unrecognisable and identification was established by means of a revolver and cigarette case belonging to Flying Officer Hinds which were found close to the aircraft.

The movements of Hinds aircraft after taking off were not observed by any other members of the Wing or persons on the ground, but it is generally believed that he was most probably shot down in combat, an assumption that seemed reasonable in view of the finding of the aircraft and the general circumstances of the casualty. Bear in mind that, at the time there would have been some 48 Spitfires in the air as well as 21 enemy fighters. This was probably the last Spitfire to be shot down in Australia.

Aircraft records for Pilot Officer Paul Tully of RAAF 452 Squadron, who were scrambled at the same time, indicate that he was attacked by 20 plus Japanese fighters some 15 miles west of Strauss airfield, which is in the vicinity of Pioneer Creek

Flying Officer Hinds was buried on the 14th September 1943 at the Berrimah War Cemetery. Two years later, on the 9th September 1945, Flying Officer Hinds was reburied at the Adelaide River War Cemetery, Grave GC7



William Hinds is also commemorated on the War Memorial outside St Michael the Archangel Church in Smarden, Kent, his mother’s home village.

In 2015, a Memorial Plaque was unveiled at the Darwin Military Museum that bears the name of William Hinds as well as 18 other British airmen of 54 Squadron who lost their lives during the Darwin Campaign.

The King's School, Canterbury wrote in the "Cantuarian" and their Roll of Honour, this tribute to Bill Hinds:

"If there was one characteristic about him which could not fail to impress it was his immense vitality. Whatever he had to do was done always with outstanding vigour and enthusiasm. He was indeed the very pattern of youth, a happy mixture of adventurousness and conservatism. These were the characteristics which made him an outstanding fighter pilot, and they are the same which will be so sadly missed in a world which has great need of young men of this type. He will have been happy to die doing a plain straightforward job for a cause in which he believed; our gratitude for his sacrifice must be mingled with a deep sense of personal loss".

The wreckage of his aircraft (Spitfire Type F.Vc RAAF Ser A58-153 RAF Ser EF558) remains in the Army range area at Kangaroo Flats Training Area just south of the headwaters of Pioneer Creek. The wreckage was scattered over a wide ledge and the assumption based on this was that it had impacted at a quite steep angle and at speed. Whilst the wreckage was scattered, it was in a defined area with no indications of any assemblages that would indicate a shallow approach.



Footnotes

Flying Officer, William Torrens Hinds had been engaged to be married to Adrienne Tolley, a daughter of a wine growing family of Helmsdale, Glenelg, South Australia, who later married Gavin Campbell of the RAN. Bill Hinds is survived by his Sister Zoe Horsfall, who previously lived in Kenya and now lives in the UK, and his nephew Michael Horsfall from Dorset in the UK, who instigated this research, as well as another nephew Charles and niece Susan. At the time of Bill's death, both his parents had died so his sister Zoe was left without any immediate family, so she moved to Kenya to stay with her Uncle and Aunt. It was on the ship going out that she met her future husband, Robin Horsfall.

William Torrens Hinds and his younger sister Zoe Jean Hinds were the only two children of William Geoffrey Hinds who married Doreen Kenny. He was the son of William Thomas Hinds of Smarden born 31.8.1863 died 3..1923. He married Sarah Longley Buss known as Bessie.

This William Thomas was the second child of five of William Hinds of Chessenden b 1815 d 31.5.1905. The fourth child was the second daughter called Amy Jane Hinds who married Carlos Coleman of Spelmonden Goudhurst.

Wing Commander Robert W. Foster DFC AE (RAF 605 and 54 Squadrons)

The only recent living link with the events of the 7th September 1943, Bob Foster, passed away on 30th July 2014 aged 94 years of age in the UK and had written to and been in telephone contact with Bill Hind's nephew, Michael Horsfall. Born in 1920, Bob's story has been told to air historian and well established aviation author Norman Franks, resulting in his book "Tally Ho!" from the Battle of Britain to the defence of Darwin. These years began shortly before WW2, when Bob learned to fly with the RAF Voluntary Reserve, having joined in January 1939. Called up for service in September 1939, he completed his training and was posted to 605 Squadron, equipped with Hawker Hurricanes. By early September 1940 he and his Squadron were in the thick of the air fighting over southern England, operating from Croydon. Surviving the Battle, he later became an instructor, but shortly after joining 54 Squadron, which had Spitfires, he and his unit became part of a group sent to Australia to help defend the Darwin area. Bob's squadron and two others, 452 and 457, engaged the Japanese incursions throughout 1943. Awarded the DFC for his efforts, he returned to the UK and was given an assignment with a RAF public relations outfit, ending up in Normandy within three weeks of the invasion of 1944. Often serving right up in the front lines, Bob saw war at a very close hand, and then quite by chance became one of the first, if not the first RAF officer to enter Paris with the liberating French army, and again by chance, was in General de Gaulle's triumphant procession down the Champs-Élysées. Bob Foster was credited with 9 aerial victories and he retired from RAF in 1947, returning to his pre-war workplace Shell. He retired from Shell in 1975.

Squadron Leader Ron MacDonald returned to the grazing industry after the war. It is believed that he later became a Doctor and was for many years at Rockhampton. Ron has passed away on the 13th October 2000.

Pilot Officer Paul Tully returned to the family property at Quilpie and to honour a promise to his wife, never flew again. Paul was born at "Terachy Station" in the Quilpie district of Queensland on 14 June 1917 and grew up on the property "Pinkilla". He enlisted on 5 January 1941 and served with 452 (Spitfire) Squadron, then based in south east England as part of Fighter Command. He returned with the squadron when it was recalled to Darwin in mid 1942 and participated in the defence of Darwin. Paul also saw service on Tarakan and spent the rest of the war training pilots and was discharged on 19 September 1945, raised a son and a daughter and died around 2002. Tully's older brother John (service number 404189) enlisted about the same time as Paul, served in the RAF on attachment with 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and was lost over the North Sea on 30 July 1942.

William Hinds was also a cousin of the direct descendents of the writer, Greg Blackmore's great, great, grandfather, Sydney Grandison Watson of Walwa, Victoria who's three sons Harry, Sidney and Greg settled Gregory Downs in the Queensland Gulf of Carpentaria in 1877.

This account has been compiled by Greg Blackmore from the various sources listed below plus information readily available on the internet and is not intended to be published commercially. If anyone has any corrections or further information please contact Greg on email: gregblackmore7@gmail.com

A special thanks goes to Gordon R Birkett for his active research on this story.

Gordon took up Aviation research to get the facts straight on the RAAF and USAAF deployments to the Pacific theatre, with particular focus on the early 1942 period. He has provided specific details on aircraft and pilots to specialist authors throughout the years. Gordon is a founding member of ADF-Serials.com.au, and has been their research co-ordinator in WW2 aircraft. He is also a member of the Queensland Air Museum, Caloundra, and a research contributor in assisting pro-bona, authors, websites and the Australian War Memorial who regularly request his assistance in researching WW2 operations and wrecks. His current focus is trying to compile data per all RAAF Spitfires and P-40 Kittyhawks, after having successfully completed such data on RAAF Hudsons, Vengeances and Wirraways for ADF -Serials.com.

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During 25 years in Darwin Bob compiled a list of over 80 aircraft crash sites, including Bill Hinds crash site and mapped a range of airfield camp sites, military camps and wartime sites generally.
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