

## **Cruiser Attack**

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On October 21, the two squadrons of Beaufort bombers and one squadron of Beaufort torpedo-carriers went out in search of two Jap cruisers which a recce plane had reported off the east coast of New Ireland. The cruisers were trying to sneak down the east coast.

It was a pretty dirty sort of night with a murky haze that made things hard to see. But a warship, a three-funnel cruiser, was sighted off Cape Narum. She was travelling towards Rabaul by way of Cape St. George.

As the Beauforts circled to attack, she turned and put up an ack-ack barrage. Flying Officer Cliff Tuttleby led the attack, with Squadron Leader Ivor Roberts, Commanding Officer of 100 Squadron, as his passenger. Flying Officer Ray Smith made an accurate run through the barrage and scored a hit "that looked as though it went down the funnel."

Hales was leading a flight in the last attack, but visibility was so bad they were not too hopeful of finding the ships. About five miles off Cape Bugdon, which is about 15 miles north of Cape St. George, the southern-most tip of New Ireland, he sighted flak going up at the bombers preceding them. His flight was then at 4,000 feet. They circled to get the ships between the moon and themselves. There was not very much moonlight and they had to watch carefully in case they lost sight of the target. In Hales' Beaufort,

Flight Lieutenant Boileau was keeping a steady watch on the shadow that lay in the ripple of the moonlight on the sea.

Down they came to the ship. They thought at first there was only one and headed for it. But as they drew near, they saw another black smudge. It was a second ship. It began to stand out plainer than the first as they swept forward. Boileau directed Hales on to her. He opened the bomb doors, set the switches. The Beaufort kept diving, almost vertically.

Red lines of tracer were flying up at them and it seemed as though they would pass through the perspex nose of the bomber, right through the bomb-aimer's window. The flashes streaked past the wings. "The Nips were unlucky not to hit us," Boileau admitted later.

The Beaufort got down to 1,200 feet. The crew could smell the cordite and feel the heat from the ack-ack. Boileau steadily talked Hales on to the target and when the Beaufort was right on the dot, he shouted: "Okay!" and Steve pressed the release. In dive-bombing it is the pilot, not the navigator, who presses the bomb release. As the Beaufort pulled away, the turret-gunner, Flying Officer Duncan Brown, saw the flashes of the exploding bombs. One of them fell directly aft of the funnel.

The ship had caught fire and in the light of the flames they could see splashes alongside. Probably the flames were endangering magazines and explosives and munitions were being jettisoned.

When the next flight of Beauforts arrived, they found the cruiser on fire at the stern. A second cruiser and destroyer were standing by. The Beauforts attacked through heavy fire from the three ships but were unable to see any more results.

Flight Sergeant Gubby Allen, in the Beaufort torpedo-carrier, piloted by Squadron Leader Owen Price, could make out the shape of the cruiser as they dived in. She kept turning violently to avoid the attack,



but Price's aim was very accurate. Flight Sergeant Paul Benjamin was in the second flight led by Wing Commander Geoff Nicoll. He said later he saw figures clambering over the side of the burning cruiser. The Japs had a floodlight on and there seemed to be a rush to get into the boats. The cruiser on fire was sitting there like a lame duck, but the other cruiser was getting quickly underway with the last of the survivors. The destroyer was weaving in and out as she fired. Others on the torpedo section of the attack included Flight Lieutenant Geoff Vincent and Flying Officer Ralph Finlay. Bill McBean was flying with Flying Officer Atkins.

The intelligence reports for this night's attack were very confused. Each of the three squadrons claimed hits on the burning cruiser. There was much controversy among them as to which of the squadrons could claim it. Bill McBean said later—

"I was in 8 Squadron at the time and we were sure we got it. Then I moved back to 100 Squadron and they talked me into believing that they got it with Ray Smith's stick. But later, I found that 6 Squadron was credited with it."

A Beaufort recce later sighted the damaged cruiser in Rabaul Harbour. She still burned for a day after she reached there, then she was not sighted again. Subsequent prisoner-of-war information revealed that much valuable equipment had to be dumped and that the cruiser was later towed back to Truk for repairs.

But the attack was not made without loss. One Beaufort did not return. Geoff Vincent was the pilot, with Skip Bailey, Allan Brown and ("Hooly-dooly") Chas Vincent. The following morning, nine Beauforts took off from Kiriwina in search of them, but without result. That morning an Allied recce reported seeing four R.A.A.F. men come ashore in a raft on New Ireland to be captured by the Japs. It is more than possible that they were Vincent and his crew. Finlay and Atkins were awarded the D.F.C. after this action.