



136 Squadron Royal Air Force & F/Sgt 'Bob' Cross, DFM.

Formed at Kirton -in- Lindsey, Lincolnshire, on 20th August 1941, and equipped with Hawker Hurricane MkIIs, 136 Squadron can be said to have been a truly 'Commonwealth' squadron. The founder members hailed from Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and even boasted an Argentine Scot!

The Squadron can also lay claim to being the only known unit of the British Forces whose name, and ultimately the official Squadron Crest, approved and granted by the Monarch, came about courtesy of a somewhat bawdy song!

It was in 'The Queens Head' pub, in Kirton village, that the first Squadron C.O., Squadron Leader T.A.F. Elsdon, DFC, broke into song, although perhaps not too tunefully, with a rendition of a slightly risqué ditty, entitled "*The Woodpecker's Hole*", sang to the tune of "*Dixie*", which was taken up by at least two of the young pilot's who also knew the words, and it wasn't long before this became the 'Squadron Song'.

The legend of 'The Woodpeckers' had begun!

Becoming operational on 28th September, conducting patrols over the North Sea, the Squadron was soon on the move, embarking for the Far East on November 9th.

Upon arrival in India, 'The Woodpeckers' were quickly redirected to Burma, arriving in early February 1942, during the Japanese invasion!

Another move swiftly followed at the end of the month, with the Squadron evacuated to India, reforming operationally, still with Hurricanes, on 31st March.

The main duties were convoy patrols, and the air defence of Calcutta, and some operations actually took place from a main thoroughfare in the city, the Red Road, with take off and landing being between the stone balustrades on either side of the road, with the odd statue or two to take into consideration on the approach!

Detachments based at Chittagong also began operating over the Burma front, in mid-December, with the Squadron being based there by the end of the year.

During this period, the personnel, and the aircraft, endured many hardships, not only from the constant patrols, scrambles and attacks, but from the climate, especially the monsoons, the poor food and terrible conditions, as they moved from jungle strip to jungle strip. The Hurricanes, mostly old MkIIA's and IIB's, had been passed on to them from squadrons in the Middle East who, desperate themselves for newer aircraft, had 'acquired' the shipment destined for 136 Squadron. Many of 'The Woodpecker's' machines bore stamps in their Form 700s (Log Books) stating 'Not for Operational use', the intention being that they should be used solely for second-line duties!

Some newer, cannon-armed MkIIC Hurricanes were received, and were soon put to good use, both in air combat, and in the ground-strafting rôle, in support of the Army, before the Squadron was withdrawn for a rest in June 1943, and began to re-equip with the Spitfire MkV, in October.

At first flying a mix of Hurricanes and Spitfires, the Squadron became totally operational on Spitfire Vs on December 3rd, and were engaged not only in the air defence of Calcutta, but in actions over the Arakan area of Burma, and the Chin Hills, rugged, inhospitable jungle, where scores began to mount. On New Years Eve, 1943, 'The Woodpeckers' were involved in an action which not only made the headlines in the newspapers, but brought personal congratulations from the A-O-C, Air Command, South East Asia (ACSEA), and from the Group and neighbouring Squadron Commanders, but also from Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, and from the Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command (SEAC), Lord Louis Mountbatten.

A mixed force of Japanese bombers and fighters had attacked, but missed, a flotilla of Royal Indian Navy motor vessels off St. Martin's Island, in the Bay of Bengal, and had turned for home. The neighbouring 607 Squadron, having been scrambled earlier, had failed to intercept the raid, and were just landing when 136 Sqn were scrambled to intercept a second force of Japanese raiders, comprising of fourteen Army Type 97 'Sally' bombers, escorted by 16 Army Type 01 'Oscar' fighters, which attempted to reach the small flotilla.

Diving out of the sun, 'The Woodpecker's' Spitfires decimated the formations, accounting for 13 confirmed destroyed, 4 probably destroyed, and 9 damaged!

As the jubilant pilots exclaimed on their return to Ramu "The sky was full of burning kites!"

Two days later, the 'Calcutta Statesman' newspaper bore the headline;

"Spitfires on the Arakan Down A Force of 30 Japs!"

[Although this was perhaps not a wholly accurate statement, it is more than likely that some of those claimed as 'probable's' and damaged, did not reach their home bases.]

The Squadron, already well known in Calcutta, especially as all their aircraft and motor transport by this time bore a cartoon Woodpecker motif, were the toast of the city.

In early January 1944, the Squadron moved back into Burma, being based at various strips, mainly at Ramu, also known as 'Lyons', where the first Spitfire MkVIII's were received.

The new 'Spits' were as different again from the MkVs as the latter were to the tired old Hurricanes, and the pilots were delighted with their superior performance and handling.

Until enough of the new Mark were received, the Squadron operated a mix of MkVs and MkVIII's, with the Squadron Commander and Flight Commanders flying the older aircraft, in the knowledge that they could climb to altitude at full throttle if need be, and that the rest of the Squadron could stay with them without problems.

The MkVIII's were used to great advantage, as at last, the fast, high flying 'Dinah' reconnaissance aircraft, sent over preceding Japanese air attacks, could now be dealt with at ease. And dealt with they were, to the point that, after losing five 'Dinahs' in a row (to the Spitfires of the neighbouring 615 Sqn.), aircraft which, until now, had been free from interception, the Japanese stopped the recce flights altogether.

By mid-February, 136 Squadron was fully equipped with the Spitfire MkVIII, often considered the best of the breed, and were able to 'mix it' easily and confidently with the opposing fighters, once again increasing the Squadron's score. But with raids of 100 plus being intercepted, and with odds of 10 to 1, the Squadron was fully stretched, and the score mounted more slowly than before.

The main task, however, was accomplished – covering the re-supply drops to the Army in the jungle, carried out by RAF and USAAF Dakotas, and supporting the ground-attack Hurricane squadrons, during the land battle to halt the Japanese near Ngakyedauk Pass, known now in history as the 'Admin. Box', where British and Commonwealth forces, surrounded, stood firm against the Japanese onslaught, turning the tide of the war in Burma.

By this time, 'The Woodpeckers' had moved again, to Rhumkhalong, an extremely dusty and basic strip, further south down the Bay of Bengal, and it was at this time that the news arrived that Bob Cross had been awarded a long-deserved DFM, with F/O 'Bojo' Brown receiving the DFC.

(NB. *It was, and still is, a strange quirk of the 'class' system prevalent in British Forces, that, for the same or similar achievements, an officer would receive a 'Cross', for example the Distinguished*

Flying Cross, or the Military Cross if Army, whereas 'other ranks' received the equivalent as a 'Medal', such as the Distinguished Flying Medal, received by Bob Cross.)

Operations continued in support of the Army, with the dust and dirt of Rhumkhalong causing problems for all concerned, and playing havoc with the Merlin engines of the Spitfires, despite the combined Vokes air & dust filters, with the rough surface also causing a few mishaps. Take off could only be achieved four abreast, with the following aircraft having to wait until the dust settled before proceeding, to avoid clogging air intakes and radiators with the all-pervading red dust.

The Squadron escorted Vultee Vengeance dive bombers, and B24 Liberators and B25 Mitchells, as they pounded the Japanese positions around Maungdaw, but it wasn't long before the squadron moved yet again, after a very brief sojourn at Sapam, this time to Wanging, in mountainous terrain near Imphal, on 11th March. Here Squadron personnel, ground and aircrew alike, lived in holes in the ground, covered by tarpaulins against the monsoon rains. In these appalling conditions, and under regular attack from Japanese land and air forces, the 'Woodpeckers' continued operations, living up to their personal motto of 'Nothing too Tough'.

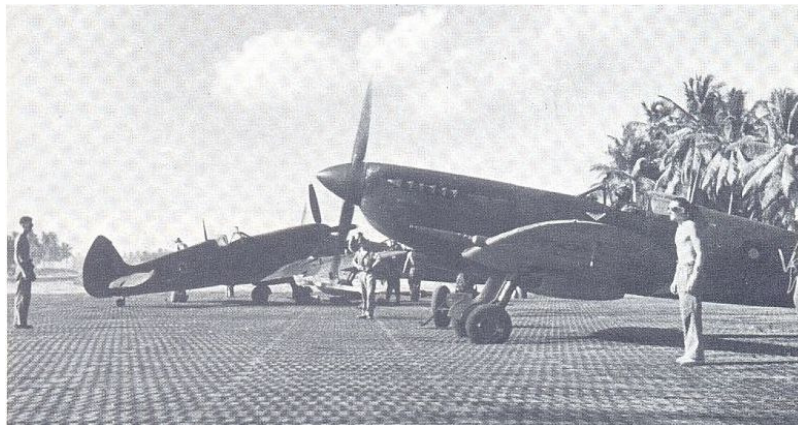
Further support was provided for the Army during the fighting at Imphal and Manipur, and in support of the 'Chindits' base at 'Broadway', a large airstrip and the 'Chindits' HQ, carved out of the heart of the jungle and re-supplied by air and glider operations, hazardous flights which were also covered by the Squadron's Spitfires.

As the 14th Army continued its push against the Japanese, the Squadron moved a few times, to be close to the area of action, and were based again at Chittagong, on 18th April, followed by further moves to Ratmalana in July, and then to Minneriya in December 1944.

The Japanese were now suffering their first defeat on land in Burma and, as the 14th Army continued to push them back, 136 Squadron flew in support, both on ground-strafting missions, and intercepting enemy bombers. Rangoon was re-taken in early May, 1945, and the face of the air war changed.

It had already been planned to attack the enemy further afield, and a new air strip was constructed on the remote Cocos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, from where B24 Liberator heavy bombers would operate. The 'Woodpeckers' would provide their escort and, on 27th March, the Squadron embarked, with the advance party arriving on the Cocos on 7th April, and the remainder of the Squadron, and their crated Spitfire VIIIs, disembarking from tank landing craft on 26th April, 1945.

The palm trees had been cleared by the Royal Engineers, and a 3,000 yards long (2,700 metres) PSP runway and dispersal areas laid, by the Indian Pioneer Corps, and within eleven days of the work being commenced, the first Spitfires were able to take off. However, it took a further three weeks before tents and other stores came ashore, and the personnel had to live under ground sheets, tied together, during this time!



*Spitfire MkVIIIs of 136 Sqn on the PSP, Cocos Islands, late 1945.
(Original source unknown)*

During their time on the Cocos, the 'Woodpeckers' provided air cover for the islands, and the growing number of Liberators now based there, but by late June, the end was in sight. After 3½ years of virtually continuous service in Burma and India, the Squadron received a message from Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park (of Battle of Britain fame), that the Squadron would be returning home. Messages of congratulations and thanks for their splendid operational record were received from far and wide, including one from the Prime Minister himself, Winston Churchill. But, although operations dwindled and finally ceased, following the dropping of the first atomic bombs, the Squadron was not finished yet. The 'Woodpeckers' moved to Malaya, re-equipping with Griffon-engined Spitfire MkXIVs, where they remained until May, 1946, when they embarked once more for India. En route to Bombay, on 8th May, 1946, the Squadron ceased to exist, being re-numbered 152 Squadron, effectively closing the pages on the 'Woodpecker Story'.

During their time fighting the Japanese, 136 (Woodpecker) Squadron, Royal Air Force, accounted for 100 enemy aircraft Confirmed Destroyed, with a further 150 Confirmed Probably Destroyed or Damaged, and were the highest-scoring RAF Fighter squadron in ACSEA, with Squadron pilots being awarded five DFCs and two DFMs.

The Squadron Crest can be seen today in the isle of St. Clement Danes, the RAF church, Aldwych, London and, in the village of Kirton-in-Lindsey, where the Squadron was formed, beneath the memorial, and alongside the Roll of Honour, in St. Andrew's Church.



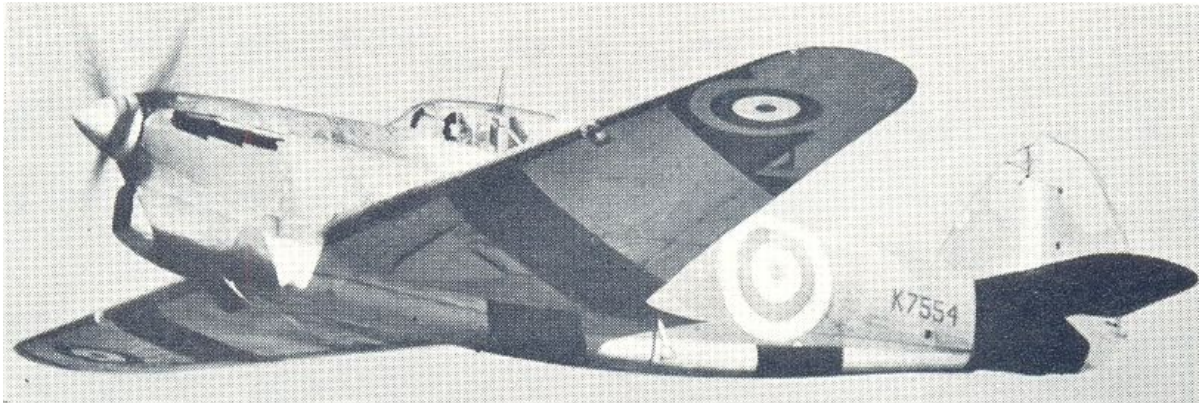
The artwork shown above is the original cartoon 'Woodpecker', designed by one of the founding pilots of 136 Squadron, Sgt. Ian Adamson, the Argentine Scot, with help from Tony Ridler, and was painted on the engine cowlings of the Squadron's Hurricanes whilst in India and Burma, as well as on all the unit's motor transport (and anything else which moved!). It would seem that the design was not painted on the Spitfires, possibly due to lack of time, and inclination, during the busy period, and numerous moves, experienced by the Squadron during that time.

It was this design, along with the Crest and the motto "Nothing too Tough", which was submitted to the College of Heralds, for approval for use as the official Crest of the Squadron. Although it took some time, after some rather forcible 'persuasion' the Chester Herald approved the request, although with some changes to satisfy protocol and 'officialdom'.

The caricature Woodpecker was replaced by a more 'formal' design, and the motto changed to the Latin '*Nihil Fortius*', meaning 'Nothing Stronger', and the final design is as presented at the head of this article.

F/Sgt Bob Cross, DFM.

After completing ab-initio training on the Fleet Finch training aircraft in Canada, R.W. 'Bob' Cross undertook his first familiarisation flight at No.7 EFTS, Desford, UK, on 27th November, 1940. Under instruction from F/Lt. Bulmore, in Tiger Moth R4922, the flight lasted 30 minutes. After completing the Elementary Course, Bob moved on to No.15 SFTS, where he flew the North American Harvard advanced trainer, and the Airspeed Oxford twin-engined trainer, finishing the course with a total of 135 hours and 25 minutes flying time, which included instrument and night flying. A posting to 1 AACU (Anti Aircraft Co-operation Unit) followed, where Bob learned to fly the Hawker Henley, before going on to target-towing duties, being based at Aberporth and Carew Cheriton. The target towing flights with the Henley were mainly at Manorbier and, by the time Bob completed his tour, in April 1942, he had amassed a total of over 450 flying hours. The twin-engined training course suggests that Bob was destined for bombers, but perhaps someone detected 'something' in Bob's abilities, as he was posted away from target-towing duties, to learn to fly fighters.



A Hawker Henley target tug, in this case the prototype MkIII. (IWM photo.)

Next stop was No.56 OTU (Operational Training Unit), equipped with the Hawker Hurricane. Here, Bob would learn the trade of the Fighter pilot, but first he had to be 'checked out'. This was done during two short flights on 18th and 21st April, in the Miles Master Mk1A, an advanced trainer powered by a Rolls Royce 'Kestrel' engine, and a type which was known to possess some unpleasant characteristics.

Bob's first solo in a Hurricane was also on the 21st April, when he flew V7468, coded 'H'.* The Log Book entry for this flight showing that it was "First Solo; Experience on Type, Sector Recce and R.T. Practice", with the flight lasting 1 hour and 40 minutes.

(* The Log Book entry shows the aircraft number as H7468. As this does not correspond to any Hurricane Mk1 serial listing fitting the dates, I am assuming the aircraft was Mk1, V7468, and coded H, although of course, this is not certain. Later entries in Bob's Log Book often only show the aircraft individual code letter, or the numerals of the serial number, with the serial letters omitted.)

Formation flying and navigation flights followed, along with air to air and air to ground gunnery practice, night flying, low flying and practice interceptions and air combat.

With a further 63 hours flying time logged, 62.10 on the Hurricane, Bob Cross was assessed and passed fit for duties as a Fighter pilot on June 14th, 1942, when he then departed for West Kirkby, on the Wirral, across the River Mersey from Liverpool, ready for overseas embarkation. With the rank of Flight Sergeant, he sailed for India on 28th July, arriving at 136 Squadron's base at Dum Dum on 29th October 1942, where he joined 'A' Flight of 'The Woodpeckers'.



F/Sgt 'Bob' Cross, DFM.

The pressures of the Squadron at the time are immediately apparent from the entries in Bob's Log Book, for on the day he arrived he was airborne in Hurricane '907, for one hour's local flying, presumably to familiarise himself with the area and local landmarks.

Over the next month, more practice flying, aerobatics and formation flying took place, with a Wing scramble on November 26th.

December 1942 saw Bob airborne a further eight times in the first three weeks of the month, including a 'Balbo' and a Squadron Scramble, both on the 5th, with two more Squadron Scrambles, both on the 17th of the month. Finally, on 20th December, Bob flew Hurricane '5124 to Chittagong, in preparation for what would transpire to be a rather busy period.

The New Year started with escort duties on the 4th January, followed by four flights on the 10th January, escorting a V.I.P., first to Maungdaw, then onwards to a landing strip, somewhere 'up country', before providing the escort for the return journey, these flights totalling 3 hours 25 minutes.

Further scrambles and escorts took place during this busy period and then, on January 23rd, Bob was again scrambled, in Hurricane '858.

During this scramble, 'A' Flight made contact with the enemy, and Bob Cross scored his first 'kills'. The neatly handwritten entry in his Log Book is straightforward and stark, presented thus:

*'Two 01 fighters destroyed – confirmed'
'One 01 fighter probably destroyed – confirmed.'*

And so, just three months after becoming an operational fighter pilot, and in what was possibly his first true air to air combat, Flt. Sgt Bob Cross opened his account, and increased the tally of enemy aircraft

accounted for by 'The Woodpeckers' by shooting down not just one, but two, probably three, Japanese fighters.

The last few days of January 1943 saw Bob take part in a further four scrambles, two on the 25th and two on the 27th, with a 20 minute flight in between, again on the 25th of the month, in order to test the .I.F.F. equipment (Identification, Friend or Foe, a radio transponder transmitting a 'blip' on 'friendly' radar, every 14 seconds.) in Hurricane '929.

The following month was taken up mainly by escorts for the transport aircraft, with three scrambles to intercept Japanese raiders, the sortie on February 5th bearing an entry in the Log Book stating simply:

"Japs sighted and chased".

A rather interesting entry for February 14th, under the 'Duties' column in Bob's Log Book, is the following:-

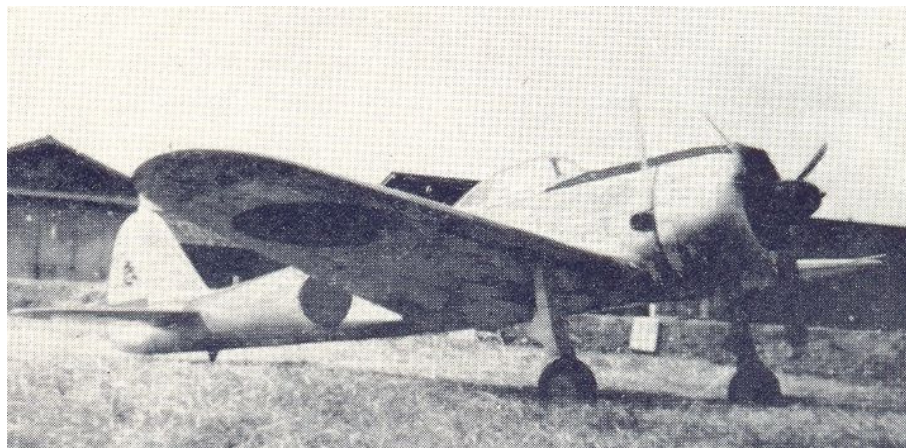
"Destroying Wellington".

This is for a flight of 2 hours and 50 minutes duration, in Hurricane '858, and I can only assume the task was possibly to destroy a Vickers Wellington bomber on the ground, possibly behind Japanese lines, in order to prevent it falling intact into enemy hands.

March 1943 followed a similar pattern, with a further seven scrambles taking place, plus one strafing operation on the 2nd, and an escort mission on the 6th. During this month, Bob flew six different Hurricanes, with the total flying hours for the month being 12 hours, 5 minutes, spread over 13 sorties in 7 days.

April opened with a sweep to Akyab on the 2nd, followed by an escort mission on the 3rd, with two scrambles on 5th, both of the latter in Hurricane '725*', when Bob again had some success against enemy fighters. During the second scramble, where the flight duration was one hour, Bob scored a 'probable' and *five* damaged, confirmed, his Log Book entry for the combat only showing "Jap fighters intercepted", with the score, and these were again Army Type 01 'Oscar' fighters.

(A caption to a photograph in a book by a well-known and respected author, showing Hurricane MkIIC, HW620, coded HM-E, normally flown by F/O 'Viv' Jacobs, states that Bob Cross was flying this aircraft on this occasion. However, Bob's Log Book clearly notes '725 as the aircraft used on both scrambles on this day. I have yet to gain access to the Squadron ORB, where this may, or may not be verified.)*



*A Nakajima Ki.43 'Hayabusa' fighter, known to the RAF as the 'Army Type 01, or 'Oscar'.
(Original source unknown)*

The month of May, 1943, saw intense activity, with eleven scrambles, six escort sorties, a sweep, a *night 'Rhubarb'* and two strafing missions. The scramble on 2nd May, in Hurricane '637, brought further success for Bob, with an Army Type 97 'Sally' bomber destroyed, and a 01 'Oscar' fighter damaged, both confirmed.

Bob's score now stood at three destroyed, two probable's, and seven damaged, all accounted for in the relatively low total of less than 130 *operational flying hours*.



*An example of the Mitsubishi Ki.21 bomber, Army Type 97, 'Sally'.
(Original source unknown)*

June to September 1943 was a relatively 'quiet' time for Bob, and most of 'The Woodpeckers', with patrols, escorts and training flights taking up most of the flying hours.

Then, in October, came the first Spitfires - the MkVc, armed with two 20mm cannon, and four .303 machine guns. The Squadron pilots found these new mounts to be far removed in performance, handling and firepower, compared to the tired, but much-loved Hurricanes, and most of the month was spent converting onto type.

Bob's Log Book is devoid of entries for October, with the flying hours for September being 'signed off' by his Flight Commander on 20th October, and it is not known if he was sick, or enjoying a rest period during this time. (Health problems were on-going for all personnel, due to the climate and poor food etc.)

The Log Book resumes in late November, with local flying and 'experience on type' being logged over the period 26th to 29th, with Spitfires 'O', 'H', and 'K' (HM-O etc) being flown, but no serial numbers are recorded.

The final month of 1943 saw the Squadron, and Bob, moving around frequently, with 'Lyons' (Ramu), Chittagong, Alipore, and a base known as Reindeer, all being visited and used for operations.

Then, on 26th December, during a scramble and sortie lasting 1 hour 45 minutes, and whilst flying a Spitfire MkVc code letter 'F', Bob Cross scored his first victories in a 'Spit', when he used cannon and machine guns to destroy a further two Army 01 'Oscar' fighters, which were confirmed.

Bob was now officially an 'Ace'!

Then there came the fight over the Bay of Bengal, on New Year's Eve, described earlier.

Once again flying Spitfire 'F', Bob's flying time was exactly one hour, from take off to landing and, in the course of the attack on the Japanese formation attempting to bomb the flotilla of the Royal Indian Navy, Bob Cross destroyed one Army 97 'Sally' bomber and damaged two others, and shot down an Army 01 'Oscar' fighter, all confirmed.

As a result of this, and previous actions, Flt.Sgt. Bob Cross was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM.)

Although his Log Book entries are, as usual, blunt and matter of fact, showing only the numbers and types of aircraft and claim, and the word 'Confirmed', the citation which accompanied the announcement in the 'London Gazette', where all such announcements regarding decorations and awards to British and Commonwealth Service personnel were revealed to the public, and are regarded as the 'official' date when a decoration can be confirmed (known as being 'Gazetted'), gives a broader insight into the actions which brought this well-deserved award, and makes interesting reading. Shown below is a copy of the announcement - the phrase 'cool deliberation' is, in my view, a gross understatement!

CROSS, Robert Walter. 924906 Flight Sergeant, No.136 Sqn. (Immediate)

L.G. 8/2/1944. Flying hours 147.55. Pilot. Air2/9216.

Flight Sergeant Cross took off with his squadron on 31st December, 1943, to intercept enemy aircraft reported near St. Martin's Island. Visual contact was made and Flight Sergeant Cross attacked at close range and damaged two bombers. He regained height by climbing into the sun and, on levelling out, observed an Oscar flying in a gentle turn above him. Drawing alongside, he turned into him firing a short burst at less than 100 yards range, destroying the fighter. He turned his attention to the bombers again making an attack from above and astern. Closing to minimum range, bursts were fired and the bomber seemed to go down in flames. Manoeuvring into position for a further contact, making a quarter beam attack on a bomber, only his machine guns were firing so, closing to about 100 yards, he went under and up alongside the bomber making a minute study of it and observing the gunner in the dorsal turret to be dead. He returned to base with an accurate description of the whole aircraft. Owing to stoppages, no further attacks could be made so Flight Sergeant Cross photographed several wreckages of enemy aircraft in the sea, looked at wrecked bombers inland and returned to base. During the whole of these combats, this N.C.O. showed cool deliberation, attacking the enemy aircraft from the most advantageous positions without hesitation. Flight Sergeant Cross has a total score of 7 destroyed, 3 probables, 8 damaged.

25th January, 1944.

Note that the date shown at the foot of the announcement, 25th January, 1944, is the date the award was made, whilst at the top, beneath the details of Name, Rank and Number, the date it was 'Gazetted' is shown as 'L.G. 8/2/1944, which means 'London Gazette, 8th February, 1944.

It was around this time that the pilots and ground personnel of 136 Squadron began to notice a rather uncanny quirk regarding Bob's intuitions. He had trained as an accountant before the war (a practice he continued after the war) and, although not an unsociable type, tended to be somewhat reclusive, almost withdrawn, keeping himself to himself.

But he had a habit of suddenly stopping whatever he was doing, whether reading, or writing a letter, for example, or even just relaxing between sorties, when he would then pick up his parachute and flying helmet, and walk out to his aircraft, telling his ground crew that the Squadron would be scrambled in 'x' minutes time.

And sure enough, each time he did this, the Squadron was scrambled!

This developed further, when he would again stop whatever he was doing, and walk over to the Flight Status blackboard of the dispersal at Rhumkhalong, where, without uttering a word, he would write the time, altitude and numbers of aircraft of an enemy raid which had not, at the time, even been detected, before moving closer to his aircraft, flying kit at the ready!

This became so common, and so unerringly accurate, that 'Jimmy' Elsdon (the Squadron's first C.O.), now promoted and based at 165 Wing H.Q., would frequently 'phone and ask Bob if there was 'anything on' that day - if the answer was 'yes', he would then come and do 'Readiness' with 'The Woodpeckers'!

Bob Cross never fully explained this phenomenon, or 'gift', only stating that it "had something to do with numbers", but this, allied with Hawk-like eyesight for spotting enemy aircraft at great distances, seemed to ensure that his score would increase.

In January 1944, the first of the new Spitfire MkVIII's arrived on the Squadron, and Bob undertook his first 'Experience on Type' on the 5th, a flight lasting 45 minutes, in 'HM-A', shown only as 'A' in his Log Book.

His next flight was a scramble on 16th January, once more flying the older MkVc, code letter 'F', when he destroyed another Army 01 'Oscar', confirmed, this time being noted, in his Log Book, as a Army 01, 'MkII'. The remainder of the month was spent on practice interceptions, one of which turned into the 'real thing', but seems to have been inconclusive, plus some time spent flying back and forth between Rhumkhapalong, Feni, Agartala, Imphal, Palel and Comilla, all in Harvard serial '786.

The final flight in January was a recce over Akyab, on behalf of a V.I.P. (un-named), again in Spitfire MkVIII 'A', which lasted 1 hour 10 minutes.

February 1944 was back to 'business as usual', with Bob, and the Squadron, being kept busy with scrambles and patrols, and a search mission, on the 5th, possibly for a downed aircraft.

By this time 'The Woodpeckers' had received further deliveries of MkVIII Spitfires, although Bob flew both these, and the MkVs up until the 10th of the month, by which time re-equipment with the newer aircraft had been virtually completed.

Soon after a routine patrol on February 9th, another combat took place following a scramble, when Bob scored again, this time whilst flying a Spitfire MkVIII, coded 'E', when he destroyed another Army Type 01, again a 'MkII', and damaged a second, both being confirmed. These were his first 'kills' in the new Mark of Spitfire.

Further operations continued without contacting the enemy in the air, but, on 16th March 1944, Bob was scrambled again, in Spitfire 'J', when he claimed his final victory against the Japanese, another Army Type 01, MkII 'Oscar', confirmed destroyed.

Bob continued operational flying with 136 Squadron, carrying out further scrambles, sweeps and patrols, until 18th June, 1944, when he was posted for a rest to 1 SFTS (Service Flying Training School), until 27th July, where he gained some hours flying the Spitfire MkIX, and a Hurricane.

His Log Book shows him back in the UK, in June 1945, where he gained time on Air Experience flights on both the Spitfire MkXIV and Mk21, as well as the D.H. Mosquito.

In September and October that year, Bob Cross also logged some hours on Vampires, Meteors and the Hawker Tempest MkVI. The final Log Book entries are for February 1946, with three flights in Meteors, totalling 1 hour and 55 minutes, the final flight logged being on 11th February, to Odiham, in Hampshire.

Having held the rank of LAC (Leading Aircraft Man) on commencement of flying training in 1940, Bob Cross was promoted through the ranks, first to Sergeant, then Flight Sergeant, and was later commissioned.

His total score of enemy aircraft was 10 Destroyed, 2 Probably Destroyed, and 9 Damaged, all confirmed, which made him the highest-scoring RAF pilot in South East Asia Command.

The individual 'scores', as recorded upon his posting from 136 'Woodpecker' Squadron, are shown below:

DESTROYED

- 1 Army 01 MkII (C.W.)
- 2 Army 01 Fighters
- 5 Army 01 MkII Fighters
- 1 Army 97 Bomber
- 1 Army 97 MkII Bomber

PROBABLY DESTROYED

2 Army 01 Fighters

DAMAGED

6 Army 01 Fighters

1 Army 01 MkII Fighter

2 Army 97 MkII Bombers.

The aircraft Bob Cross flew during his RAF service were:-

Fleet Finch

D.H. Tiger Moth

N.A. Harvard

Airspeed Oxford

Hawker Henley

Miles Master

Hawker Hurricane Mk1, MkIIB, MkIIC

Westland Lysander

Westland Wallace

Supermarine Spitfire MkV, MkVIII, MkIX, MkXIV, Mk21

D.H. Mosquito

D.H. Vampire

Gloster Meteor

Hawker Tempest MkVI

* * *

Note: Although it may be possible to establish the serial number and code combinations for some of the Hurricanes flown by Bob Cross, and more than likely possible to do the same for the Spitfire MkVs also flown by him, it has not been possible, to date, to *definitely* confirm a serial / code combination for any of the Spitfire MkVIII's flown in 136 Squadron, although there is a slim possibility that information contained in the 136 Squadron Operational Record Book (ORB), held at the National Archives, Kew, *might* provide a cross-reference which could help in identifying the individual code letters, as noted in Bob's Log Book.

Unlike most of the other variants of the Spitfire, the available serials listings for the production of the Spitfire MkVIII do not show any information regarding squadron allocation, other than the initial Maintenance Units (MUs), and ultimate overseas destination, for example, India, or Italy.

Some publications have indicated that Spitfire MkVIII, serial number MT567, coded HM-B, was flown by Bob, and a number of profiles, some showing a marked variation in both colour scheme and other markings, have also been published purporting to show this aircraft, as flown by Bob.

However, it is almost certain that this information, and these profiles, have been produced as a result of conclusions reached by the originators, in good faith, after studying a well-known photograph of a line-up of the Squadron's Spitfires, taken on the Cocos Islands in September, 1945, where HM-B is at the forefront, and linking this to the known fact that Bob Cross flew a Spitfire MkVIII coded HM-B on at

least one occasion. But, this can not be accepted as fact, unless proven beyond doubt, for the following reasons.

Firstly, there is a strong possibility that, by the time this photograph was taken, *nineteen months* after the Squadron first received Spitfire MkVIII's, that the 'HM-B' shown was a replacement aircraft, and therefore not the same 'HM-B' which Bob Cross flew, twice only. The first occasion was on 25th February 1944, shown under the 'Duty' description in his log book as 'Propaganda', a flight of 20 minutes duration, whilst the second, and final sortie in an aircraft coded 'B', was on 7th April 1944, on a patrol over the area codenamed 'Aberdeen', with a duration of 1 hour 15 minutes. Neither of these sorties encountered enemy aircraft.

Secondly, the photograph mentioned above, and shown for convenience below, has appeared in a number of books and magazines, with captions stating it was MT567 in some, and in others, that it was MT657 - both of these aircraft were sent to India, but there is no record of the squadron allocation of either!

Unless the Squadron ORB, or the Individual Aircraft Movement Card, the latter held at the RAF Museum, Hendon, contains the required information, then it is possible that the true identity of the 'HM-B' flown by Bob Cross may never be known. (I am at present looking in to this.)

One thing is for certain though - Bob Cross did *not* score a victory in a Spitfire MkVIII coded HM-B, as has been published in some sources!



*The well-know photograph of 'HM-B', variously identified as MT567 and MT657.
(original source unknown.)*

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