



Sole survivor of the four Hudsons lost on 12th January 1942 was Ted Howard, seen here photographed at a navigation reconnaissance course at Laverton late in 1941. He recalled in the late 1980s that because of this training "and because I had once sat alongside the skipper in a Hudson from Pearce to Albany, I was rushed into a crew as second pilot and shot off to Darwin". Howard's Hudson experience was very limited, he never flew one and the only time he was at the controls was taxiing A16-46 out from the dispersal point to the airstrip prior to the aircraft captain, Parker Hodge, climbing aboard on what was to be their last flight. He would not have even had a parachute had one not been given to him at the last moment. As one of only four Hudson aircrew that survived capture and imprisonment after air operations, Ted Howard could rightly call himself "a lucky survivor". (RAAF Official courtesy Cowan family)

Ted Howard, aboard Hodge's aircraft, recalled of A16-46's last moments:

While making our bombing approach at 13,500 feet, we were attacked from the starboard beam by Jap navy aircraft. The pilot, Flt Lt Hodge, attempted to make a head-on attack, so as to bring the two forward fixed guns to bear. Our oil tank in the port wing was set afire by fire from cannon or incendiary shell. As we had not released our bombs, I remained in the bomb aiming position in the nose of the aircraft until, from the attitude of the aircraft, the sound of the escape hatch above the pilot's cockpit being released, and the amount of smoke in the aircraft, it became obvious that it was to be abandoned. I was not equipped with wireless i/c gear [i.e., an intercom] and, therefore, received no instructions. I returned to the pilot's cockpit and saw the radio operator retiring through the doorway of the main cabin, having received instructions from the captain to abandon [the] aircraft. I had, about ¾ hour previously, seen that every one had parachute gear in readiness, but was not able to observe the order of abandoning [the] aircraft owing to the density of the smoke in the fuselage cabin. The pilot was already standing on his seat half in, half out of the aircraft, but still maintaining control so as to facilitate the crew's baling out. He instructed me to abandon aircraft, which I did from the roof hatch, passing over the turret and between the two rudders.

During my descent I had been able to observe our aircraft, the port wing of which fell away some little while before the aircraft struck the water.⁶⁹

It is likely that Gorrie's Hudson, A16-12, had been the first shot down and that Hodge's aircraft followed. Only Cuming's crew returned. Whilst they did not see what had happened to A16-46, a wireless message advised that A16-12 had been attacked by three Type 0 fighters, caught fire and spun into the water below in flames without any of the crew escaping (Howard was the only survivor of the two crews lost).⁷⁰

Two more Hudsons and their crews, all from No. 13 Squadron, were lost that day in the same area. Their involvement has previously been misunderstood. They did not fly off from Namlea with the No. 2 Squadron aircraft, but rather took off later after flying in from Babo and were not seen by Cuming when he was in the area. The aircraft and crews were A16-7; Flt Lt G. Sattler, Sgt J. G. Goode, Sgt M. R. Hodgson and Sgt R. A. D. Hunter and A16-67; Flt Lt A. R. Barton, FO S. W. Clifford, Sgt J. L. Mills and Sgt B. S. Bates.

Of the four missing aircraft, only the remains of Sattler's aircraft were found, the dead crew had been buried nearby; their bodies were later re-interred in the Ambon War Cemetery, but Ted Howard's account left little doubt as to the fate of Hodge's crew. Of the other two crews, in 1949 next of kin were informed that despite all the searching and enquiries made in the Manado area, no trace of either aircraft or crew had been found. It was

known from Cuming's account that Gorrie's aircraft had crashed into the sea, and it was thought probable that that was also the fate of Barton's aircraft, therefore precluding the likelihood of recovering any bodies.

The loss of four Hudson crews on one operation was something that never happened again (to make matters worse, another two Hudsons had been lost in operations from Port Moresby on the 11th). One consequence was that the losses needed to be made up quickly. It was arranged that four new, but turretless, Hudson Mk IVs allotted to No. 14 Squadron at Pearce, Western Australia, would be delivered by new crews who would then exchange them for four turreted Mk IVs which would be flown on to Darwin. Following their arrival, aircraft and crews would then join 2 and 13 Squadrons as replacements. Unfortunately on the delivery flight to Pearce, one Hudson crashed on take-off from Ceduna, South Australia, with the loss of six lives. A replacement crew was provided, though, and subsequently, on 25th January according to the airframe record cards, A16-121, A16-123, A16-125 and A16-135 were received in Darwin, three of the four captains being Flt Lt Ivon Black, FO Ian McCombe and FO Frank Meyer (Black and Meyer were graduates of the first No. 1 OTU Hudson conversion course, posted out on 15th January). As will be seen, however, neither Meyer nor any of these Hudsons was to survive events over the next four weeks.

To return, once again, to events in the NEI, on Ambon on the 15th there was an air raid alarm which turned out to be false, but, nevertheless, caused the five Hudsons there at the time to take-off and await the all clear signal. When the signal was received they began to return and were joined by two more Hudsons incoming from Darwin flown by recently posted-in crews captained by Flt Lt J. W. "Mickey" Finlayson and FO George Brown. Arch Dunne was one of the other five captains and recalled later:

Three aircraft landed (including Ryland and myself) when the second [air raid] warning was given. Two Hudsons had remained airborne. The first three aircraft which had landed, promptly took off again. There was great confusion with the two [defending] Buffaloes also taking off. Finlayson and Brown subsequently got away. Brown remained with the other five aircraft, while Finlayson made an emergency landing on the impromptu runway alongside the strip, which had by this time been damaged by enemy bombers.⁷¹

Derrick Hogan, a spare wireless air gunner posted in to No. 13 Squadron on 24th December, only made two flights into Laha prior to the 15th, staying overnight on both occasions and ferrying RAAF personnel back to Darwin on the following mornings. On these flights and that on the 15th he flew with Finlayson and his story agrees: "As we landed, the airstrip was under enemy attack - we immediately took off again, dispersed for 2.10 hours then landed again at Laha on grass alongside the damaged strip".⁷²

According to controller Neville Rooke, as Finlayson climbed away at the end of the airstrip, bombs came down where his Hudson had been.

All the others flew on to Namlea. George Brown:

When we arrived at Laha the 'strip was in the process of being blown up by the Nips - Betties, Zeros and red very lights everywhere. Doug [second pilot Doug Gorringer] fortunately had been in the area before and knew about Namlea on neighbouring Boeroe and we hightailed it there where we remained on a "detached" posting . . .⁷³

In this attack the raiders gave military targets a pasting. Consistent with Hogan's record of the time in the air waiting for the all clear, it reportedly lasted for two hours. Although the 13 Squadron record of the attack suggests that the aerodrome and operations room were the main targets, petrol dumps, quarters, even two American Catalinas on the water at the naval base, are all mentioned as being hit. Unserviceable Hudson