

22 January 1944

86 Squadron Cape Valsch

In the final days of 1943 the radar station at Cape Kombies had been plotting regular incursions of a single Japanese aircraft making land fall over Cape Valsch before heading towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. S/Ldr. Stanley Galton decided to try an interception, sending F/L. Howard Stuart and P/O. Darrel Cornwell off at 10:25am to patrol around the Cape Valsch area.



Howard 'Bill' Stuart

Initially sighting nothing, the two were returning to base and flying at 12,000 feet. Stuart flying a set course East and Cornwell abreast on starboard, weaving slightly. Then at 12:40pm, 30 miles South of Malatol Island, Cornwall spotted and identified a 'Betty' flying West at 10

o'clock and 3000 feet below, flying directly under the two aircraft. The two immediately turned and gave chase. The Betty held its course but had begun to dive towards the sea, steeply at first then levelling out to around 50 feet above the water. The P-40's shallow dived in pursuit and with an indicated air speed of 300-320 mph began to overhaul the Betty. Having positioned themselves about a mile apart with Stuart to port, and Cornwell to starboard of the bomber, Stuart initiated the action with a port rear quarter attack from 600 feet, approximately 30 miles south of Cape Valsch.

Stuart fired a two second burst closing to within 50 feet but over deflected in his first pass, with the Betty throttling back and turning slightly towards its attacker, his rounds splashed all around the water in front of his quarry. Return fire was light, with only a little inaccurate machine gun fire coming from the port blister. Stuart then turned over him and made a mirror image attack of his first pass on the starboard side. This time with better results:

'I did not observe any strikes, but I think I hit him in this attack, as he staggered perceptibly.'

Cornwell then followed Stuarts attack on the starboard side, making the same error in over deflecting, and striking the water

in front of the bomber. Turning over the top of the Betty, Cornwell slotted in behind Stuart making his third pass. No hits were observed by either pilot in their next two passes, although Cornwell did think that he hit the bomber. As Stuart manoeuvred for an astern attack, Cornwell drew up abreast of the aircraft, and noted no return fire from the side blister, or rear guns. This probably confirming that the Betty had received damage by one or both of the pilots in their previous passes.

It was Stuart's astern attack which would deliver the fatal blow:

*'I gave him a 2 second burst and saw black smoke issuing from his port engine. As I drew astern he began to skid violently to port and starboard. I gave him a 3 second burst and saw strikes on the port side of his fuselage and the port wing root; and with a third burst of 3 seconds his port engine caught fire. By this time I was practically on him. I gave him a quick burst for luck and pulled out to starboard.'*¹

Combat claims

F/L H.W Stuart	1 Betty destroyed	(MP-Y) A29-305	CFR
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Other participants

P/O D.G Cornwell

Allied losses

Nil

Japanese forces

1 Betty Bomber

Cornwell described the Betty's dying moments:

*'I noticed smoke aflame from the port engine as Black1 (Stuart) attacked from astern. The flame increased, blew through into the fuselage and streamed back past the blisters until finally the whole interior was a mass of flame and it was blowing out of the tail. It flew along like that for about half a minute with Black 1 still astern and attacking. By this time it was almost on the water; the port wing finally dug into the water, the Betty broke into pieces and blew up. Turning back I saw smoke, and a large oil slick on the water and wreckage which may have included bodies.'*²

Before joining up with Stuart, Cornwell gave the wreckage a short strafing run, having expended 300 rounds and Stuart 900 rounds during the engagement. The two pilots estimated that only around 50 rounds of inaccurate defensive fire from the Betty's side blisters was encountered. At no stage did the plane's tail cannon fire, and it was considered that the aircraft was travelling light with a reduced crew.

¹ *ibid*

² *ibid*