

THE HISTORY OF 27 SQUADRON SAAF

With the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 the vital importance of the Cape Sea Route was not immediately realized and for the first couple of years, most of the war effort was directed towards operations in East and North Africa.

At first, coastal defence aircraft consisted of obsolete Hartebeests and Furies, which soon became unserviceable owing to the lack of spares. Later, modified Junker 86s bought from the South African Airways were used, but these were quite unsuitable for the work required of them.

Meanwhile, with the closure of the Mediterranean trade route, an ever-increasing volume of shipping was passing around the Cape and sheltering in South African ports. The number of submarine sightings, whether real or imagined, also increased.

However, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 8 December 1941, and Japan's entry into the war, it was realized that shipping would now be the prey of German, Italian and Japanese submarines and raiders.

The fear of such attacks was soon justified for by May 1942, Japanese submarines appeared off Madagascar and ships were sunk in the Moçambique Channel, and closer to home, off the Zululand coast. German submarines and raiders had also been active.

Reorganization of the Coastal Air Force was therefore essential if vital war supplies were to reach their destinations safely. As a result, the Coastal Air Force was given more autonomy and a number of new Squadrons equipped with suitable modern aircraft were formed. One of these new Squadrons was No 27 Torpedo Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron which came into being on 24 August 1942.

Notice of the formation of the Squadron coincided with the disbandment of 8 Squadron and therefore approximately 100 personnel were transferred from the latter Squadron to 27 Squadron. The majority were artisans at Germiston, a percentage of whom had seen

active service in East Africa and the Middle East.

The policy followed was to gather all non-artisan personnel at the Mobile Air Force Depot, Voortrekkerhoogte and all artisans at Germiston. Initially, the personnel at MAFD were under the command of Squadron Sergeant Major W. O. Bester, ex no 8 Squadron and formerly of the Pretoria Regiment. The men under his command were absorbed in the Pool and performed routine work for the time being.

The artisan personnel were grouped at no 5 AD Germiston and their time was occupied in servicing Ventura aircraft as they arrived from Accra.

The Squadron was formed as a Torpedo Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron on a 3 Flight basis, each Flight to consist of 12 aircraft, and was scheduled to operate from the Cape Peninsula on seaward reconnaissance. Originally, 17 Venturas and 2 Ansons were allotted to the new Squadron but this changed in October 1942, when the establishment of all bomber Squadrons in the SAAF was altered.

The Squadron was now to be established on a 2-Flight basis with 24 IE aircraft — 12 per Flight and 12 IR Aircraft. Several new posts were also created, for example, a Major's post as second in command of aircrews, etc.

Initially, no officers were posted to the new Squadron, those of the old 8 Squadron being posted elsewhere. The first Officer appointed to 27 Squadron (on 3rd September, 1942) was Lt W. F. Seller, as administrative officer. He made his headquarters at Germiston where the majority of the Squadron's personnel was located. Other officers soon followed, one of whom was Major W. S. O'Brien, who was to fill the post of Adjutant.

The first stores were indented for and duly arrived. The only problem in this respect was

the difficulty experienced in obtaining technical equipment.

On the 10th of November, 1942, the fledgling Squadron received word that it had been given an Officer Commanding. He was to be Lieutenant Colonel "Boet" Botes, a very experienced officer who had done duty in East Africa, the Middle East and in Coastal Command.

Suddenly news came of the expected move to the Cape. Stores rolled in, but difficulty was still experienced with technical stores — this situation was slightly eased when some were obtained from the disbanded 8 Squadron.

The date set for the move was the 1st December 1942. Mechanical transport rolled in and the vehicle park filled up. Arrangements were made for the issuing of licences for the messes and for the initial grant of a hundred pounds to be forwarded to the Squadron.

The advance party had arrived at Eerste Rivier on the 28th of November and had set up camp. The main party arrived at Eerste Rivier station at 0600 hours on December 3rd. Weather-wise, it was not a sunny welcome to the Fairest Cape — it was raining, a mist covered everything in a wet, grey blanket and the wind was howling. However, even the miserable weather did not dampen "27's" enthusiasm.

As there were as yet few officers, it was decided not to have a separate officers mess, and so cooking was done for officers and NCO's together. The airmen received a mess (in the shape of a converted bungalow, of which there were several) plus a recreation room. Other sections were given office space in the bungalows. Plans were made for building an NCO's mess from aircraft packing cases. For the next few days the administration and organisation of the Squadron and its new home continued uninterrupted.

On the 7th of December the Squadron was informed that its first Venturas were waiting at no 3 AD Brooklyn. It was agreed that the Squadron's mechanics would be sent in daily to service these. This would get the aircraft ready faster and would also acquaint the mechanics with the Venturas.

Perhaps more important to the men at this stage was the occasion of the opening of the NCO's and airmen's canteens!

Work carried on apace in getting the Squadron efficient, comfortable and happy. The NCO's "scrounged" enough packing cases for their mess, which was completed and a party was held, which conformed with all Air Force traditions! Cricket matches were arranged and 27 Squadron soon became a force to be reckoned with.

It was heard that Eerste Rivier was not to be the Squadron's final base, but that this was to be Phesante Kraal, near Durbanville. However, when the proposed site was visited by the officers it was discovered that work on the runways had only just commenced and that the proposed site for the camp was very badly chosen. Another site was picked and the Engineers duly moved in to begin work.

On the 17th of December the first aircraft—an Anson—arrived at Eerste Rivier. The Squadron were cheered by this, as the lack of aircraft and therefore, of operations, was beginning to tell on the patience of the men.

More officers arrived, amongst whom were the two Flight Commanders, Captains Gildenhuys and Urry.

Tragedy struck the Squadron on the 30th of December, when Air Mechanic R. V. Harding was drowned whilst swimming at Strandfontein.

On the 6th of January, Major General Venter arrived and expressed himself very satisfied with the progress made by the Squadron.

The 8th of January saw the long awaited arrival of the Venturas, which resulted in the Squadron's being plunged into a period of frenzied activity as guns were fitted, aircraft serviced etc. 2 Ansons arrived on the 19th of January. Lectures, flying training and artillery co-operation exercises at Simonstown and Robben Island kept the personnel busy and on the 27th of January, 1943, 27 Squadron carried out its first operation — Capt Wally Mathias as first pilot of a Ventura which was directed to escort a convoy on its perilous journey around the Cape.

On February 6th, a Minute was received which authorised the strength of the Squadron to be raised to 18 Venturas instead of 10. More aircraft soon arrived.

A further surprise was received on the 6th of February — the Squadron was to move from

Eerste Rivier, not to Phesante Kraal, but to Rooikop aerodrome, near Walvis Bay. Accordingly, the advance party of 6 officers and 62 other ranks left for Rooikop from Eerste Rivier station on the twelfth. One Flight was to be attached to 23 Squadron at Darling for an indefinite period.

On February 15th the vehicle convoy moved off at first light.

The advance party arrived at Rooikop on February 16th and were pleasantly surprised to find a hangar and an administrative hut there. Although the weather was bad, all but one of the aircraft arrived without mishap. This aircraft had to force-land on the beach about 100 miles from Walvis Bay but reached the base safely after being found by a Naval aircraft.

The rest of the month passed in a bustle of activity as the camp was laid out and various problems attended to.

On February 24th, the new OC, Major Douglas Meaker arrived and by the 28th, when the ammunition train arrived, the Squadron (with the exception of the detached "A" Flight) was fully assembled at Rooikop.

March saw the beginning of operations from Rooikop. These were mainly in the form of convoy and group escort duty, as the danger of submarines was ever-present. The first operation was flown by Captain Bob Thomas, who was sent out to search for a submarine reported seen 120 miles from Walvis Bay. No trace of it could be found.

On the 21st the Squadron flew its first night operation when it was ordered to provide an escort for a convoy. After the first two attempts failed because of fog, the O.C. found and escorted it. Other escort operations followed, which went off successfully.

Training for aircrews was also carried out and work on the camp proceeded.

The Squadron was settling in well and after the water carriers and timber arrived, life was rendered far more comfortable for its members. The new officers mess was built, as well as a Met section, for Met reports from Walvis Bay had been found to be vague and unreliable.

Socially, the Squadron was also busy. Rugby practices were arranged, from which no

casualties resulted! A very enjoyable time was had by all at the braaivleis held on the 23rd.

April was a busy month for the Squadron. Early in the month the Squadron was ordered to search for survivors from the torpedoed ship, SS City of Baroda. The wreck was found on the 6th, but although lifeboats and rafts were spotted, no survivors were seen. Convoy escort operations continued through the month. On the 17th, the Squadron was requested by the Railways to fly a critically ill man to Cape Town for an operation. The Squadron agreed, but the flight was cancelled as the operation was performed in Windhoek.

Colonel Hofmeyr, Cape Fortress Commander, paid the Squadron a brief visit on the 9th and expressed his satisfaction with what he saw.

April saw the official opening of the officer's, NCO's and airmen's messes, celebrated in the time-honoured fashion!

On April 27th, a visit was paid to an allied submarine at Walvis Bay, after which some of the senior officers were brought home for supper and "flips".

Probably the happiest event of the month was the arrival of "A" flight from Darling. The aircraft arrived back on the 23rd, and the rest arrived by train on the 30th.

April also saw Aus used as a base for operations.

The following month saw an increase in operations and much convoy escort duty was carried out, among which were escorting the Arundel Castle and escorting an important convoy of four destroyers and the cruiser "Newcastle".

Oropoho was used as a base for the first time on May 12th.

The Squadron had two visits during the month: on the 12th a group of USAF officers arrived and were very impressed with everything they saw; on the 25th Colonel Ross, Inspector of the Air Force arrived and listened to all reasonable complaints, which were soon rectified.

The training of observers and gunners was completed by the middle of the month.

The Squadron had its first accident on May 11th, when an air current caused a Ventura to crash on landing at Oropoho. Luckily, no-one

was killed or seriously injured, although the aircraft was badly damaged.

June was very busy with regard to convoy escort operations, escort being flown mainly from Rooikop and Aus. On 14th June, a group left for Sanitatas, as it had been decided to move the advance operating base there from Oropoho.

The 29th was an enjoyable day for the Squadron, as a Concert Party arrived and gave a performance at Rooikop.

On the 2nd of July, the Squadron received an unpleasant surprise when it was informed that all convoy and group escort duties would cease. This was bad news indeed, as most of the flying operations were devoted to these tasks. However, this state of affairs lasted only until the 16th, when escort duties were begun again. Operationally it was a very slack month.

July was a disastrous month for the Squadron in that so many crashes occurred. A total of 6 aircraft were put out of action, one of which was a complete write-off. It was ironic that this all happened just after the Squadron had received the last Ventura which completed the Squadron's complement of aircraft. Now it was difficult to find enough aircraft to take part in operations.

Panic-stations were sounded on July 4th, when smoke was seen issuing from the bomb dump. However, the cause of the smoke was found to be a leaking smoke bomb and so everyone could breathe freely again.

News of the award of the DFC to the OC, Major Meaker, reached the Squadron on the 10th.

August was very quiet, with only the occasional escort duty being ordered. On the 11th, the new OC, Major M. G. Uys AFC, took over command of 27 Squadron.

Only two operations were flown in September. One was an important escort duty for a convoy of 7 English warships, including the Battleship HMS Ramilles.

Unfortunately, another aircraft crashed while taking part in this operation.

The Squadron held its first concert, entitled "First Flight" on the 17th, which was highly enjoyed by all.

The Squadron's Anniversary on the 1st October was celebrated with a slap-up braai-veils. The news that the whole of the Squadron was to move to Phesante Kraal was hailed with great joy by all the members of "27" and by the end of the month everyone had arrived there. After the desert, the green Cape Peninsula and the concrete runways of Phesante Kraal were a source of joy to the Squadron.

November saw the Squadron very busy setting up camp. Roads were made, offices constructed and the base generally made more comfortable. The Squadron even went in for farming when a few pigs were bought for Squadron consumption.

This was a lean period for operations, although one of importance began on the 11th, 27 Squadron cooperating with 23 Squadron in trying to locate a Japanese submarine which was said to be carrying German technicians, and perhaps even Von Ribbentrop, to the East. An all-out attempt was made, 2 aircraft even flying as far as Bredasdorp to continue the search from there. However, the effort was wasted as the Squadron was informed that the submarine had been seen many hundreds of miles to the East, having moved faster than expected. 27 Squadron was not amused! During this operation one pilot somehow missed Cape Point and continued Northwards. Making no landfall he turned East and landed up near Saldanha Bay!

On the 17th the Squadron was visited by Major General I. P. de Villiers who was most satisfied by what he saw.

On the 25th, Captain Muir flew to Bredasdorp, taking with him the equipment and personnel necessary for the establishment of an advanced striking base.

The month of December ushered in an intensive program of flying training, bombing and formation flying exercises. An arrangement was made whereby 25% of the personnel were given 10 days leave. The 31st saw 4 Venturas on an anti-submarine patrol in the morning, and 2 merchant vessels were escorted in the afternoon, until bad weather forced the aircraft to return. A spot of drama occurred when a Verey cartridge fired from the bombing range caused a bush-fire.

The New Year began with a week of intense operational activity, when 3 submarine hunts

and escort duty were flown. Patrols were flown from Mtubatuba and practice bombing attacks carried out.

On the 8th the first group of personnel left for MAF on posting in accordance with the policy of cutting the Squadron down by 50%. The second group left on the 9th.

February 1944 was not a very busy month from an operational standpoint. A few submarine hunts were carried out as well as the usual escort duty. The Squadron had an unexpected visit from the CCAD, Brigadier Wilmott, on the 3rd and on the 18th, the GOC Coastal Area, Major General I. P. de Villiers and Brigadier Wilmott both visited the Squadron. By this time matters were getting out of hand as the Adjutant, Ops Officer, Engineer Officer, Electrical Officer, Quartermaster and Account Officer had all been posted away.

During March and April life continued in a routine manner, until the Squadron received news that it was to move North. From the 1st to the 9th of May the Squadron was stationed at Brooklyn pending entraining for Durban. The aircrews and about 60 ground staff left by air for Oran. The sea-party arrived at their destination on the 13th of June and left for 337 Wing RAF at La Senia, where 27 Squadron was to be based. The Squadron was given a hearty welcome but had to live under very trying conditions as the stores had not yet arrived and accommodation was very limited.

The bulk of the air party arrived at La Senia on the 6th of July, only one aircraft temporarily missing, as it had had to force-land at Tozeur in Tunisia with engine trouble. On the 11th the Squadron took over the duties of 500 Squadron RAF. Some confusion was caused owing to the fact that the Squadron had been instructed to take over the equipment of the RAF Squadron, which it did, but was informed on the 30th that this equipment had to be handed back again.

Tragedy struck the Squadron on the 26th when an aircraft crashed on take off and the entire crew was killed.

Several gunners, both RAF and SAAF were posted, untrained, to the Squadron, which necessitated a thorough training program.

Four operations were flown in July, 3 of which were reconnaissance flights along the

Spanish coast. One, the first one on the 18th, was flown in an attempt to locate a pilot in a dinghy in Arzew Bay. The pilot was found and flame floats were dropped. Unfortunately the engines cut and the aircraft was forced to ditch. It was a total write-off, but the crew were unhurt.

For some months Oran steadily declined in importance as an operational base; France was occupied by the Allies, thereby ending the danger of German long-range strikes at convoys. The focus of operations therefore shifted from the North African coast to the Western Mediterranean; Squadrons gradually moved away and by the 1st September 1944 337 Wing, La Senia, closed down.

On the 16th of August the whole operational disposition of the Squadron was regrouped: 11 aircraft and 12 crews were detached for duty on Malta; Two detachments of 2 aircraft and 3 crews each were sent to Reghaia and Bone and a single aircraft was left at La Senia as a replacement for them. 27 Squadron was now in the unique position of being the only fully GR Squadron from Malta to the Oran Sector.

On the 14th of August the Squadron performed the first operation of the newly formed Spanish International Air Sea Rescue Service when 12 aircraft helped in the search for a missing Halifax.

On the 16th August the Malta detachment left and duly arrived at Hal Far base. Here it was kept busy with anti-submarine sweeps, reconnaissance work and escort duties. On the 21st an aircraft crashed in flames on take-off. The crew were not seriously injured except the pilot, who was sent to hospital.

The beginning of September saw the Squadron still split into 4 sections. On the 18th, however, the Reghaia detachment, after a few ASR and other searches, moved to Hal Far. The Bone detachment arrived on the 25th, after doing some ASR work and training. By the end of the month, the whole operational strength of the Squadron was grouped on Malta.

Although it was almost certain that there were no more submarines in the Western Mediterranean, the Squadron giving anti-submarine escort to shipping, in case undetected submarines still lurked around.

Tragedy struck on the 13th when an aircraft failed to return. Searches were flown, but to no avail — no trace could be found of it.

On the 15th, the South African Minister of Finance, General Theron and other senior Officers arrived and the OC took them for a drive around the island. On the 26th the OC attended the swearing-in of the new Governor of Malta.

October 1944 witnessed the end of GR operations in the Mediterranean and on the 20th the exodus back to La Senia began. Highlights of the month were the wedding of Lt A. Burger on Malta and the visit of the concert party, the "Sundowners" to the Squadron.

The Squadron was withdrawn from active operations during November and all personnel and aircraft were gathered at La Senia in preparation for the expected move. The Squadron was split up into 4 groups — one would accompany the aircraft; the second group were to be posted to CMF; the third would remain as a holding party in the Middle East and the last group consisted of trainees who were to return to the Union. The first flight of 10 aircraft left for Cairo on the 24th and the second, also consisting of 10 aircraft, left on the 25th.

At the beginning of December, the air echelon had moved on to Cairo with 40 of the ground personnel as passengers and the balance of the Squadron was left at La Senia.

Movement order No 42, issued by SAAF Admin HQ on Nov 29, 1944, provided for the movement of the air echelon to the Union in 4 formations on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of December. The first 3 formations each flew 5 Venturas PVI and the last one flew 5 Venturas PVI and a Ventura B34. Only one mishap occurred and this involved the Ventura B34 which lost an engine over Lake Rukwa and had to do an emergency landing at Tabora. The flight was completed in 4 days and by the 8th the aircraft had arrived at ZAS after which the aircrews were all given 30 days ex-North leave.

On the 16th the balance of the Squadron vehicles left with the holding party from La Senia en route for Algiers. There they awaited embarkation on the Liberty ship "Samconan" which was only carried out on the 4th of January, as the ship had to ride out a sudden storm. The personnel were very well treated

by the RAF during their enforced stay in Algiers and very much enjoyed their Christmas party there.

Towards the end of January the key personnel assembled at Almaza. It had been thought that they would form the nucleus of the new Squadron maintenance staff to work on the Warwick aircraft with which the Squadron was to be equipped. However, these aircraft had not yet arrived and would not be arriving for another month.

Arrangements were consequently made for the aircrews to convert initially on Wellingtons which would be of assistance when the Warwicks did arrive. To provide experience for the ground crew, 206 Group had arranged for a party of 50 to be attached to No 168 MU Heliopolis, where they could work on Wellingtons and receive instruction on Warwicks. Meanwhile the aircrews in the Union had their leave extended to February 16th and so it was only on the 22nd that the OC, Lt-Col M. J. Uys, the 2 Flight Commanders and the aircrews arrived.

The Squadron had thought that it was to train at Gebel Hamzi but it was ordered to move complete to the RAF station at Gianacis, which it did on the 25th of February. The new base was comfortable, but the transport provided for the Squadron was in a very bad state of repair.

March saw the arrival of both Wellington and Warwick aircraft. By the 10th, all training was going strong and the Squadron was joined by 2 RAF Instructors, who trained the pilots on Wellingtons. All the pilots had been converted to Wellingtons by the 16th and a night flying course on these aircraft was undertaken, lasting from the 19th to the 24th. The following day a rainstorm flooded the airfield, rendering it useless for a week.

Warwick conversion training began in May and finished on the 15th. Operational training commenced the following day which involved Naval exercises, bombing, Air to Ground and Air to Air fighting and Fighter Affiliation exercises. On the 17 a tragic accident occurred when a Warwick crashed and the entire crew were killed. Doubts were voiced as to the performance of the Warwick which resulted in Major H. Rose-Martin taking his aircraft up and proving that the Warwick was indeed reliable.

The Squadron completed its training program on the 4th of May and expected to move to its operational base on the 12th. The Squadron was divided into 3 parties in anticipation of the move and the first party "B" party, had moved to Port Tewfik en route for Aden on the 29th of April with the stores. However, much to the Squadron's disappointment, it was decided that it would not be needed in the Far East but that it would be used in the Eastern Mediterranean as a Rescue and Reconnaissance Squadron. Thus, until the stores and equipment arrived back from Aden, only a minimum of flying could be done.

No orders were received until the 25th of July when HQ RAF ME advised that the Squadron would take over the ASR work of 221 Squadron RAF after training in ASR work was completed.

On the 3rd, 12 aircraft took part in an exercise with the Navy similar to one carried out the month before (simulating a massed bombing attack). After this, no more flying could be carried out until the stores arrived back — which occurred only at the end of the month — and so the Squadron occupied itself with training.

With effect from the 30th of July, the Squadron was under the command of a new OC — Lt Col D. W. Pidsley DFC.

With all the stores back by the beginning of August, ASR training, dual and solo night flying and flying training with the Warwicks were carried out. Ground training, navigation lectures, bombing and safety equipment lectures all helped to keep the personnel busy. Detachments were sent out to:

El Adem (2 Warwicks, 4 crews and maintenance personnel).

Aqir (3 Warwicks, 4 crews and maintenance personnel).

and

Benina (the same as Aqir).

The Squadron HQ and remaining aircraft remained at Gianacelis.

The detachments took over the full commitments of 221 Squadron RAF on the 21st of August, 1945. Work started immediately and the 22nd saw the first calls being made to the Squadron for assistance in searches.

The 15th of August marked the end of the war in Japan and the Squadron celebrated it, not excitedly, but with an air of quiet thankfulness.

In September, the Squadron was visited by Mines Department and Civil Service officials, for the purpose of recruiting personnel. Operations continued, and on the 29th the Squadron went to the aid of a burning passenger liner, the "Empire Patrol" and was instrumental in saving many lives.

The next month the Squadron's personnel were divided into 3 demobilization groups, but were disappointed when told that they would have to wait until a RAF Squadron could be found to replace 27 Squadron.

The Squadron moved to Idki on the 17th - 24th and found that although it was supposed to be a RAF station, there were only about 60 RAF personnel there. Another SAAF Squadron, 22 Squadron, virtually ran the base. This Squadron was disbanded at the end of the month and the personnel not due to be demobilized yet, joined 27 Squadron as replacements for those due for repatriation.

In November a few operations were flown, but then personnel from 621 RAF Squadron began arriving. 27 Squadron completed its role in the Second World War on the 26th of November, 1945, when the signal arrived instructing it to hand over its duties to 621 RAF Squadron.

27 Squadron was reformed in August 1951 under the command of Major W. P. Stanford.