

U3A AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

GROUP CAPTAIN CLIVE(KILLER)CALDWELL.

DSO. DFC and BAR, POLISH CROSS OF VALOUR.

PART 2.

The RAF was keen to keep Clive and Air Marshall Tedder offered him Command of a Wing of three *Spitfire* Squadrons but Prime Minister John Curtin wanted him back in Australia. He came home via the USA and there he visited the Curtiss Aircraft Factory and spoke to the workers who had built the *Tomahawk* and *Kittyhawk* Fighters.

Clive was very popular with the Americans and he paid a visit to Hollywood where he met Mary Pickford and Nigel Bruce.

On arrival back in Australia he was given a job that he hated. He was posted to Mildura where he was expected to train the new young Pilots to fly the newly arrived *Spitfires*. He was also asked to Test Fly the new Australian designed and built, *Boomerang* Fighter. He was not impressed with its performance and he wrote a report detailing its many weaknesses.

Air Marshall Jones was a great supporter of the *Boomerang* and was very annoyed when he read Clive's report and he demanded that he rewrite it.

Clive rewrote the report but still said that its performance was poor. He concluded the report with;

The most noticeable thing about the Boomerang is that, in direct contrast to its name, it is most unlikely to return if it ever meets any enemy aircraft.

The *Boomerang* was never used as a front-line fighter and its only use was to ground strafe enemy positions. The Aircrew who were unfortunate enough to fly it, hated it.

AM Jones was not impressed.

After a few months at Mildura, Clive asked to go back on operations. He was promoted to Wing Commander and given Command of three *Spitfire* Squadrons , one RAF and two RAAF. The RAAF Squadrons were the 452 and the 457 and the RAF Squadron was 54 . They were now known as No. 1 Fighter Wing, *The Churchill Wing*.

There were 95 Pilots in the Wing and only 6 had any combat experience so it was Clive's job to lick them into shape to meet a well equipped and experienced enemy.

The first Air Raid on Darwin in February 1942 had come as a great shock to most Australians but it was only the start. There had been daily attacks and the Japanese were starting night raids. The Air Defense was done by the US 33rd. Pursuit Squadron, flying *Kittyhawks*, and they had fought well but had lost 10 of their planes and their airfield had been regularly bombed. The RAAF newly formed 76 and 77 Squadrons, flying *Kittyhawks*, were just seeing action.

In January 1943, 70 *Spitfires* with 700 ground staff were moved to Darwin and were to use three new Airstrips cut out of the bush at Livingstone and Strauss. The *Spitfires*, for security reasons, were known as *Capstans* and their Merlin engines were known as *Marvels*

The Japanese were not fooled and Tokyo Radio announced;

Filter tipped or plain , the Capstans will burn just the same.

The only problem with the *Spitfires* was that they were designed to operate in Britain and could only stay in the air for one hour. They could turn and out-climb most enemy fighters but they would now come up against an enemy fighter that could stay up for three hours and could out turn any other fighter.

This was the *Zero*.

The Japanese pilots were very experienced and the allied Pilots were very new.

Before coming to Darwin, Clive had studied reports of the Zero and had written;

It is a lot better than the experts thought and it is being much better flown.

When Clive's Wing arrived in Darwin it was the wet season and comforts were few. The Mess had a concrete floor and a tin roof with no side walls. The only tables and chairs had been those looted from houses in Darwin. There were a few packs of cards and a wind-up gramophone.

Clive's Pilots were all aged 19 to 20 and most sported large moustaches and they smoked pipes. A few months before, they had been kicking a football around their school playground. They were now flying a machine at 350 mph. and facing a very experienced enemy.

On the 2 March the weather improved and Clive was about to meet his first *Zero*.

At 2 pm. the Radar showed two large groups of aircraft approaching Darwin and by the time that the *Spitfires* had reached 12,000 feet the bombers had dropped their bombs and were heading for home. By the time the *Spitfires* found their targets they only had 15 minutes flying

time left. The engagement only lasted 8 minutes and Clive shot down a **Zero** and a **Kate** bomber. His other Pilots found it hard to come to grips with the enemy but they were all able to return to base. All were very low on fuel.

On the 15 March a Japanese force of 24 bombers and 25 **Zeros** attacked Darwin and intended to bomb the oil tanks. This time Clive had 27 **Spitfires** at 20,000 feet and they dived to attack the enemy. There was a huge dog-fight over Darwin. A Gunner on one of the AA Batteries wrote;

I had a front row seat as we were not able to fire our guns. There were dog-fights all over the town. Planes wheeling, diving, firing guns, pilots bailing out, planes on fire I can never forget that day.

6 **Zeros** and 9 bombers were shot down and 14 were damaged.

4 **Spitfires** were lost but 3 pilots parachuted to safety. The only one lost was piloted by Squadron Leader Ray Thorold-Smith, an experienced pilot and a very good friend of Clive.

In 1985, 43 years later, this **Spitfire** was found in the marshes on the Western side of Darwin. Ray Thorold –Smith was finally laid to rest.

On the 2 May 40 Bombers came in at 25,000 feet escorted by 35 **Zeros** at 30,000 feet. Clive took 30 **Spitfires** and tried to climb to 35,000 feet but the **Spitfires** struggled and used too much fuel. Clive had warned his Pilots to watch their fuel gauges but most were too keen to engage the enemy. The managed to shoot down 18 Japanese planes but many simply ran out of fuel and 14 **Spitfires** were lost with 10 Pilots killed.

Down in Melbourne, “experts” were saying;

Why had so many Spitfires been lost? Were the Pilots to blame?

Clive was furious and he wrote to AM Jones and asked him to stand up for his men.

AM Jones was silent.

It was now clear to Clive that the *Spitfire* had a few problems. When they had been shipped to Australia the glycol coolant had been drained from the engines and not replaced with a corrosion inhibitor. The pipes had corroded and when refilled they had developed leaks. Under strain the engines had overheated and some had exploded. Not a happy situation at 30,000 feet.

All these problems were repaired and on the 20 June a force of 32 bombers and 30 Zeros attacked Darwin and Clive took 30 Spitfires above them and shot down 8 bombers and 6 Zeros.

4 Spitfires were lost but all the pilots were saved.

One of Clive's big problems was his relationship with The Head of the RAAF, AM Jones.

Jones thought that Caldwell was arrogant and Caldwell thought that Jones had nothing to offer his Fighter Group.

However, after the success of the action on the 20 June he finally managed to send a notice of congratulations.

I have ordered that congratulations are to be conveyed to the Squadrons of No.1 Fighter Group for their meritorious action against the enemy Raid 55 on 29 June 1943.

With this came Clive's long overdue *DSO* with the following Citation;

By his coolness, skill and determination he has set a most excellent example to all Pilots in his Wing. His skills and judgment as a Leader are outstanding.

Wing Commander Caldwell has flown over 475, active, flying hours and carried out over 300 operational sorties. His personal score of enemy Aircraft destroyed had now passed 25 , 5 of which are Japanese shot down since his return to Australia . His courage, skill and outstanding ability as a Leader are an inspiration to his Wing and are worthy of the highest praise.

It should be noted that this was not signed by AM Jones but by Air Vice Marshall Bostock.

Clive was now promoted to the rank of Group Captain.

After the 20 June the Japanese were not keen to again bomb Darwin .Clive shot down his last enemy plane which was a *Dinah*, a fast reconnaissance plane, at 30,000 feet over Darwin.

The last Japanese raid was to be on 12 November 1943.

Clive's Wing had shot down 68 Japanese planes. They had lost 37 **Spitfires** , with 19 Australian and British Pilots killed in action.

In September 1943 Clive handed over Command of his Fighter Wing to Wing Commander Peter Jeffrey and returned to Australia to take Command of No.2 Operational Training Unit at Mildura. In 1943 Australia needed more trained Fighter Pilots and Mildura was very busy.

Clive and his wife moved into a flat in the town.

In April 1944 Clive was keen to see some action again and he applied to go back to Britain and train to fly the new *Mustang* Fighter.

AM Jones refused his request.

He then applied to go back to Darwin and fly with a Fighter Squadron. Despite AM Jones objections he was given Command of No. 80 Fighter Group which was 5 Squadrons now equipped with the new *Mark 8*

Spitfire. These planes were equipped with long-range detachable fuel tanks which gave them a much longer range and time in the air.

Clive now had the task of moving his wing of 200 aircraft and 1,000 ground staff North to the island of Morotai. This was done with only one *Spitfire* crashing on landing.

Fighting a War is thirsty work and alcohol was scarce on Morotai. There were lots of Americans on the Island and they were all paid very well and had nothing to spend it on. When Clive arrived he had a few bottles of Scotch under his seat but he had arranged for a Transport plane to follow him and carrying enough booze that would sink a battleship. Clive had paid 14 shillings a bottle of Scotch and he then sold it to the Yanks for \$10 a bottle.

He made a lot of money which he used to provide extra comforts for the Australian troops. The Yanks were happy and Clive's men were very pleased.

In April 1945 AM Jones called a meeting of his RAAF Commanders and told them of a plan to see a landing of AIF troops on Tarakan in Borneo. The idea was to capture the oil supplies and the airfield there.

As this plan was the idea of General Blamey and AM Jones the Commanders were not supposed to criticize it. Clive did not like the plan and said;

The landing will be a disaster as the Japanese are very strong and will not give up easily. The Oil wells and airfield have been bombed by the RAAF and will be useless. It will mean that there will be a lot of casualties for little gain.

AM Jones was very annoyed and he said;

Caldwell, Strategic Planning is not your business. You will go ahead with your orders.

Clive said;

I will only do it under protest and I wish it to be recorded as such.

Clive stormed out of the meeting. AM Jones was speechless. He had been humiliated before his Senior Officers. Caldwell must go.

On the 1 st. of May 1945, the landing at Tarakan went ahead, without Clive and it was a disaster with over 300 Australian Troops killed. As Clive had warned, there was no oil in the destroyed tanks and the airfield was so badly damaged that it was unable to be used.

Tarakan was a stepping stone to nothing but it was the end for Clive Caldwell.

What followed was to rock the RAAF to its foundations.

Group Captain Clive Caldwell was to be Court Martialled for trading liquor on Morotai. He was suspended from Command of his Fighter Wing and placed under House Arrest.

As the War was nearly over, Clive tried to resign his Commission and seven other senior Officers also tried to do the same. Every member of the RAAF thought that the charge was trivial as everyone on Morotai was buying and selling booze and Clive was not keeping the profits for himself.

Three of the RAAF Top Aces , Group Captain Arthur, Wing Commander Waddy, Wing Commander Gibbs, Wing Commander Ranger, Squadron Leaders Grace, Vanderfield and Harpham would also support Clive and they refused to fly and offered to resign their Commissions.

They all wrote to AM Jones saying that the RAAF was being used to attack targets that had no strategic value and were risking aircraft, wasting bombs and ammunition and wasting lives of Aircrew.

When AM Jones received the resignations he was shocked and said;

What the bloody hell is going on?

He was then told by the RAAF pilots ;

You are the Chief of Air Staff, why don't you go to Macarthur and thump the table and demand that we be taken to the Philippines and Japan?

Macarthur did not want Australians involved in the invasion of Japan. He only wanted them for mopping up operations.

The Court Martial took place after the war was over in January 1946. There were 5 charges of trading in liquor and Clive was found guilty of charges 1 and 4. Charges 2,3and 5 were dismissed.

Clive's Counsel J.E. Cassidy KC finished his case with;

Let us not kill our heroes. Let his reputation remain.

The sentence was;

Group Captain Caldwell be reduced in rank to that of Flight Lieutenant and dismissed from the RAAF.

Clive Caldwell left the Court bitter and humiliated he would write;

There never was any secret about me trading liquor at Morotai. By reason of my activities some 3,000 Australian troops lived in healthier circumstances, sanity and comfort.

Clive went into business with George Faulkner, who ran a Merino Property at Hadden Rig in NSW. They sold wool and wool products in Australia and overseas. It was a success and Clive retired in 1983.

He was a member of the Royal Automobile Club in Sydney and became a well known member and could be found at the bar on most days. Many former RAAF members paid their respects to a great hero of the War.

Clive Caldwell died in August 1994 . He was not given a State Funeral but many ex RAAF types were there to see him off.

At the time of his death there was only one airworthy *Spitfire* left in Australia of the 656 that had been sent to our shores. The final words came from several former *Spitfire* Pilots;

Dick Cresswell;

Clive Caldwell loved the publicity. Once he became the Top Ace in Australia he became the Medias leading light. All those victories, what an extraordinary man. A nice bloke who drank too much at the end.

Bobby Gibbs;

I knew him well. He was very sure of himself at all times. He was cranky about being Court Martialled. We all did it. What a farce. A few bottles of booze. It all seems so trivial after what we had been through.

Bruce Watson;

He was a fine Leader. A remarkable shot. He was a good bloke.

Members of the RAAF who served as Aircrew in WW2 have a high regard for Clive Caldwell. If you visit the War memorial in Canberra you will see a proud display of Clive Caldwell. There are details of his flying record and all of his decorations for bravery. You will also see his uniform with the four rings of the rank of Group Captain. There is also his cap with the gold braid of a Group Captain.

To members of RAAF Aircrew now in their 94 to 99 years Clive Caldwell will always be remembered as a Group Captain. ***The Top Ace.***

Who will ever remember Air Marshall George Jones?

(John Imrie, 20/10/2022)