

## *In the Fight: Australians and the war in Burma 1942-1945*

### Conference Presentation: Cricketers and Other Sportsmen

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#### **Introduction**

My chapter looks at the lives of some Australian sportsmen, particularly cricketers, who served in the Burma campaign. The life of Ross Gregory, the only Australian Test cricketer to die in WWII, is covered in some detail, while there are shorter profiles on three members of the RAAF cricket team that played two 'Tests' against the RAF in India in late 1944 and early 1945. In the second of these, the RAAF team was led by former Australian Test captain Victor Richardson. Later in 1945, after hostilities in the Pacific ended, Richardson provided assistance to the Australian Services Eleven during their tour of India. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the lives of three footballers, who had played at the elite level before the war, and subsequently became involved in the Burma campaign.

Before giving some more detail about the chapter, I should mention that I do not see it as exhaustive in terms of either its coverage of Australian sportsmen who served in the Burma campaign or the sporting activities that were organised for Australian servicemen in this theatre of the war.

My main professional interest has been the history of Australian education, particularly secondary education in Victoria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I am also interested in the history of Australian sport and have written previously on the development of school games in Victorian secondary boys' schools. Drawing on the English public school model, many secondary educators in Victoria, and elsewhere, believed that playing games not only produced fit young men, but also provided valuable lessons that helped build character, develop teamwork and promote leadership skills. For these educators, school games became even more important during WWI, because they believed participation in them provided good preparation for war service, which some even called 'the greater game'.

Although the horrors of WWI had probably convinced most Australians that war was not a game, the recruitment of talent sportsmen during WWII was still seen as advantageous to the war effort.

#### **Ross Gregory**

Ross Gregory was educated at Melbourne's Wesley College. Lawrence Adamson, Wesley's headmaster from 1902 to 1932, was a firm believer in the value of school games. He was also involved in the administration of major amateur sporting bodies in Melbourne and believed that the 'ideal' sportsman was an amateur because the moral lessons that sport provided were diminished when money became involved. During WWI, Adamson argued against continuing professional sporting competitions because they provided a monetary incentive for young men not to join the armed forces.

Although Adamson died shortly after Gregory started at Wesley, he would have admired Gregory's sporting ability and decision to serve his country when WWII broke out.

Gregory was a member of Wesley's undefeated first cricket teams in 1933 and 1934. At only 19, he was selected in the Victorian state team and, the following season, scored a century against the touring English team. Soon after, he was selected in the Australian team for the Fourth Test of the 1936/37 Ashes series.

Gregory shared a century partnership with Australian captain Don Bradman in the second innings of this game. He was retained for the Fifth Test, where he scored 80 runs in Australia's only innings, being caught by England's Hedley Verity off the bowling of Ken Farnes. Sadly, all three lost their lives in WWII.

Somewhat controversially, Gregory was not selected in the Australian team to tour England in 1938. He continued to play for Victoria but announced before the 1939/40 season that he was no longer be available due to work and study commitments. He had recently become engaged but he did not disclose that he had made himself available for military service shortly after war was declared.

Gregory joined the RAAF and began training as a navigator in Australia. He was subsequently sent to the UK, where he flew sorties over France and Germany in Wellington Bombers. He was posted to India in April 1942.

Cricket historian David Frith published a biography of Gregory in 2003. This includes extracts from Gregory's diary, started three days before he left Australia. Frith provides a detailed analysis of the crash of Gregory's Wellington Bomber in June 1942, which led to his death and that of five other crew members. The crash took place in what was then Indian Bengal and is now part of Bangladesh.

There are a number of possible reasons for the crash, including bad weather. Investigations carried out on Frith's behalf in Bangladesh in the early 2000s, including interviews with local villagers who had seen the crash when they were children, suggest there was more than one Wellington in the area at the time. This leads Frith to speculate that Gregory's plane may have been hit accidentally by a bomb released by one of the other Wellingtons.

### **'Tests' in India**

While there is no evidence Gregory played organised cricket while in the RAAF, matches involving Australian servicemen were played in England during the war, and games were organised in other places where Australians were stationed.

Amongst the games organised in India were two 'Tests' in New Delhi between teams representing the RAAF and RAF. Victor Richardson, who served as a Welfare Officer attached to the RAAF Liaison Office in New Delhi from early 1945, captained the RAAF in the second of these games.

The Australian War Memorial collection includes a number of photographs taken at this match. According to the description accompanying one of them: "Wide publicity was

given to the game and both days' play was broadcast by all India Radio. Many RAAF servicemen and former Australians domiciled in India watched the game.”

Unlike Richardson, the other RAAF team members were not former Australian or state representatives. Most, however, had played local cricket at a high standard. Three team members were Vic Guthrie, Ken Alcorn and Don Ross.

**Guthrie** joined the RAAF when war was declared and left for England in 1942. He flew Spitfires and Hurricanes in the UK and was later posted to India, where he undertook operations in Burma, India and Ceylon.

An accomplished cricketer, Guthrie scored 100 not out for the RAAF on the first day of the first ‘Test’ against the RAF.

At war’s end, Guthrie was sent to Japan , where he spent two years as part of the British Commonwealth Overseas Forces. He then served in various roles in Australia, before taking command of the newly-formed RAAF Transport Flight in Vietnam. He eventually settled in Canberra, joining the staff at Government House after discharge from the RAAF. He retired just before his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and died in 2015, aged 92.

**Alcorn** did initial pilot training in Australia before completing more advanced training in the UK, flying Wellington and Liberator bombers. He was transferred to India in October 1943.

Alcorn had played club cricket in Perth and Adelaide before the war, and while in England, participated in two matches for RAAF teams. In India, he played in both the RAAF-RAF ‘Tests’.

In 1944 Alcorn piloted one of the RAF Liberators, based in India, that bombed Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. These islands were occupied by the Japanese during the war. As the result of these long-haul actions, Alcorn was awarded the DFC.

Alcorn returned to Australia after the war. He moved to Melbourne, where he died in 2005.

**Ross** had been employed by the State Savings Bank of Victoria before joining the RAAF. He was sent to the UK, where he worked at the RAAF Overseas Headquarters in London. After officer training, he served briefly in Egypt before arriving in India in March 1944. He was attached to the RAAF Liaison Office in New Delhi, working in pay and accounts.

Ross, who had been a member of a Victorian Country Eleven that played the touring Englishmen in 1937, captained the RAAF team that took on the RAF at Lord’s in London in 1942. In India, he topped scored in the RAAF’s first innings in the second RAAF-RAF ‘Test’.

After the war, Ross became a State Bank manager and then studied savings banking in North America. He was appointed the Bank’s Assistant General Manager in 1962 and was promoted to General Manager in 1972. He later served as a Commissioner of the Bank for seven years from 1977. Ross died in 2010, just before his 98<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **The ‘Victory Tests’**

As had been the case after WWI, cricket matches between teams representing Australia and England were organised soon after hostilities in WWII ended. In England, an Australian Combined Services Eleven played five matches against England, the first commencing on 19 May 1945. These games have come to be known as the 'Victory Tests'.

The Australian Services Eleven was captained by Lindsay Hassett, who had toured England with the 1938 Australian team. During the war, he had served with the AIF in the Middle East and New Guinea. In mid-1944, he joined the Second AIF Reception Group in England, which was tasked with preparing for the repatriation of Australians who had been held prisoner in Europe. This group also included other talented cricketers. They were joined in the Services Eleven by RAAF and other Australian personnel who were still stationed in the UK.

The success of the 'Victory Tests' prompted Australian authorities to send the Services Eleven to India and Ceylon on their way home. The team arrived in India in October 1945 and, during their tour, played three matches against Indian representative sides. As Australian cricket authorities had mostly ignored the sub-continent before this, the Australians had the opportunity to play against some of India's best cricketers for the first time. An Indian representative team later toured Australia during the 1947/48 summer season.

Victor Richardson was not a member of the Services team, but assisted them while they were in India. Although the tour proved arduous for the players, they were generally well looked after by their Indian hosts. After a game in Ceylon, the team returned to Australia, where they played matches against Australian state teams.

### **Three Footballers**

Cricketers were, of course, not the only Australian sportsmen to serve in the Burma campaign.

For example, '**Ted**' **Regan**, who was a member of the Essendon team that was defeated in the 1941 VFL grand final, lost his life in Burma. Regan had joined the RAAF in 1941 and, after basic training in Victoria, received further training in Rhodesia. He then went to India as a Blenheim bomber pilot.

Regan died in July 1943, when the Blenheim he was co-piloting was shot down by the Japanese. It was part of a six-aircraft raid on the Burmese town of Ramree.

'**Pup**' **Raymond** studied medicine at the University of Sydney. He also made his name as a rugby union player, being selected in 13 international matches for the NSW 'Waratahs' in the early 1920s.

Raymond was a Rhodes Scholar and continued medical studies at Oxford University. He gained specialist qualifications and returned to Australia in the late 1920s. He then joined the medical branch of the RAF and served in India and Burma. He was in charge of a casualty clearing station during the retreat from Burma by British forces in 1942.

Raymond was later in charge of a surgical unit in North Africa before becoming assistant director of medical services to the Fourth Indian Division in Italy and Greece. After the war, he returned to specialist practice in Sydney, where he died in 1964.

**Harley Stumm** studied Arts and Law at the University of Queensland. He was a member of the Combined Australian Universities' rugby union team that toured Japan in 1934.

Stumm was also a Rhodes Scholar, studying Law at Oxford. In addition, he joined the University Air Squadron and learned to fly. Soon after returning to Brisbane to get married, he was ordered to RAF Headquarters in Singapore. Following the fall of Singapore, he served in various parts of the Pacific, flying many raids against the Japanese. Eventually posted to India, he carried out operations over Burma. As a result, Stumm was awarded the DFC. He lost his life in a flying accident in May 1944.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, returning to Ross Gregory. He was like many young Australians who chose to join the 'fight' in WWII: he was just starting adult life, he had chosen a career and was looking forward to marriage and possibly starting a family. Sadly, the war deprived him of the chance to develop further his extraordinary talent as a cricketer. How much fame he could have won on the cricket field will never be known.