

## *'In the Fight'* Conference

### **The AIR WAR over LAND and SEA**

**5.1** Twin brothers, RAAF Warrant Officers John and Alfred Payne, flew Spitfires with 615 Squadron 'Churchill's Own. Etc. (Australian War Memorial SUK14088)

1 After the capture of Rangoon and the ejection of British forces from Burma, the goals of the Burma Campaign for the Allied forces became two-fold, firstly to recapture Burma and especially its key ports at Rangoon; and secondly, to continue to supply the Nationalist Chinese forces either by road or air. It soon became apparent that properly equipped and deployed air forces were critical to achieving both aims. Australian airmen in the Burma theatre, unlike the UK or Middle East, did not form into Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadrons, but were absorbed into RAF squadrons, joining the multi-national aircrews from the UK, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Some Australian aircrew, who had joined the RAF in England at the outbreak of the war, were already in India and Burma in 1941 with their squadrons. Later hundreds more would arrive, after training through the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) and also moving with their RAF squadrons to India. A small number of RAAF men flew with the fledgling Indian Air Force and there was even an Australian who flew Tiger Moths in the tiny Burma Volunteer Air Force (BVAf).<sup>1</sup> Australian airmen served in every type of aircraft and role in the theatre which stretched from Ceylon to India to Burma to China and included bombing raids into Vietnam, Malaysia and the Indian Ocean islands. It was widely recognised that the main cause of casualties, was the wild, fierce, and unpredictable monsoonal weather, which often curtailed all flying operations between the months of May and October. In fierce monsoon winds some planes even had their paint stripped off. After wings continued to fall off during flight, the famous wooden de Havilland Mosquito fighter plane had to be painted silver, as the dark camouflage paint had allowed infra-red rays to weaken the wood glue in Burma's unforgiving tropical climate. Aircrew also had to cope with being accommodated in temporary grass huts, trying to avoid malaria, deadly snakes, wild animals, monsoonal rains and storms, all pervasive mud and or dust, scant home leave, jungle living and continual redeployments trying to keep up with operations.

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**5.2** RAAF airmen Flying Officer Frances Hodgson and Pilot Officer William Gerard, serving with 117 Squadron RAF are pictured dropping supplies, etc. (Australian War Memorial ART24310)

By late 1944 there were over 1000 Australian aircrew in the theatre and in addition to combat roles, they filled non-operational posts in headquarters, administrative units, in training roles and as test and ferry pilots. Some acted as air-ground liaison officers with Major General Orde Wingate's Chindits' deep penetration columns well behind enemy lines. They moved with the columns with small teams of RAF radio operators and brought in both close air support and most importantly, air drops of supplies. They also shared the dangers of firefights against the Japanese, crossed fast flowing rivers, struggled to obtain food and to maintain their health. In the second Chindit operation in 1944, one Australian air coordinator, Flight Lieutenant Harry R. C. Houlgrave, single-handedly managed the jungle airfield and hundreds of night and day insertions and extractions by RAF and USAAF transports and gliders at the largest Chindit base, 'Broadway'. Australians served in air transport squadrons, and some RAAF Dakota crews flew their unarmed supply aircraft over the Hump from northern India into China; a hazardous 5-800km flight which had to cross the Himalayas over mountains of up to 18,000 feet. They had no reliable charts, little radio navigation and perpetually bad weather. The Hump route became known as the 'aluminium trail' as nearly 600 transport aircraft crashed along the way between 1942 – 45, due to unpredictable weather, mechanical failures, pilot error or Japanese fighters. Air-transport squadrons in Burma grew in number as the value of air drops of supplies to units in difficult terrain was recognised, as well as air-landed general cargo and reinforcements to forward airfields, and the evacuation of casualties in return. Cargo could be everything from saboteurs to secret agents to mules to goats to money to arms to food to fuel or VIP prisoners. Live goats were parachuted to Indian troops for food and pack mules were very cantankerous passengers. One mule even had to be shot mid-flight after it got loose and began to run around the cargo hold! Australians, also flew small, unarmed aircraft to pick up individual casualties from operations well behind enemy lines.

2

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**5.3** Killed in a flying accident on 14 August 1944 was Australian pilot RAAF Warrant Officer Keith J Knodler of 90 Squadron RAF. Burial in Bangalore, India. (Australian War Memorial PO2490.001)

A worn and faded red covered volume marked 'Casualties – India' is held in the archives of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) Canberra<sup>2</sup> and this register was studiously maintained by the RAAF Liaison Office (RAAFLO) in Delhi, India. It contains a monthly listing of the RAAF casualties, and hand-written in either blue or black fountain pen ink, is the name, rank, serial number, the date of the casualty and the category of the casualty. The category of casualty included 'Killed, Missing, Missing Believed Killed, Presumed Dead, Missing Position Unknown, or Seriously Injured,' the latter wounds being described in some detail. Deaths from malaria and other illness were recorded, along with fatalities from vehicle accidents, drownings, and sadly, a Blenheim pilot, who took his own life. A companion volume at the AWM also lists the RAAF Deaths and Burials.<sup>3</sup> Deceased aircrew whose bodies were recovered had their burial details recorded as well as the original location of the crash.

**3**

The position of those lost over the sea, or whose bodies were unable to be recovered from the Burma jungle, was recorded with the approximate latitude and longitude. Fellow pilots often reported seeing an aircraft crash into the jungle and flying over the scene and seeing absolutely no trace of the downed plane or crew. The jungle had just swallowed them up. After the war, Grave Recovery Units were able to retrieve some of these bodies from the jungle for reburial in a CWGC cemetery. Sadly, a few of those Australian airmen who had originally been buried in clearly marked temporary graves at crash sites, were unable to be traced again post-war, so vigorous had been the return of jungle growth after the ravages of war and monsoon floods had passed. Those lost at sea or in mountainous jungle terrain were very rarely recovered. Finally, most of the RAAF's 320 dead and missing in the Burma theatre were suffered by causes other than enemy action. Pilot error, 'friendly fire,' mechanical failure, terrible weather, misadventure, accidents, 'other causes' and disease all contributed to the death toll.

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**5.4** One of the most decorated pilots of the Burma Campaign was Flt/Lt Charles Crombie, DSO, DFC who destroyed 12 enemy aircraft and 4 probables. (Australian War Memorial SUK11692)

The general commanding 14th Army in Burma, Lieutenant General Sir William Slim, fervently believed that courage was the foundation of all virtues as it allowed leaders to inspire confidence in others, even in the face of challenges and moments of uncertainty.<sup>4</sup>

Australian airmen received over 150 honours and awards during the Burma Campaign which included five Distinguished Service Orders (DSO), 99 Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC), six Distinguished Flying Medals (DFM), one Member of the British Empire (MBE) and 36 Mentioned in Despatches (MiD). The stories of just two of these RAAF awardees can help to illustrate that courage in leadership. Flight Lieutenant Charles A. Crombie DSO DFC, of 176 Squadron RAF, received both his decorations in 1943, in recognition of his gallantry on night operations in the United Kingdom, Middle East, and India. In particular, the DSO award acknowledged his bravery in Burma after downing two Japanese aircraft as his aeroplane caught fire. He ordered his crewman to bail out and then continued the fight against a third Japanese plane, but eventually he had to parachute to safety as his own aircraft became completely engulfed in flames.<sup>5</sup>

Squadron Leader Joseph E. Morphett, DFC and Bar, commanded 355 Squadron RAF in 1943 and 1944 and was widely regarded as the finest Liberator pilot in the RAAF. He received his DFC for an action in February 1943, when one of his engines failed on an extended bombing mission and he restarted it and flew home. In June 1944, he was awarded a Bar to his DFC after leading a bombing mission to Mandalay in a Liberator bomber. An engine failed, but Morphett flew to friendly territory as the remaining three engines had also developed problems. He ordered his crew to parachute to safety, while he remained at the controls until they were all clear. By now the aircraft was too low to allow for his own successful parachute descent and so in the darkness, Morphett attempted to land the aircraft, even though by now all the engines had stopped. The bomber crashed, yet Morphett somehow survived and laconically described the aftermath in a report. <sup>6</sup> I put the aircraft down in a

**4**

## *'In the Fight'* Conference **The AIR WAR over LAND and SEA**

clearing in the jungle at 01.30 hours and in pouring rain, hit some trees, and remembered nothing more until late in the morning when I woke up to find I was lying in a swamp, suffering from a fractured skull, two fractured legs, a broken shoulder, and a hole in my ribs.<sup>7</sup> Sir William Slim's view that courage was the foundation of all virtues was no better personified in the bravery and leadership of Charles Crombie and Joseph Morphett and their fellow RAAF aircrew in the Burma Campaign.

Page | 5

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<sup>1</sup> Moremon, J., *Burma and India 1941-1945*, DVA, 2006, p4.

<sup>2</sup> AWM 66/261/26/1/5.

<sup>3</sup> AWM 66/261/26/1/6.

<sup>4</sup> Slim, W. *Courage and Other Broadcasts*, Sharpe Books, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> NAA A9300, 5374060. The Distinguished Service Order (DSO) is awarded for 'meritorious or distinguished service by officers of the armed forces during wartime, typically in actual combat, serving under fire' and usually awarded to those above the army rank of captain.

<sup>6</sup> *London Gazette*, No. 36560, 13 June 1944.

<sup>7</sup> NAA A9695/1094. Interview with Squadron Leader J. E. Morphett, India, 9 September 1945.