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THE ANGRY SKY

AUSTRALIA'S AIR WAR OVER EUROPE



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Air Warriors

Cyril Ayris

I have always been interested in the personal stories of the young men and women who were plucked from their everyday lives to risk everything to defend king and country in a time of war. Probably because I find it so hard to imagine.

It's why I derived so much pleasure from writing the biographies of four World War 2 servicemen, three of them pilots, the other an army doctor who pioneered surgery for tuberculosis without anaesthetic and within the confines of a German POW camp.

But today it's all about airmen so I'm very happy to bring you the necessarily abbreviated stories of two young pilots whose hair-raising experiences were probably considered at the time, to be nothing out of the ordinary.

My first book, 'Kittyhawk Pilots' tells the story of Perth teenager Stan Watt and his remarkable war with 450 Squadron.

Equipped with Curtis P-40 Kittyhawks, and based in North Africa, 450 was initially designated a fighter squadron, but when the Germans began their retreat from Africa and up through Italy, its principle role became ground attack in support of land forces.

In Italy the squadron was often employed on cab rank duty. This called for the pilots to circle battle grounds, ready to be called in by ground-based controllers to attack targets impeding the army's advance. These tactics were so successful the commander of the German Army in Italy reflected after the war: 'The effectiveness of the fighter bombers lay in that their mere presence over the battlefield paralysed every movement.'

However, the German propaganda broadcaster Lord Haw Haw saw the Australian airmen differently. He branded the squadron: 'A band of Australian mercenaries whose harassing tactics are easily beaten off by the Luftwaffe.' The fact that the Luftwaffe had by now all but disappeared from African and Italian skies rather spoilt his line. However the squadron seized upon it and gleefully adopted the nick-name Desert Harassers, which has stuck to this day.

Stan had meanwhile enlisted in the RAAF two days after his 18th birthday and had learned to fly in Geraldton and southern England before being transferred to North Africa in 1944 for training as a fighter pilot.

He was a bit disappointed when he got there – the Luftwaffe was long gone and the serious fighting was now in Italy. This meant there was no real call for fighter pilots. They were now looking for pilots trained in dive bombing, to attack German ground troops and installations in their retreat up the Italian peninsula.

It was at this stage, while still in North Africa, that Stan was taught how to fly Kittyhawks. When I say "taught how to fly", the plane was a single seater and there was no link trainer. They simply told them how to do it and sent them up to work it out for themselves.

The Kittyhawk had been used as a fighter but, because the fortunes of the war had changed, it was fitted with three bomb racks (one under each wing and a third under the fuselage) and thus converted into a dive bomber.

Stan fell in love with the aeroplane. It had a new and more powerful Allison engine and was armed with six 0.5 inch machineguns, three along each wing. It was about as fast as a Hurricane, very manoeuvrable and wonderfully stable. It had excelled in combat over North Africa – in fact more than 800 Australian pilots flew Kittyhawks in World War 2. It was to the Australian pilots, what the Spitfire was to the British. That at least was how Stan described the aeroplane to me. Other appraisals of it were, to say the least, less flattering.

No matter – Stan revelled in its sheer power: he skimmed low over desert sands, he climbed vertically with the sun shining full on his face, he threw the aeroplane into gut-wrenching turns and pulled out of screaming dives so that the G-forces seemed to be tearing his body apart.

Stan decided at the outset that he would model his flying on similar tactics that had been adopted by the squadron's most famous pilot, Squadron Leader Bobby Gibbes who had been recommended for a Victoria Cross. Gibbes' tactic in a dog fight was brutally simple: He flew straight at the enemy aircraft on collision course, his assumption being that the German's nerve would crack before his and that he would take evasive action. The only flaw in the plan was that he might one day meet up with a German pilot who liked to do the same thing.

The action which resulted in Bobby Gibbes being recommended for a VC reads something like a Boys' Own Adventure. It was pure Biggles.

It happened in Libya. Gibbes was leading six Kittyhawks on a reconnaissance flight over an Italian airfield appropriately named Hun. Hun squatted near the start of the Sahara Desert in stony country, 300 kilometres from 450's base. The allies intended taking Hun and they wanted as much information on the airfield's defences as possible.

After having a look at Hun, Gibbes' orders were to continue south for further reconnaissance in case there were more enemy lurking in the desert.

The six Kittyhawks arrived over Hun to find a number of aircraft parked around the perimeter. With the element of surprise in their favour, and unable to resist the temptation, all six Kittyhawks peeled off and shot the hell out of the airfield.

Gibbes, who went in first, set one aircraft ablaze with his first burst of machinegun fire. Continuing across the airfield at little more than head height he opened fire on a Savoia 79 (a three-engine Italian bomber) which must have been loaded with bombs and ammunition because it exploded with so much force it almost blew Gibbes out of the air.

The six Kittyhawks re-formed over the airfield and, because they had encountered no flak, they went in again. This time there was flak. However, they pressed home the second attack, shot up more aircraft and again re-formed unscathed.

That should have been the end it. However, a pilot who had only recently joined the squadron peeled off for another attack. He was followed by his number 2, then two more pilots decided to join in the fun. Gibbes' orders to pull away were ignored.

One of the Kittyhawks took a direct hit from flak and plunged into the ground killing the pilot

A second pilot, Pilot officer Rex Bayley, radioed that his engine had been hit and he was preparing to make a forced landing.

Gibbes, watching all this from above, followed Bayley's progress as he quickly lost altitude. The country, he noticed was stony, craggy and criss-crossed with wadis.

Incredibly, Bayley landed safely about 1½ kilometres from the now-smouldering airfield. Gibbes radioed that he would come down and pick him up; Bayley said don't ... the country's impossible.

But Gibbes found a relatively clear strip of desert 5 kilometres away from the downed Kittyhawk. He told Bayley to start running towards it and ordered the remaining Kittyhawks to attack any Italians who tried to reach the crash site.

Gibbes went down, cleared a wadi, and landed ever so gingerly in the stony desert. He then taxied towards the crash site.

When his way was finally blocked by a second wadi, he turned the Kittyhawk round, switched off the engine and waited for Bayley.

He filled in time by removing his long range tank to reduce his payload. When there was still no sign of Bayley, he walked 300 metres back along his "runway", removing some of the bigger stones. He marked the end of his runway by tying his white handkerchief to a camel thorn bush on the edge of the first wadi.

All this was closely followed by the four Kittyhawks circling above.

Bayley finally appeared, close to exhaustion. Gibbes threw his parachute away and told Bayley to climb into the cockpit. Gibbes jumped in after him and sat in his lap.

He started the Kittyhawk's engine, stood on the brakes and opened the throttle wide. The engine howled, but still Gibbes stood on the brakes. The aeroplane was shuddering like a jelly in a cyclone before he released the brakes and the Kittyhawk surged forward.

But the ground was too stony, the runway too short, the two pilots too heavy. The white handkerchief came into view, the plane was still on the ground.

The wadi was about to swallow the Kittyhawk when Gibbes pulled desperately on the stick. Reluctantly the wheels rose a few inches from the ground and the Kittyhawk and its two sweating pilots soared across the wadi.

But they were not high enough. The port wheel clipped the opposite bank and was torn away.

Another ridge appeared dead ahead. They cleared it by inches.

Slowly they gained altitude and, escorted by the other Kittyhawks, flew back to base ... where Gibbes landed on his one starboard wheel.

The raid on the Italian airfield had destroyed two JU-52s, two Savoia 79s, a JU-88, a Messerschmitt 110, a CR 42, an ME 126 and two gliders. No enemy aeroplane was left undamaged.

Stan Watts quickly became acquainted with this story. Little wonder that he decided to model his flying on Bobby Gibbes.

Having mastered the Kittyhawk, Sergeant pilot Watts was sent to Sinello in Italy to begin new and advanced training in dive bombing.

Dive bombing training involved climbing to 8500 feet before making a wing-over dive towards an imaginary target. As the aeroplanes approached their target, the pilots fired their machine guns to keep their imaginary enemy's heads down. They dived at about 60 degrees at 350 knots, releasing their bombs when they were within 1500 feet of their target. When they had perfected the technique they were told what to expect in the way of enemy resistance. I think the best way to describe that is to read direct from the book:

The first antiaircraft defences will be 88mm shells fired from guns usually grouped in fours. The shells are primed to explode at predetermined heights and will appear as fiery orange balls surrounded by large puffs of black smoke. These will almost certainly be fired at you before you begin your diving attack and they will follow you down to 4000 feet. A direct hit will knock you out of the air; even a near miss will rock your aeroplane. After 4000 feet you can expect to receive 40mm cannon which explode with a small brown puff of smoke. This is rapid fire ammunition which forms a dangerous barrier, easily capable of bringing you down. This will continue to 2000 feet. Then 20mm cannon will open up. It is also heavily concentrated and is the most dangerous because you will be too low to recover from a direct hit. Then, as you close in on your target, you will receive small arms fire.

The defence against this barrage of exploding steel was a combination of speed, manoeuvrability, the Kittyhawks' own machine guns, a cool head and skilful flying. Speed was the essence of a successful dive bomb attack. Strike fast, get away fast. Always weaving. Weaving when you start your dive, holding steady for no more than a second while you line up to release your bombs, weaving while climbing to safety.

Stan's flying assessment was stamped 'above average' and on 11 July 1944 he reported to 450 Squadron in the Tuscany village of Crete (not to be confused with the island). The squadron had been charged with attacking battle-hardened Panzer troops on the Italian mainland.

Stan's first active operation was a dive bombing raid on a factory west of Arezzo.

He took off with one 500-pound bomb slung under each wing. His Kittyhawk cleared the mesh strip, and dropped into a quarry before gaining height. The airstrip, he said, was too short and ended at the edge of the quarry.

He formed up with the rest of the squadron and, within an hour, they were over their target. Squadron Leader Jack Gleeson made a low level pass to confirm the target, climbed to join the waiting squadron and gave the order to attack.

Stan peeled off in a steep dive on the factory. To his immense relief there was no flak. He reached down to two toggles. One would arm his bombs, the other release them. In his excitement he pulled the wrong toggle, releasing both unarmed bombs 1500 metres short of his target.

Realising his mistake he opened up with his six machine guns and was pleased to see glass and splintered tiles and concrete erupt into the air.

Nevertheless he had completed his first mission and when he got back to Crete the trestle tables were erected under a tree and flagons of red wine were produced. It cost threepence a litre.

Stan had been with the squadron less than a fortnight when it launched its most successful raid of the war.

Intelligence had established that the Germans had an important training camp in a thick wood east of Arezzo. Trucks, tanks and ammunition and fuel depots were also reported to be hidden in the wood.

The target was deemed so important, twelve 450 Squadron Kittyhawks were committed to the raid. Stan was flying one of them.

They took off at 10.30am on 21 July 1944 carrying heavy payloads: one 500 pound bomb under each wing and a third under the fuselage. They clawed their way to 8500 feet, flying like pregnant ducks, maintaining radio silence.

After a zigzag flight across northern Italy they arrived over Arezzo. One by one the Kittyhawks dived on the wood dropping their bombs on target. They reassembled at 6000 feet then made another run at treetop level, emptying their machineguns into the foliage.

The wood was so dense they could not see what damage they had done but a few days later the squadron received a congratulatory message from the Army: they had silenced the enemy's mortars, killed 140 soldiers and destroyed 55 vehicles including 14 tanks.

And so Stan's war continued with bombing raids on factories, towns, bridges, railways and depots.

On one occasion he and his mates were at a dance in Castaglione when they were ordered to scramble to attack two trains which were thought to be carrying German troops. The Kittyhawks were armed with one 500-pound bomb and 12 anti-personnel 20—pounders.

They found the trains (actually, there were three), travelling one behind the other. They launched their attack through 80mm flak, then heavy 20mm shells began exploding to left and right. The pilots released their bombs, soared out of range then came in for a second attack, raking the already blazing trains with machinegun fire. Forty minutes later they were back at the dance, perfectly groomed, hair still Brylcreamed.

Squadron 450's war continued through summer, autumn then winter. Many pilots were killed. The Gothic Line was dive bombed, The Gustav Line fell, the allied advance was inexorable.

When Rome fell, four Squadron pilots piled into a Jeep and drove into the Eternal City – where a priest beckoned them into the Vatican, led them along corridors into a private chamber where the Pope personally thanked them for liberating the city.

By March 1945 Stan had won commissioned rank, flown 198 hours on 123 sorties and dropped 165000 pounds of bombs. A party was thrown and he was clapped out of the squadron.

Having completed his tour of duty, Stan was given a choice: Return to Egypt to teach flying to Egyptian airmen or join MORU – Mobile Operations Room Unit. Stan chose the latter and, after a week's training, he began what was arguably the most dangerous and certainly the most exhausting chapter of his war.

His job, in a nutshell, was to lead an 18-man squad on the ground, which would operate almost under the barrels of German artillery, calling in air strikes where they were most needed.

They lived off the land, they rarely got more than a couple of hours uninterrupted sleep, they could not bathe, they went down with scurvy and their senses were battered 24/7 by the crashing of German artillery. It was bitterly cold, the ground was frozen and there was a constant danger of being caught by the Germans and arbitrarily shot. And because they were on the front line, they saw the raw uncensored effects of sustained bombing. Again, I read from the book:

The noise from the German guns was horrendous – indescribably horrendous. Brilliant flashes lit the sky, black smoke billowed, the ground trembled under the impact of exploding shells. Trees stood stark and naked, their foliage stripped by gunfire. There were no birds, buildings stood gaunt and shattered, their rooms obscenely exposed by blown out walls. There was mud everywhere, churned by tanks and trucks and the marching feet of thousands. Overhead the dive bombers came screaming in, releasing their deadly loads on to a world where there seemed to be nothing left that was worth destroying. One day we went to a German base that had just been dive bombed and found an estimated 800 to 1000 bodies hanging from vehicles, out of shattered windows, sprawled in the roads. Sometimes we were walking through something resembling a charnel house. It was a world of madness in which reason had been replaced by the most appalling vengeance imaginable.

He led his MORU section for six weeks after which he was admitted to a field hospital, infested with lice, suffering malnutrition and dermatitis – and a neck injury which he had sustained when he stood on the brakes of a half-track he had commandeered, and was hit on the back of the head by his iron bed.

It was a rather inglorious end to a remarkable four years in the service of his country. He was discharged a veteran, aged 22.

The subject of my next book was Spitfire pilot Russell Leith, a Perth man, born in Fiji to Australian parents, who won the Order of Australia and Distinguished Flying Cross.

Russell was the exact opposite of Stan. Where Stan was harum scarum and constantly in trouble for one misdemeanour or another, Russell was punctilious in everything he did. For instance, in his four years in the war in Europe, he wrote home at least once a week. His family kept the letters and when I started work on his biography I was given access to all 230 of them.

However, the two men had one thing in common: put them in the cockpit of a Spitfire or a Kittyhawk and they would fly them to the very edge of their performance in a manner which, to me anyway, bordered on the foolhardy.

We called Russell's book "DUTY DONE". Time doesn't permit the telling of the whole story – anymore than with "KITTYHAWK PILOTS" – but I will tell relate a couple of yarns which may give a taste of what life was like in the war-torn skies of England and France up to and immediately after D-Day.

After extensive training in the United States and Britain, Russell was posted to 453 Squadron which, like 450, would establish quite a name for itself.

Russell – whose nickname was Rusty – was posted to 453 on 8 July 1942 when the Squadron and its Spitfires was based at Drem, east of Edinburgh. They later moved to southern England where they patrolled the channel, engaged the Luftwaffe and flew escort to bombers on their way to France, Belgium and Holland. The Battle of Britain was over, the air force was on the offensive.

One of the tactics employed by the allies was the staging of 'rhubarbs'. Precisely how they came to be called 'rhubarbs' has always remained a mystery to me. Pulling off a 'Rhubarb' involved flying Spitfires deep into enemy territory, strafing targets with machine gun and cannon fire, then hightailing it back to base before the Germans had a chance to retaliate. It was very cheeky.

On 25 March 1943, Squadron 453 was based in Southend near the mouth of the Thames. It was cold, it was damp and the cloud was so low there was no chance of flying. Russell was bored.

He had an idea and, presenting himself to his flight commander and, accompanied by his mate Flt Sgt Bill Morath, he suggested a rhubarb run into Belgium to shoot up a few land targets. The flight commander refused permission but, after considerable pressure from the two young airmen, they were given a reluctant go-ahead.

An hour later two heavily armed Spitfire Tens lifted off from Southend, Russell in the lead, Bill Morath a little behind and to his right. The success of the mission would depend on flying at near-zero altitude to avoid detection by enemy radar.

The two aeroplanes flashed across the beach dunes and headed across the channel almost skimming the waves. They were flying at an economical 290 kilometres an hour, giving them more time over their targets.

The two pilots were pleased to see cloud still down to 1000 feet; it meant there was little chance of being attacked from above. It was exhilarating flying which called for maximum concentration.

Thirty minutes after take-off the Belgium town of Blankenberge appeared through the mist. Russell and Bill eased back slightly on their control columns, the Spitfires roared over beachfront buildings, cleared the town and dropped back to treetop level.

They saw people looking up at them in alarm. Cattle and sheep fled.

'Power lines ahead,' warned Bill Morath.

'Seen them,' replied Russell. The Spitfires lifted a little, cleared the lines and returned to zero altitude.

'Bill spoke again: 'Did you see that boy and girl waving at us from the canal bank?'

Two cargo barges appeared dead ahead. Both Spitfires raked them with machinegun and cannon fire.

They followed a railway line east of Bruges. A train appeared. They opened fire on it, steam billowed from its ruptured tank. More deadly fire into a railway station.

They flew into West Flanders and northern France attacking every form of transport that could be used by the enemy.

Finally, out of ammunition, they headed for the French coast, dropped to wave-top level and re-crossed the channel. Ninety minutes after take-off they were on their way to the local for a celebratory drink.

The air war intensified, and Russell became engaged in numerous dog fights in which he was credited with 2½ kills, all Messerschmitts.

As part of Operation Overlord, and operating from Ford on the English Channel coast, 453 Squadron flew 47 sorties over the Normandy beachhead. In that month of June 1945, it flew 1100 hours on 700 operational sorties. On 9 July, twelve 453 Spitfires took on more than 40 Messerschmitt 109s, destroying four and damaging five.

It was not all one-sided. In the first six weeks, six of the Squadrons pilots were killed and more were wounded.

But they were itching to cross the channel and on 25 June their wish was granted. They flew to landing ground B11 near the small coastal town of Longues-sur-Mer, a stone's throw from Arromanche, and set up headquarters under a large oak tree. 453 Squadron thus became the only Australian unit to operate on the ground in Normandy as part of Operation Overlord.

Forty years later Russell would fight a five-year war with Canberra bureaucrats to have the Australian flag flown alongside those of other nations at the Caen Museum for Peace. He won the battle and the flag flies there to this day.

July 24, 1945 was a warm sunny day with little cloud. It was late afternoon when the squadron was scrambled to intercept enemy aircraft which had been located by radar.

In fairness to Russell, I should preface what happened next by explaining that on the previous day, Russell had been flying alongside a close friend, Kenny Kinross, when Kinross was attacked and shot down by an American Thunderbolt. This, despite the fact that all allied aircraft had bold black and white identification bands on their wings and fuselages. Kenny Ross stood no chance, he was killed.

The very next morning, Russell and another friend, Clarrie Sweeney, attacked a German convoy. Russell saw Clarrie misjudge his dive and plunge into the ground. A worrying factor was that Clarrie and Kenny had been particularly close friends which raised the question in Russell's mind, at last, as to whether he had really misjudged that dive.

It was only hours later that the squadron was scrambled to intercept those enemy aircraft I mentioned earlier. Russell was wearing flying boots and he had wrapped a silk scarf round his neck. The day being warm, he decided to fly without a jumper.

The Squadron had gained the enemy's estimated altitude when Russell saw an ME 109, slightly higher and heading east into German-occupied territory. Russell opened his throttle wide and gave chase. He eventually got behind the enemy aircraft and, when he was within 150 metres, he opened fire. The ME 109 seemed to disintegrate and Russell watched it plunge into the ground. The pilot did not bale out.

Russell was feeling rather pleased with himself when the Spitfire's engine coughed apologetically and died. It had run out of petrol. Russell, carried away by the thrill of the chase, (possibly dwelling on the loss of his two friends) had failed to watch his fuel gauge and was now over enemy-occupied France with nowhere to go but down.

There were two options: bale out or find somewhere to land. He was circling down, the only sound the rush of wind, when he saw two long narrow fields in line with a hedge between them. It would have to do.

He radioed his squadron and told them what was happening, adding: 'I got a Hun though.'

'Well done, Rusty,' was the reply. 'Good luck old chap.'

He flopped the spitfire on to the first field doing 160 km/h. It raced towards the hedge. Russell pulled back on the control column, the Spitfire answered its last command, rose lazily over the hedge, whopped down on the other side and came to a skidding halt not far from a concrete water tower.

Russell unhooked, grabbed his escape kit, climbed from the cockpit, leaned back inside, pressed the explosive button destroying the identification friend or foe radio device, and began running back towards the hedge.

There were bursts of machine gun fire. He flattened himself in the long grass, waiting. When there were no more shots, he regained his feet, made the hedge, climbed through and ran as fast as he could.

He crossed a field where villagers were raking hay. They ignored him, offering no help, but not raising the alarm either.

Russell was given shelter in a farmhouse near the village of Saint Philbert Des Champs, not far from the town of Lesieux, and spent the next four weeks either on the run or being looked after by members of the French underground.

He slept in haystacks, hedgerows and farm sheds; he begged or stole food; he walked and sometimes he used bicycles, always one step of the Gestapo who were there in force looking for traitors and downed airmen.

He was being sheltered in an attic with two other airmen when a detail of German soldiers arrived and set up a machinegun post under the attic window, to protect their retreating forces. It was three days before they left, and the three airmen could step outside for a breath of air.

A couple of days later there was merry shouting and singing. Paris had been liberated, the Germans had gone.

Within a week Russell had found his way back to the Squadron where the adjutant said, "Good Lord, Rusty. Where the hell have you been?"

Fast forward 55 years. Russell must have suffered a bout of wartime nostalgia because he returned to France, intent on finding the field where he landed his Spitfire, and the villages where he was sheltered.

He found the field. The hedge was still there, so was the water tower. He met people who remembered his crash landing and he asked if anybody had souvenired anything from his Spitfire. If they had, he said, he would be most appreciative if they would let him have it.

He returned to Australia and commissioned me to write his book. We had just started our first interview when there was a knock on the door. Waiting outside was a delivery man with a huge package securely wrapped in brown paper.

Russell opened the package with no idea what it could be. It was the Spitfire's Perspex canopy.

What had happened was that a local farmer had waited till Russell had made his escape, and the German had gone, before racing across to the Spitfire armed with a screwdriver. He unscrewed the canopy, took it back to his farm and had been growing tomatoes under it 55 years.

My wife and I went to France on holiday at the time I was writing Russell's biography and we too found the field where he crashed his Spitfire and a village where he was looked after by the French Underground.

I was so pleased and excited at locating the place I found a phone box in the village square and rang Russell to tell him.

'You remember the church?' I asked. 'I'm right opposite.'

Russell seemed a little disinterested – which was unlike him – and I asked if there was anything wrong.

'No, there's nothing wrong,' he said a little testily. 'It's just that 2.30 in the morning here.'

Sadly, Stan and Russell have passed away. But working with them was something I will never forget. And I will never be able to understand how those young men could fly Spitfires and Kittyhawks in aerial combat, return to base, then go to a dance or the pictures – and regard it as all being in a day's work.