

Australians at No. 5 Veterans of This War

Several Fought in Libyan, Syrian, and New Guinea Campaigns

Expositor Toronto Canada c1944

By M. A. P.

More than three months of fighting with the Australian Imperial Forces in 1941, victim of a shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea, battles in Greece and Crete, capture by German paratroopers and ten days in a prison camp at Canea; a hazardous escape from there and two years of living in Crete hiding from the Gestapo; finally, escape from Crete and arrival at home in Australia. That sums up the story of John Corbould, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. Corbould, Mildura, Victoria, Australia, one of the 35 members of the Royal Australian Air Force, now stationed at No. 5 S.F.T.S.

John, nicknamed "George's Mate" by his friends, because he was mentioned in the King's last birthday honors list for "conspicuous gallantry in the Middle East," wears only the African Star, but is entitled to wear also an oak leaf, for his M.I.D.

He is only one, however, of several lads of the R. A. A. F. at present at No. 5, who have seen action previously in this war. These youthful veterans have risked their lives countless times on battlefields with the Australian Imperial Forces in the Middle East or South Pacific, having struggled through tropical jungles in equatorial heat and swarms of disease-carrying insects, and have borne hardships and disappointments that only the soldiers of battle campaigns can know.

Yet their stories, for the duration of the war, must remain, for the most part, secret. An Expositor reporter interviewed five of the lads who would only give a bare outline of the action they had seen during the past few years. They were very reticent about their adventures. They did not wish to be publicized or take, in any manner, the part of a soldier who had performed great duty on the field of battle.

The information they did release was given in a quiet, unassuming, and almost begrudging manner. John Corbould could say little more about his experiences than what was previously given.

ESCAPED

After they left Libya, he said, they set off for Alexandria, but their boat was sunk near the Island of Crete. The men were forced to land on the beaches and fight the Germans again. It was here that he was taken prisoner by German paratroopers and put in a camp at Canea. After ten days, Corbould and two other men made their escape and lived among the civilians for two years. During that time, he learned to speak Greek, and later, with the aid of the underground, he was able to return to Libya, just after the fall of Tripoli. From there he was transported to Australia.

Of his "conspicuous gallantry in the Middle East," he would say nothing. Life in the German prison camp was described by him as "rotten." Food was very poor and came in small quantities. They were treated badly and health conditions were very poor. A month after he returned home he transferred to the R.A. A.F., and began his elementary training there, coming to Canada a few months ago for the remainder of his flying course.

Cecil Webber, son of Mr. and Mrs. C. Webber, Sydney, is another lad with a record to be proud of. He was with the A.I.F. in the battle of Cairo and spent 15 months in Libya, during that campaign. Early in 1942, he said, his unit was evacuated and they returned to Australia.

IN NEW GUINEA

Later that year they were shipped to the battle area of New Guinea, where they spent 16 gruelling months fighting the Japanese. Early in 1943 Webber's unit was sent back again to Australia, where the "flying bug" got him and he transferred to the Air Force. He is entitled to wear the New Guinea and Africa Stars, but wears neither.

The only one of this group who was wounded while in action was J. C. Preston, son of

Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Preston, Queensland. He was with the A. I.F. from 1937 up to the time he transferred to the Air Force some months ago.

For 23 months he fought in both the Libyan and Syrian campaigns and spent some time with the troops which defended the Tobruk fortress. It was here that he was wounded by an Italian hand grenade and he was sent to recuperate in a hospital in Palestine. Six months after he had been wounded, his unit was ordered to move on to Java.

En route, however, they found that Java had fallen to the Japanese and so they returned to Australia. After a short period of leave, Preston transferred to the Air Force.

C. G. O'Byrne, whose parents, Mr. and Mrs. P. A. O'Byrne, reside at Launceston, Tasmania, was a member of a Bofors anti-aircraft unit with the A.I.F. For 18 months he served as a Gun Sergeant in New Guinea and during that time his anti-aircraft troops shot down four Japanese planes.

O'Byrne's descriptions of the bombings of their gun positions by Japanese aircraft are vivid. He recalled a time when he had only been at a station two days and had very little experience with bombings.

"I heard the drone of the Jap planes one night about midnight," he said, "but paid little attention to them until suddenly the bombs began to explode in the hills not far off. An officer who was in a tent with me dashed out and into a slit trench.

"By the time I realized that I should have headed for the ditch too, the bombs were going off closer and closer. I ran outside and flung myself down in the grass and prayed. After what seemed an eternity the raid was over, and I had learned my lesson—never to hesitate during a raid again. It was the closest call I ever had while in action."

O'Byrne's transfer to the Air Force came through while he was still in New Guinea and he was shipped back home where he began air crew training after a brief period of leave. He has an older brother now a prisoner of war in Germany who served with the First Australian Spitfire squadron in the Battle of Britain.

The work of M. Rothberg, son of Mrs. S. Rothberg, Melbourne, while he served with the A.I.F., was highly secret. He toured the Australian coast and spent some time in the theatre of war on the north-west Australian coast.

FLEW 6,000 MILES

Later he was transferred to New Guinea, where for 16 months he was engaged in the same type of work, in co-ordination with the American Navy. His transfer to the R.A.A.F. also came while he was at New Guinea and he flew 6,000 miles back home to Australia.

For their service in Africa or New Guinea each of these boys is entitled to wear the Africa or New Guinea Stars.

With the exception of J. C. Preston, who was a staff sergeant, they all held the rank of sergeant while in the A. I. F. Rothberg's ambition, when he has finished his course here, is to go into the Burma campaign to fight, but all the other lads say they "have a bigger argument with the Germans," and are keen on going into the European campaign.

The story of these Australians has not ended with their service on other battle fronts. They are filled with a great, restless keenness to get on with their courses so that they may one day return to enemy territory and revenge themselves on the Germans or Japs against whom they once fought so desperately, for their country and for the cause of the Allied nations.