

Brighton's Air Ace: Air Commodore Harry Cobby

by Jo Jenkinson

From bank clerk to World War I air ace within less than two years seems an unlikely journey for a man who had claimed to have no interest in flying. That was about to change.

Arthur Henry (Harry) Cobby was born in Prahran on 26 August 1894, the son of Arthur Edward Stanley Cobby, a tram conductor, and his wife Alice. After completing his education Harry Cobby became a clerk with the Commonwealth Bank. Before the outbreak of World War I he had already been commissioned into the Brighton Rifles, the 46th Infantry militia unit, but when he applied to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force at the start of the war the bank refused to release him on the grounds that his position was a reserved occupation. Cobby persisted and was accepted, not into the army, but into the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) on 23 December 1916 as a founding member of No 4 Squadron. Training began at Point Cook in aircraft whose maximum speed was 40 miles an hour, and consisted of, at best, a total of about ten minutes a week flying with an instructor.

On 17 January 1917 the Squadron departed for England, and after completing their training in December 1917 left for France. Until the last two months of World War I Cobby served in the Pas-de-Calais region as a fighter pilot, flying Sopwith Camels. No 4 Squadron was charged with supporting allied forces during the German Spring Offensive which began in March 1918. Nervous at the prospect of battle, and with only twelve hours solo flying experience behind him, Cobby was soon to face combat for the first time. In February 1918 he claimed his first (unconfirmed) German casualty. The following month his first official victories were confirmed when he shot down two aircraft belonging to the notorious 'Circus' of Baron von Richthofen. These successes would be followed by an unbeaten record of confirmed victories for any Australian flyer which included shooting down 29 enemy aircraft and 13 balloons. The balloons served as large observation platforms and were heavily protected by enemy fighters and anti-aircraft defences, making them a dangerous but highly valuable target for allied fighters.

Recognised as a talented and aggressive pilot with leadership potential, Cobby was appointed flight commander and promoted to Captain in May 1918. He later summed up the characteristics of a successful fighter pilot: 'The most successful air fighter is the most aggressive, but at the same time, a cool head and a fine sense of judgment are essential.' But the serious and challenging task to which he was committed did not dampen an underlying sense of humour: his Sopwith Camel was personally decorated with aluminium cut-outs of Charlie Chaplin. Described as just over average height, lightly built, and with bright blue eyes, he enjoyed practical jokes at the expense of the enemy, including painting the red, white and blue circles of the air force on the statue of Frederick the Great of Prussia in Cologne.

As his combat successes multiplied Harry Cobby was recommended for the Military Cross in June 1918, later changed to a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and gazetted on 2 July 1918. He received two bars to the DFC after shooting down three enemy aircraft on 28 June and two Pfalz scouts near Armentières in July, evading the pursuit of four Fokker aircraft after this victory. In August he led bombing raids against two German airfields in France, for

which he received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). As the war neared its end he was leading allied formations of up to 80 aircraft, and had become a national hero.

In September 1918 Cobby was transferred back to England to a training unit, a role which he enjoyed far less than that of fighter pilot, claiming that mock 'dogfights' with inexperienced trainee pilots were far more dangerous than genuine fights with the enemy. Continued applications to return to active service were denied and he remained in England until after the War ended in November 1918. Here Harry Cobby was chosen to lead the Anzac Day flypast over London by a formation of 50 aircraft of the Australian Flying Corps, watched by an alarmed Prince of Wales as he took his formation through a series of wild stunts.

Cobby later wrote about his World War I exploits, and those of his fellow airmen, in his book, *High Adventure*, which was published in Melbourne in 1942. A reviewer in the Adelaide Advertiser judged that his story, 'though unassumingly told, makes exhilarating reading', but lamented faults in style and grammatical construction. 'Group Captain Cobby's qualities are those of the doer, rather than the thinker or the writer,' the reviewer wrote. 'His courage, resourcefulness and initiative as a flier may be recognised between the lines . . . and though these attributes are leavened by the cheerful high spirits and outward casualness for which the Australians were noted in the last war, his keen sense of responsibility and judgment is revealed by the fact that he did not lose a man during the attacks he led over the German lines.'

In 1919 Cobby returned to Australia, and the following year married Hilda Urban in Caulfield. They settled in Neerim Road, East Caulfield, and had one son and one daughter. The AFC had been disbanded and in March 1921 he was one of the original officers to join the newly formed RAAF. Based at Point Cook, now with the rank of Flight Lieutenant, Cobby was appointed Commanding Officer of the re-formed No. 1 Squadron in July 1925. In 1927 he was promoted to Squadron Leader and in 1928 attended the RAF Staff College in Andover, England, returning to Australia to take over command of No. 3 Squadron at Richmond, New South Wales.

Though he was a gifted leader on active service, Harry Cobby found the detail of commanding a staff base irksome. He relinquished his command of the base and in 1933 was promoted to Wing Commander, with the role of Director of intelligence for the RAAF. One of his tasks was to investigate the potential of aerial surveying and photography, leading to the establishment of the North Australian Survey Flight which provided invaluable information for the subsequent development of military airfields in World War II.

Cobby retired from the RAAF to become Controller of Operations at the Civil Aviation Board, while continuing as a member of the Citizen Air Force (RAAF Reserve). After the outbreak of World War II, he returned to active service as Director of Recruiting, later taking over as Commanding Officer North-Eastern Area, based in Townsville. By now the family had moved to 63 New Street, Brighton, where they remained for the duration of the war and well into the late 1940s.

Cobby had been appointed to the rank of Group Captain in 1940, and in 1943 was promoted to Air Commodore (temporary). That year he was a passenger in a Catalina flying boat returning from what was then Dutch New Guinea when the Catalina crashed on landing. One of the depth charges it was carrying exploded on impact. Although injured, Cobby managed

to get himself out of the wreckage, and despite the imminent danger of the remaining depth charges exploding, or the aircraft slipping under water, he re-entered the hull three times and saved two other passengers. He was awarded the George Medal for his outstanding bravery, and while recovering from his injuries was posted to the RAAF Staff College at Mount Martha.

In August 1944 Harry Cobby took over command of No. 10 Operational Group, which became the Australian First Tactical Air Force (1st TAF). The 20,000 personnel under his command, consisting of fighter, close support and airfield construction units, formed the RAAF's major mobile strike force in the South-West Pacific. With misgivings about responsibility for the 1st TAF being divided between administrative and operational commands, Cobby faced a difficult situation which culminated in the so-called 'Morotai Mutiny' in April 1945. His senior pilots had been relegated to a ground attack mission against a small island which appeared to be both futile and strategically unimportant as Japanese forces were already retreating. Eight of the pilots based on Morotai Island tendered their resignations, without blaming Cobby, but the Chief of Air Staff and the Allied Forces Air Commander concluded that Cobby should be stood down for poor management of his staff. Cobby, as later air force historians judged, had been a scapegoat for feuding within the RAAF's senior leadership in the Pacific War. It was a sad ending to an illustrious career, but not to his array of awards. He was awarded the CBE for his direction of air operations in New Guinea in 1942-32, and in 1948 received the American Medal of Freedom in recognition of his war service. The citation stated that from September 1944 to January 1945 he displayed 'exceptionally sound judgment and far-sighted planning . . . and materially assisted in support of the operations in the Philippine Liberation'.

Harry Cobby was officially discharged from the air force on 19 August 1946, and returned to his family in Brighton until, at the end of the 1940s, they moved back to Carnegie. He rejoined the Civil Aviation Board (now the Department of Civil Aviation) and was appointed Director of Flying Operations in 1955. On Armistice Day, 11 November 1955, he was admitted to Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital where he died later that day, survived by his wife and two (now adult) children. He was given a full military funeral at St Mary's Church of England, Caulfield.

Sources:

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Wikipedia

Review of *High Adventure* by A.H. Cobby, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 3 October 1942

TROVE Digitised Newspapers, 1942-1946