

## **Robert Wilton Bungey**



*A photo of Bungey as a young civilian, possibly taken on enlistment in the RAAF, circa 1936 (National Archives of Australia).*

Robert Wilton Bungey was born at Fullarton, South Australia on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1914. Soon afterwards the family moved to the seaside suburb of Glenelg where Bungey grew up. He attended Glenelg Primary School and Adelaide High School. In his private time he developed an interest in physical fitness and swimming, often making long ocean swims between the Brighton and Glenelg jettys. Bungey also learnt jujitsu.

After graduation from high school Bungey gained employment with Ajax Insurance in Waymouth Street, Adelaide, where he trained as an assessor and attended night school. However Bungey had been interested in aviation since he was a boy and at the age of 21 he made the decision to join the air force as a pilot trainee.

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1936 Bungey was formally enlisted into the RAAF where he joined No. 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook. As well as learning the basics of service life, Bungey flew Gipsy Moths, Avro Cadets and Westland Wapitis. On graduation as a pilot a year later he had accumulated 125 hours in his log book. During his time at Point Cook Bungey became close friends with another South Australian trainee, Les Clisby.

With the RAF undergoing a rapid expansion at this time, there was a big demand for newly trained pilots. Bungey was one of at least a dozen graduates from the 1936-37 Point Cook course who chose to go to Britain and enlist in the RAF on short service commissions (among these men was Les Clisby). Shortly after arrival there in August 1937 Bungey was sworn in to the RAF as a Pilot Officer. Between September and November 1937 he attended No. 8 Flying Training School at Montrose, Scotland. During this time he flew Hawker Harts and Audaxes, which were single-engine biplane bombers not dissimilar to the Wapitis he was already familiar with from Point Cook. Training included cross-country navigation, aerial photography, reconnaissance, night flying, bombing and gunnery. Overall, Bungey was assessed as 'Above Average'.

### **No. 226 Squadron: 1937-1940**

In November 1937 Bungey was posted to his first operational squadron: No. 226 Squadron at Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire (it later moved to Harwell in Berkshire). This unit had been

activated earlier that year and was newly equipped with Fairey Battle light bombers. The Battles were metal monoplanes powered by Merlin engines and represented a generational improvement over the biplanes they replaced such as the Hawker Hart. At this time the Battles were faster than most RAF fighters. Historian Greg Baughen has written:

If war had broken out in the summer of 1937 the Fairey Battles would have been untouchable.

The year was spent training in all manner of bomber tactics including mass formation flying. Towards the end of 1938 Bungey was posted to the School of Air Navigation where he completed an eight week navigation course using Avro Ansons.

Bungey returned to No. 226 Squadron in early 1939 where training on Battles resumed. This included dive bombing, instrument flying, high altitude flying with oxygen and long range missions. On the eve of the outbreak of war in August 1939 Bungey was a reasonably experienced pilot with a total of 425 hours in his logbook.

Even by this time the RAF had begun phasing out the Fairey Battle in favour of multi-engine types more capable of attacking strategic targets deep within Germany. Also, within just a couple of years the Battles had been overtaken by advances in newer types and were now considered slow (as much as 100mph slower than the new German Bf 109 fighters). Nevertheless, immediately after Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, all ten Battle squadrons were deployed to France as part of the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF). From bases in France it was hoped the Battles, which were relatively short ranged, could strike targets in Germany as well as assist with tactical missions.

Accordingly, No. 226 squadron immediately deployed to Reims, France. The Battle squadrons were ordered to each maintain nine aircraft at thirty minutes readiness. However, because of fears of provoking retaliatory German bombing against civilian targets, no operational sorties were flown and the so-called Phoney War set in. Bungey flew reconnaissances near the German lines, and by the end of September six Battles flying such missions had been shot down by German fighters. Even at this early stage it was clear that without fighter escorts the Battles were highly vulnerable.

Meanwhile, senior RAF commanders debated over whether to use the Battle for strategic or tactical missions, but there was no clear consensus. It was agreed that they needed to be replaced by twin-engined Blenheims, but only two squadrons were sent back to Britain to make this change. This left eight Battle squadrons in France, and these were matched with just two Hurricane squadrons as part of the AASF. There were never sufficient fighters to escort the Battles and this would ultimately be a costly mistake.

With little to do (an exception was some pamphlet dropping missions), the Battles did not fly a great deal in subsequent months. In October, Bungey managed just three missions. Training continued but flying generally was limited by a severe winter in France. On 8<sup>th</sup> December Bungey was one of several pilots honoured with providing an escort for King George VI during one of his visits to France.

Meanwhile it was thought that the Battles could operate effectively as night bombers (the planned missions included dropping mines in the Rhine), but to penetrate targets deep

inside Germany they would have to keep weight to a minimum. Because of this requirement the Battles never received armour or self-sealing fuel tanks.

By April 1940 the Battle squadrons were busily engaged in training for these night missions, and Bungey recorded 19 flights during the month. However, the Battles would soon be needed for daytime attack missions for which they were not properly trained or equipped. Neither were there adequate fighters available to provide escort. It was a recipe for disaster.



*Fairey Battles of No. 218 Squadron over France in 1940 (Imperial War Museum)*

The expected German offensive began on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940, and Battles were soon in action including four from No. 226 Squadron which dive-bombed enemy columns near Luxembourg. However of a total of 32 Battle missions flown that day, 14 of the bombers failed to return to base. This was a horrendous loss rate, and proved the vulnerability of the Battles to both enemy fighters and ground fire. By the end of 12<sup>th</sup> May, Battle losses had increased to 30.

Bungey did not fly his first mission until 13<sup>th</sup> May. This was a mission against a target in The Netherlands, where bombs were dropped to demolish buildings to block a road. The following day Bungey was lucky to avoid participating in a series of desperate raids against bridges and pontoons near Sedan. In the highest loss rate suffered by the RAF in any major operation in its history, of 63 Battles launched 35 were lost. These attacks did cause the Germans to suffer their own losses and delays, but in just a few days of fighting half of the Battle force had been destroyed.

Due to these losses it was decided to change to night bombing tactics. During the remainder of May Bungey flew six night bombing attacks, with the targets including a rail junction, a train and road convoys. However on 19<sup>th</sup> May the situation was so dire that day attacks were ordered by all Battle squadrons except No. 226 (possibly this was because No. 226 Squadron was more advanced in its night training: the following night Bungey flew a mission in the same area). By the end of May, due to the adoption of night operations and other changes in tactics the Battle loss rate had been reduced significantly, but during three weeks of operations over 100 Battles had been lost and 119 aircrew killed. Against this already tragic background, Bungey learned that his close friend Les Clisby had been killed flying a Hurricane over France on 14<sup>th</sup> May.

At this time the successful Dunkirk evacuation took place which provided some cause for hope. Battle missions continued by night and limited day operations were covered by Hurricanes where possible. During such a day mission on 7<sup>th</sup> June, Bungey dive-bombed a convoy and was shot up by a Bf 109. A few further missions were flown up to 13<sup>th</sup> June when Bungey dropped incendiaries on a petrol dump. However by this time the situation on the ground was critical and the Battle squadrons were ordered back to England on 15<sup>th</sup> June. A few days later France surrendered.

Despite the real danger of an invasion of England, in late June No. 226 Squadron was one of two Battle squadrons sent to Northern Ireland. This location was far from the frontlines and during July Bungey's flying involved mundane tasks such as the calibration of radar stations. By August 1940 he had 560 hours in his logbook and was now rated 'Above Average' as a pilot and navigator and for bombing and gunnery. At this time he enjoyed a week's leave yachting around the coast of Ireland and he became engaged to Miss Sibil Johnson of Berkshire.

#### **No. 145 Squadron: 1940-1941**

Meanwhile, the Battle of Britain had begun in July 1940 and before long there was an acute shortage of trained fighter pilots. Accordingly, Bungey volunteered for fighter duty and was posted to No. 145 Squadron on 18<sup>th</sup> August. This was a Hurricane-equipped squadron which was based at Tangmere near the English Channel and had a frontline role. However, Bungey initially undertook Hurricane conversion training in Scotland. This was done with some urgency: in the last week of August he made 17 Hurricane flights. In September the training progressed to fighter tactics and gunnery with 19 flights carried out during the month.

On 10<sup>th</sup> October Bungey was ready for operational duties and flew to Tangmere where he immediately commenced flying operational patrols. These were flown almost on a daily basis in October and on some days three or four sorties were flown. On 7<sup>th</sup> November Bungey was flying a patrol near the Isle of Wight which was bounced by Bf 109s from higher up and five Hurricanes were shot down. Among these was Bungey who was able to force land his Hurricane I (V6889) in three feet of water and scramble out to safety. The only comment he made was that "the water was frightfully cold".

Just two days later Bungey was back in the air and shared in damaging a Junkers Ju 88 with Pilot Officer Jean Offenbergh. A month later, on 11 December, Bungey again teamed with Offenbergh in the destruction of a Heinkel He 111. The latter part of Bungey's combat action report read:

... Blue 1 [Bungey] had attacked from dead astern, while Blue 2 [Offenberg] was below. He opened fire from 300 yards, closing to 25 yards giving short bursts. The port engine continued smoking and a large fire broke out between the port engine and the fuselage. This burnt for about 2 mins and the a/c [aircraft] went into a slow shallow glide, with the port engine stopped and the starboard engine probably stopped. The e/a [enemy aircraft] was followed about 20 miles out to sea, where it finally disappeared into cloud at 2,000 feet ... no evasive action was taken by the e/a ...

Throughout December 1940 the tempo of operations remained high, with Bungey taking to the air 30 times. However, by this time the Battle of Britain had ended and, combined with the onset of winter, enemy operations were much curtailed.

January 1941 saw Bungey promoted to Flight Lieutenant and two other key developments. On 9<sup>th</sup> January he flew his first offensive patrol over French territory (in a Hurricane): such sweeps would soon become a common tactic. The following day he made his first Spitfire flight and much of the remainder of January and February were focused on converting to the new type. During February he flew 33 times.

Bungey's last Hurricane flight was on 22 February when he ferried V7187 to another base, and after that all of his fighter flying was in Spitfires. March saw operational patrols over the Channel and offensive sweeps over France. On 10 March he recorded damaging a Ju 88 while covering a convoy. However during April and May Bungey made no fighter flights: he underwent an operation on his knee (which had been injured when he was shot down the previous November) on 6<sup>th</sup> April and then appears to have taken some well-deserved leave.

### **No. 452 Squadron: 1941-1942**

In May came the exhilarating news that Bungey would be promoted to Squadron Leader and had been chosen to command the first Australian fighter unit to be formed in Britain: No. 452 Squadron. It would also be the first Australian squadron equipped with Spitfires.

By this time home town newspapers had been regularly reporting on Bungey's wartime exploits. They celebrated his promotion to command of No. 452 Squadron and on meeting his fellow Australian pilots Bungey was quoted as saying:

These boys are so keen it is simply grand to be with them ... They're first class pilots; in fact, they are exceptionally good and possess such a wonderful spirit of adventure.

Bungey took command of the recently formed



*Squadron Leader Bungey, June 1941  
(Australian War Memorial)*

squadron on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1941 at Kirton-in-Lindsey, Lincolnshire, in the north east of England. Over the next month he busily worked up his pilots, with the training including full squadron scrambles in line with 'Balbo' doctrine. This was a tactic that intended to overwhelm intruding German aircraft with an entire wing of fighters. However the efficient forming up of such large formations needed extensive practice. In addition, the squadron became operational for night missions.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Pilots of No. 452 Squadron pose happily in June 1941, with Squadron Leader Bungey in the centre. During Bungey's command of the squadron six of the pilots pictured would be killed. (Australian War Memorial)*

On 21<sup>st</sup> July the squadron moved to Kenley which was one of the three main fighter bases tasked with defending London. Here the Spitfires patrolled the Channel and undertook various offensive sweeps over Northern France called 'Circuses' and 'Rhubarbs' (on occasion escorting Blenheim bombers). Bungey was keenly involved with leading these operations which often met the enemy. In August he flew 30 times, most of which were operational fighter missions.

The performance of the squadron was highly creditable. During August it was credited with the destruction of 24 German aircraft which was the highest for any fighter squadron in Britain. The success of the squadron was noted by Air Marshall W.S. Douglas, the commander of Fighter Command. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September he recommended Bungey for the Distinguished Flying Cross, noting his earlier war service and also that:

S/L Bungey has been in command of 452 Squadron at this station since 21<sup>st</sup> July and he has led the squadron in an exemplary manner on many operational flights

over France. He has also led the wing on several occasions. Due to his personal leadership the squadron has attained much success.

The recommendation was accepted and Bungey's DFC was formally gazetted on 7<sup>th</sup> October. The squadron's success had continued from September to November when it was again the highest scoring or equal highest scoring fighter squadron in Britain. While Bungey's leadership was a key factor, the squadron boasted two outstanding aces in Keith 'Bluey' Truscott and Irishman Brendan 'Paddy' Finucane who accounted for a large portion of the squadron's kills. On the other hand, No. 452 Squadron was encountering experienced German pilots flying the latest types of fighter: Bf 109Fs and Fw 190s. By early October a dozen Spitfires and at least five pilots had been lost.

While on weekend leave Bungey married his fiancé, Sibil Johnson, on 8<sup>th</sup> October. However he returned to flying duties just a few days later. At this time the squadron moved to Redhill, which was only a short distance from Kenley so the type of operations was little changed. With the bulk of the Luftwaffe now engaged on the eastern front, the offensive sweeps over France were intended to lure the remaining German fighters into battle. However the Germans would only do so under the most favourable conditions and the RAF suffered heavy losses during these operations throughout 1941. Many of the RAF pilots became disillusioned with the repetitive nature of these missions, as noted by author Tony Holmes:

Many of these pilots had survived the Battle of Britain, yet they had no hesitation in stating that flying 'Circuses' and 'Rhubarbs' was far more nerve-racking. They particularly detested crawling along at less than 200mph as they escorted the Blenheims and Stirlings over France, being rocked around by exploding flack and nervously waiting for enemy fighters to bounce them.

The cycle of missions continued towards winter when on 6<sup>th</sup> November Bungey was leading the squadron in a mission off Calais when they were attacked from above and behind by several Bf 109Fs. In the subsequent combat Bungey saw hits on one of the enemy fighters after firing six bursts from 100 to 300 yards range until his ammunition was exhausted. It was believed destroyed.

Two days later, on 8<sup>th</sup> November, the last 'Circus' for 1941 was launched. This was a disaster with 16 Spitfires being lost, including two No. 452 Squadron machines which had been flying top cover for Blenheims. One of these was piloted by Bluey Truscott, who bailed out over the Channel. After returning to base Bungey took-off again and helped the Air-Sea Rescue service pinpoint Truscott's location. In doing this, Truscott credited Bungey with saving his life.

While offensive missions in the company of bombers over France had ended for the year, No. 452 Squadron remained busy with fighter operations over the Channel during the winter months. Bungey continued flying until his last Spitfire mission on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1942, recorded as a 'Channel sweep'. He then left the squadron for another posting after handing over command to Truscott. Bungey had led the unit for six months during which he'd personally accumulated over 80 hours flying the nerve-racking offensive missions over France. In total he now had over 900 hours of flying in his logbook, most of it accumulated during wartime.

At this time Truscott paid tribute to Bungey:

Our squadron's success is largely due to him ... he is an amazing navigator and a wonderful leader. Because he is quiet and retiring he is often overlooked in reports of the squadron's achievements but he is a top rank commander. I'll do my best to maintain the standard he set.

In another later comment Truscott said that Bungey:

... would not take leave so that he could continue to fly at the head of his men. He was such a wonderful leader that we would follow him anywhere. We think he is the best Squadron Leader in the war.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Spitfire Mark VB P7973 of No. 452 Squadron which was flown by several prominent pilots including Bungey, Truscott and Finucane. After the war this machine was gifted to the Australian government and is on display at the Australian War Memorial (Australian War Memorial).*

### **1942-43: A Tragic End**

Meanwhile, at the end of November 1941 Bungey had farewelled his wife, Sibil, who voyaged from Liverpool and after several weeks at sea disembarked in Adelaide on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1942. She reported that her husband:

... is out on two and three sweeps over the Channel nearly every day and is working very hard.

Sibil also said that she was resigned at Bungey remaining in England for the duration of the war. Just weeks later on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1942 Sibil gave birth to a son, Richard. On hearing the news Bungey sent a telegram that read:



Bless you darling knew it would be Richard feel terribly proud – love you more than ever - Bob Bungey

With knowledge of the tragic fate that would befall Bungey in 1943, it is very possible that he left No. 452 Squadron in January 1942 suffering from some degree of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Both his experiences during the Battle of France in 1940 and then during the 'Circus' and 'Rhubarb' missions flown during the latter half of 1941 were exceptionally stressful. Both his wife and Truscott mentioned his high workload and keenness to personally lead the latter operations. He also witnessed at first hand the loss of many other pilots including his friend Les Clisby.

The possibility that Bungey was suffering PTSD is further supported by the fact that he went from command of a fighter squadron to a string of administrative postings at air bases for the remainder of 1942. This was likely intended to allow him time to recover and return to active duty.

Bungey's initial posting was to RAF Shoreham, which was the former civilian airport at Brighton on the south coast of England. At the time this was a minor base that housed Walrus amphibians of the Air Sea Rescue service, and Bungey flew a Walrus there on 10 February 1942.

However Bungey was only at Shoreham for a short time before moving to RAF Hawkinge in Kent, which was another south coast airfield. A Spitfire squadron was based here and during the next few months Bungey managed several Spitfire test flights, including one on 28 July 1942 when he climbed to 38,000 feet! Most other flying was local communications flights in Tiger Moths. From September to December 1942 Bungey was attached to another Kent airfield, RAF Lympne, but managed only five flights during his four months there.



*Richard Bungey on arrival in Australia, May 1943 (Spitfire Association)*

At the start of 1943 Bungey appears to have tried to resume operational flying, undertaking training on twin-engined Bisleys and Blenheims with 51 Operational Training Unit, which was a night fighter training unit. During the month Bungey flew 15 times, although it is unclear if he passed the course or if the training ended abruptly for some other reason. His last ever flight was on 24 January, and he now had over 1,000 hours in his logbook.

Bungey's career now took a different turn with a posting back to Australia where his skills and experience could be used teaching fighter tactics as Chief Flying Instructor with No. 2 Operational Training Unit at Mildura. Possibly he also intended rejoining No. 452 Squadron which was now in Australia with No. 1 Fighter Wing providing for the defence of Darwin.

After sailing from Britain in mid-February, Bungey arrived home on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1943 and was reunited with his wife and met his 14-month old son for the first time. Bungey's arrival was feted in the press and a luncheon in his honour was planned at Parliament House.

However before this could take place an unexpected tragedy struck. Sibil was ill with meningitis and on 27<sup>th</sup> May died a short time after being admitted to a private hospital in Glenelg. The mindset of Bungey, likely suffering PTSD and now black with personal grief, can only be imagined. Two weeks later, on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1943, he took his son for a walk to the wintery beach. There he drew his service revolver and shot his son and then himself through the head. Bungey was killed but his son Richard survived.

A family friend wrote the following observation after attending the funerals of Sibil and Robert:

... the shock of her sudden death was too much for his war-strained nerves. He seemed wonderfully calm after the first day or so, and that was his real self, strong and brave, but underneath were the jangled nerves that wrought the final tragedy. It is his real self that we remember and command to God.

Bungey was buried alongside his wife in St. Judes Cemetery, Brighton, South Australia.

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NAA Files:

A9300 BUNGEY R W BUNGEY ROBERT WILTON : Service Number - 257414 : Date of birth - 04 Oct 1914 : Place of birth - FULLARTON SA : Place of enlistment - POINT COOK : Next of Kin - BUNGEY RICHARD 1939 – 1948 barcode 5379092

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