

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

FLGOFF FREDERICK CECIL RILEY (1919 - 2022)

World War 2, Spitfire Pilot

Fred Riley (left) with his brother who joined the Army during World War 2 (Riley family)

Frederick Cecil Riley was born in Motherwell, Scotland, on 20 February 1919, the second youngest of nine children. His father, Cecil Urquhart Riley, served with the Gordon Highlander Regiment during World War 1. While an older brother immigrated to South Australia in 1922, the family moved to Lithgow, New South Wales, when Fred was four years old, with his father securing work at the Lithgow small arms factory. His mother passed away aged only 55 from breast cancer when Fred was only 14 years old. Fred attended school in Lithgow until his early teenage years when he commenced work in the local area. Aged eighteen, Fred moved to Drummoyne, Sydney, after his eldest brother secured work for him at the Dunlop Perdriau Rubber Company as an accounts clerk.

Upon turning twenty-one, Fred enlisted in the militia. He served as a Private in the 35th Battalion from 1940 to September 1941. Fred registered for service with the RAAF on 17 June 1941 and enlisted on 13 September 1941 at No 1 Recruiting Centre, Sydney. He later stated, *"If I was going to war, I did not want to be in the Army."* After completing initial training at No 2 Initial Training School, Bradfield Park, in February 1942, he was posted to Narromine, NSW, where he attended No 5 Elementary Flying Training School. A course mate was the future Australian actor, Bud Tingwell, who served and flew mosquitos and spitfires in both the Mediterranean and Pacific theatres during World War 2. From 2 April 1942 to 27 May 1942 Fred undertook basic flying training, obtaining 62 hours on the DH 82 Tiger Moth.



SEFTS Tiger Moth training aircraft at Narromine. (AWM)



Fred Riley (right) after graduating from 6SFTS in Ontario. (Riley family)

In June 1942, Fred embarked for overseas to Canada to continue his flying training. From August to December 1942, he attended No 6 Service Flying Training School at Dunnville, Ontario. Flying the Harvard and Yale advanced trainers, he flew 150 hours and gained his Wings on 4 Dec 1942.

Arriving in the UK in January 1943, Fred completed refresher training and ground courses before being posted to No 17 Advanced Flying Unit at RAF Calveley in Cheshire, in May 1943. He completed 24 hours on Miles Master advanced training aircraft, becoming familiar with English flying conditions.

From June to October 1943, he attended No 53 Operational Training Unit, a spitfire conversion unit, at RAF Kirton-in-Lindsey in Lincolnshire, England. The role of 53OTU was to train pilots on the Spitfire but also fighter combat tactics. Completing a particularly intense course, Fred flew 58 hours on the Spitfire Mark I and Mark II during his training at 53 OTU, regularly flying

several times a day over a two-month period. The course comprised aerobatics, formation fighter flying, dogfighting, air to air gunnery and air to ground strike.

Thus, over a period of about 18 months, Fred had transitioned from entering the Air Force to becoming a fully trained Spitfire fighter pilot ready for operations.

Upon completing his operational conversion training, Fred was posted to No 130 Squadron (RAF) on 20 October 1943. Formed on 16 June 1941, the Squadron was known as *The Punjab Squadron*, following the gifting of a squadron of Supermarine Spitfires by the State of Punjab, India. The unit proudly had the Indian Elephant emblazoned on its unit badge. The unit was initially based at RAF Portreath in Cornwall where it conducted patrols over the southwestern approaches to England. When Fred joined 130 SQN, it was based at Catterick, Yorkshire, equipped with the Spitfire LF Mk V and was in the process of training a cadre of new pilots in preparation for a return to front-line operations. Fred became one of eight RAAF pilots at the squadron on his arrival, making up over 1/3 of the unit's pilots.



The 130 (Punjab) Squadron Badge

On December 11, 1943, Riley survived an accident on takeoff when the squadron Tiger Moth he was flying for a routine ferrying mission lost power on takeoff. He attempted to nurse the aircraft onto a plowed field where the wheels got stuck, causing the aircraft to flip upside down. Both Riley and his passenger escaped injury and Riley was noted for his good airmanship and presence of mind in managing the stricken aircraft.



Fred Riley (right) with fellow RAAF 130 SQN pilot, Peter Standish, in 1943. (The Riley family)

In February 1944, 130 SQN was abruptly disbanded. Fred, together with eighteen ex-130 SQN pilots, was posted to join 186 SQN based at Tain, Scotland. At the time 186SQN was converting from the Hawker Typhoon to the Spitfire LF Mk V. Within two days of Fred joining 186 SQN, the unit was ordered to relocate to Lympne, Kent. 186 SQN commenced offensive operations over occupied Europe in March.

In early April 1944, 186 SQN was renumbered to 130 SQN (Punjab Squadron). Riley flew his first combat mission on 12 April when he was one of 12 130SQN spitfires that escorted a RAF Boston strike mission over Hesdin, France. During April, the operational

tempo increased with the squadron conducting bomber escorts, fighter sweeps, shipping reconnaissance and air-sea rescues. At the beginning of May 1944, the unit moved to RAF Horne, becoming part of No 142 Wing, alongside No's 303 (Kosciusko) SQN and 402 SQN RCAF. Horne was a more basic airfield, comprising only two steel mesh runways, steel mesh taxiways, four small blister hangars and a small fuel storage, with all base personnel living in tents for accommodation and messing. As a part of 142 Wing, Fred and the pilots of 130 SQN conducted bomber escort and fighter sweep operations in the build up to D-Day. He regularly flew a daily dawn and dusk mission.

At midnight on the evening of 5 June 1944, Riley and his fellow 130SQN aircrew were briefed on the D-Day landings. Nine hours later, Fred was conducting the first of two D-Day sorties, flying over Utah Beach, conducting a combat air patrol in

support of the allied landing. Twelve hours later, he flew his second D-Day sortie, one of 12 130 SQN aircraft patrolling Utah Beach, again in an evening combat air patrol. He later recalled the greatest threats on the day were not German but allied anti-aircraft fire and colliding with allied aircraft in the very congest airspace over Normandy. Throughout June and July, Fred and his colleagues continued the high operational tempo, regularly flying several sorties a day in support of the Allied ground advance and in northern France. Increasingly, their patrols became more focused on attacking German ground forces trying to reinforce the German defence of the coastal areas, as targets of opportunity. Fred recalls such missions as being more risky than those on D-Day due to their being conducted at low level where German light anti-aircraft fire was more prevalent.

In late July 1944, Fred was one of four pilots to escort General Eisenhower's flight, in a specially modified B-25 Mitchell, from southern England to Northern France. Fred and the other spitfire pilots met General Eisenhower before the sortie which required the four spitfires to fly in very tight formation for the entire flight. The following day, the BBC reported the flight and the aircrew of the escorting spitfires including Pilot Officer Fred Riley – a FSGT Riley was stunned as this was how he learned he had been commissioned to Pilot Officer while serving with 130 SQN.

In August 1944, 130 SQN converted to the Spitfire Mk XIV and moved to back to Lypne to intercept the increasing number of V-1 Flying Bombs now targeting London. The missions involved two Spitfires flying in pairs for about 60 to 90 minutes, with up to twenty such patrols conducted per day. The missions were challenging as it required the spitfires to engage the flying bombs in a small 50-mile stretch beyond the coastline where coastal anti-aircraft fire engaged them, to a balloon barrage area just south of London. The Spitfire was also barely fast enough to catch a V-1 flying bomb. In effect, the 130 SQN aircrew only had minutes to engage the V-1's in their small operating area. In mid-August, Fred successfully destroyed one V-1 when he engaged a V-1 from 200 yards astern with two short bursts and then seeing it burst into flames and crash - one of twelve accounted for by the unit. In total, Fred flew 17 V-1 intercept missions during August 1944.

With the V-1 threat diminished by late August, 130 SQN returned to fighter escort and ground attack operations. When OP MARKET GARDEN commenced on September 17th 1944, Fred and the pilots of 130 SQN escorted transport and glider aircraft over the Netherlands and provided flak suppression support. Fred flew two combat mission during OP MARKET GARDEN.

At the beginning of October 1944, 130 SQN shifted to Grave, the Netherlands, becoming part of No 125 Wing, 2nd Tactical Air Force. From Grave, Fred flew patrols to counter German Me 262 jet fighters and undertook low-level armed reconnaissance missions over the Netherlands and Germany. After enduring almost daily deadly bombing raids by Me 262s, 130 SQN was shifted to Diest, Belgium at the beginning of November. On 8 December 1944, Fred and eight of his colleagues were conducting a long range armed reconnaissance mission deep inside Germany when they were jumped by a larger force of enemy fighters. During the engagement, Fred engaged an Me 109 which was later confirmed as destroyed.



130 SQN Spitfires dispersed at a grass airfield at Grave in Holland in 1944. (AWM)

On 22 December 1944, Fred was involved in a fighter sweep over Saint Vith, Belgium. Piloting Spitfire RM755, he was struck by friendly ground fire. Crash-landing his Spitfire, Fred suffered serious injuries, including a fractured skull and vertebrae. He woke up in an American field tent a day later and after initial treatment was sent back to England for six months rehabilitation. After almost 6 months recuperating in British hospitals, he departed for Australia on 14 May 1945, finally arriving in Australia on 18 July 1945, completing three years of service in the European theatre. He was finally discharged from the RAAF on 2 October 1945.

Fred Riley arrived at 130 SQN as a Flight Sergeant and was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in May 1944, followed by promotion to Flying Officer in November 1944. In total, he flew over 250 hours on operational missions with the squadron.



Aussie aircrew of 130 SQN pose in front of a squadron Mk XIV Spitfire at Grave in October 1944 – Fred Riley standing second from right. (AWM)



A RAF Mk XIV Spitfire, similar to that flown by Fred Riley in late 1944.

One of six World War 2 veterans who served in the D-Day Landings, Fred was a special guest of the Australian and French Governments for the 70th anniversary of the D-Day Landings in 2014. He was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French Government and presented with a Normandy Veterans Association Medallion at a commemorative ceremony at Ellon, near a World War 2 airfield in the French countryside.



Fred Riley being presented with a Normandy Veteran's Association medallion for the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings at Ellon, France in 2014. (Department of Defence).

At the RAAF Edinburgh Airshow in 2019, Fred Riley was a special guest of the RAAF. During the visit, RAAF members asked if Fred would like to see one of the vintage Supermarine Spitfires performing at the airshow. Fred gleefully accepted and visited a Temora Museum Mark XIII Supermarine Spitfire. He was given the rare opportunity of again sitting in the cockpit of a plane he had flown almost 75 years previously. He remarked during the visit "I can remember most of the instruments in there." It was the first time he had been in the cockpit of a spitfire since he had been shot down in December 1944.



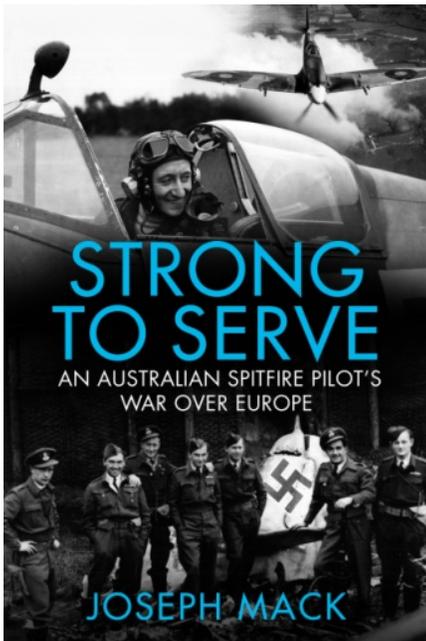
Fred Riley sitting in a Spitfire cockpit at the RAAF Edinburgh Airshow in 2019, 75 years after he was shot down during the Battle of the Bulge in World War 2. (Department of Defence)



Fred Riley as a Pilot Officer in a 130 SQN Spitfire in October 1944. (AWM)

In recent years, Fred has attended Air Force Association commemorative services, such as the annual Air Force Birthday Commemorative Service, when he can. In 2021, he was a special guest at the Air Force Centenary celebrations on 31 March, as one of the few remaining RAAF World War 2 Veterans in South Australia attending the Air Force Centenary Commemorative Service at the South Australian National War Memorial, North Terrace, Adelaide, and then the morning tea at Government House.

Pictured right: Fred Riley with RAAF members at the Air Force Centenary Morning Tea at Government House, Adelaide, on 31 March 2021. (Department of Defence)



In 2022, Fred Riley's story has been magnificently retold in *Strong to Serve – An Australian Spitfire Pilot's War Over Europe*. Authored by RAAF Officer Jo Mack, one of the original RAAF members who met Fred Riley at an One Tree Hill ANZAC Day Service, the book provides a wonderful account of Fred's story in the European theatre as well as the experiences of some of the other Australians who served in the Royal Air Force's No 130 (The Punjab) Squadron.

His story was the subject of the keynote address at the 101st anniversary of the RAAF Commemorative Service on 31 March 2022 at the Air Force Memorial, Torrens Parade Ground. Unfortunately, due to ill-health, Fred could not be there in person but his granddaughter, Joanne Cottee was and live streamed the video to Fred so that he could hear the story which reportedly brought a big smile to his face.

Unfortunately, Fred passed away on 5 April 2022, less than week after his story was told at the commemorative service at the Air Force Memorial at Torrens Parade Ground. He was one of South Australia's last and probably oldest RAAF veterans.

Greg Weller
SAAM History Group Member
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