

## ANDREW KING COWPER ~ An Australian "Ace"

I have often looked in wonder at the entry in the WWI Roll of Honour which shows Cowper, A. K., (S.H. '13-16), as having been awarded the Military Cross with two bars. To be awarded one Military Cross is a matter for awe. But three! Just who was this Andrew Cowper, and what were the exploits which led to his decorations? I resolved to find out.

It was the Old Oundelian Cecil Lewis, M.C., who said in *Sagittarius Rising*, his classic account of WWI flying, that "The RFC attracted the adventurous spirits, the devil-may-care young bloods of England, the fast livers, the furious drivers – men who were not happy unless they were taking risks".

No one personified this spirit better than the young Australian who, in 1913, came to Eastbourne College for his education. What was extraordinary about Cowper, apart from the rare accolade of gaining a Military Cross with two bars, was that he managed to squeeze a lifetime of flying achievement into five short months. Brave to a degree, aggressive in pursuit of the enemy, an inspiring flight commander, he must have been one of those airmen to whom the aircraft became a physical extension of himself. And he survived to enjoy a long and full life.

Born on 16th November 1898 at Bingara, New South Wales, Andrew Cowper entered School House in January 1913 and left in December 1916. He was the fifth child of Percival Cowper, a surveyor, at that time residing at 23 Jevington Gardens, Eastbourne. Andrew was a fourth-generation descendant of William Cowper, the 18th century poet, which is something of which he was justly proud. At the College he was a house prefect and in the cricket and rugby teams in both 1915 and 1916. In the XV he usually played as a wing, occasionally as a centre. Arnold's end-of-season reviews mixed faint praise with typically mordant criticism: "has dash and shows readiness to go for a loose ball. Still misses everybody who comes his way, with monotonous regularity. Prodigal of his passes – to friend and foe alike". And as a cricketer he scored few runs but earned the accolade "His ground fielding is neat and he has saved many boundaries". He also won his colours as a swimmer and a gymnast, and was a sergeant in the OTC.

On leaving school in 1916 he enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment and soon transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. On 10th May 1917 he was appointed temporary Second Lieutenant. Training with 3 Reserve and 64 Squadrons, he had his first flight on 13th May and his first solo on 14th June. On 26th August he was posted to 24 Squadron in France, flying de Havilland DH5s from airfields in an area southeast of Amiens. The squadron was a part of 14 Wing, operating in support of the Fourth Army. The DH5 was unusual in having a back-staggered top wing which gave the pilot a clear forward view but left them exposed from the rear. With one forward-firing machine-gun, it had a top speed of 100 mph. Although a robust machine, it was mainly useful for trench strafing and ground attack.

In November the Allies launched the assault opposite Cambrai, using tanks for the first time, supported by aircraft in what were called "Battle



Flights", low-level ground-strafting patrols. Cowper in this month forced down two enemy machines, both Albatross DIIIs.

In the New Year of 1918 the squadron was re-equipped with SE5As with 200 hp Hispano-Suiza engines, sturdy, stable machines with a top speed of 130 mph, justly popular with pilots. On 18th February Cowper shared in the destruction of a DFW.C two-seater near La Fère.

The following day, the 19th, Cowper shared in the destruction of a Rumpler C and another DFW.C. There followed an extraordinary four weeks in which he accounted for a further eight enemy aeroplanes by himself and seven more with the assistance of his comrades.

On the 26th, returning from patrol, he encountered a Pfalz DIII scout which he forced to land on the 25 Squadron airfield at Ham, near St Quentin. The pilot, one Uffz Hegeler of Jasta 15, was reported to have told his captors that he landed there because he was afraid that if he landed at a French airfield, he would be shot.



*The captured German aircraft.*



The captured machine was exhibited at the Lord Mayor's Show and later at the Agricultural Hall in London.

On one occasion he had to walk back to Moreuil from Cachy after his aircraft had been shot to ribbons in ground strafing. Having acted as Flight Commander of B Flight for some weeks, on 24th March he was confirmed in the post and promoted temporary Captain. His Military Cross was gazetted on 22nd April with the citation:

*For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. Whilst leading a patrol of six machines he observed four hostile triplanes, one of which he attacked, succeeding in causing it to break up in the air. The remaining three enemy machines were destroyed by the rest of the patrol. On the return journey he encountered an enemy scout, and shepherding it by the most skilful piloting west of the lines, forced it to land undamaged in one of our aerodromes. On a later occasion, during three separate combats, he and his patrol brought down one machine completely out of control and two others with their observers wounded, and later in the same day three other machines completely out of control. Previously to this he has assisted in destroying six other enemy scouts, displaying at all times the greatest courage and determination.*

Between 21st March and 1st April he flew 20 ground attack sorties, attacking enemy troop and transport concentrations. The 24 Squadron history comments on "Cowper in particular having the most extraordinary escapes, planes and centre sections being riddled repeatedly". On 12th April he was transferred to Home Establishment. As he said when interviewed in the 1970s, had he not been removed from combat duties, he would not have survived much longer. He had become a compulsive hunter, spending every possible moment seeking to attack the enemy in the air and on the ground, with the almost inevitable result that he would have been shot down.

After his return to England, two bars to his Military Cross were gazetted. The first, on 22nd June, stated:

*Within a short period he has himself destroyed three enemy planes and has driven down four others completely out of control. During the recent operations he has further destroyed two hostile machines, and has attacked in the most daring manner and with the greatest effect enemy troops and transport. On all occasions his gallantry and skill have been of the highest order.*

This was followed, also on 22nd June, by the second:

*He bombed enemy troops who were entrenching, and caused great havoc and confusion. He made repeated and determined attacks, in spite of heavy hostile fire, and eventually forced the enemy to retire from their trench. He returned to his aerodrome for more bombs and ammunition, and, going out a second time, attacked enemy troops and*

*transport and threw them into confusion. He went out on two other occasions on the same day with equal success. Later, while co-operating with an infantry attack, he obtained four direct hits with bombs on an encampment and forced several parties of the enemy to retire from their front line. He showed magnificent dash and determination.*

In all, Cowper had accounted for 12 enemy aircraft, with a further seven shared with colleagues – a total of 19. He clearly qualified as an "ace" for which the criterion was five. All this he achieved in five months of active service. For the next 22 months he was, according to his service record, shunted hither and thither in non-combatant roles. From November 1918 to January 1919 he was convalescent at Leamington, later Matlock, assigned to ground duties, suffering from "flying sickness", otherwise diagnosed as tuberculosis due to war strain. This illness, from which some died, was the result of constant flying at altitude without oxygen. He next served with 79 Squadron flying Dolphins with the Army of Occupation in Germany, and in June of the same year he sailed for service on Bristol Fighters with 48 Squadron in India before retiring from the RAF on 19th February 1920. This period must have been tedious in the extreme after the heady excitement and risks of the months in France. With little to do there was every opportunity for a young man of 21 or 22 to get into mischief. Cowper was court martialled at Harlestone on 16th September 1918; his offence: "at the Gaiety Theatre, London, on the night of the 14th/15th August 1918, improperly created a disturbance during a performance at the said theatre". (The show was a review called *Going Up* and starred Joseph Coyne, Evelyn Laye and Ruby Miller). Cowper was acquitted. Then on 16th October 1919 at a General Court Martial at Quetta, he was severely reprimanded, the offence unascertainable.

Cowper returned to Australia and took over his parents' sheep property, Wiliga, near Coonamble, New South Wales. He married in 1924 and there were two sons, Leon and Henry, both of whom predeceased their father. Drought forced the Cowpers off the land and they moved to Sydney where he became proprietor of a seed and plant merchants, and of a gladioli farm near Mona Vale. Horticulture was his hobby as well as his living and he established a fine garden at his Belleview Hill home.

He enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in 1942, rose to the rank of Squadron Leader in the Administrative and Special Duties Branch and was demobilised on 2nd March 1945.

Cowper died, aged 81, on 25th June 1980 at the Prince of Wales Hospital, Randwick, and was cremated. His wife had died in 1963.

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MICHAEL PARTRIDGE