



WAR ATHLETES

Christopher Warner on sporting figures in conflict.



KEITH TRUSCOTT

While on leave in May 1942, Flight Lt Keith ‘Bluey’ Truscott once again found himself the centre of attention. The Australian ace and footy star had already established himself as a living legend when he returned to the starting line-up as honorary captain for the Melbourne Football Club.

Known for his aggressive style of play and wavy red locks (hence the nickname), Truscott emerged from the players’ tunnel to the roar of an enraptured crowd. A few days later, the stocky half-forward saw his former headmaster from Melbourne High School, who asked him how he had enjoyed his return to Aussie Rules football. ‘Not for me,’ Truscott answered. ‘Too dangerous!’

The homegrown talent first made his senior debut in 1937 and became an immediate fan favourite with the powerhouse team. He kicked 31 goals in his first four seasons and earned two premierships (league titles) with the Demons before setting his sights on becoming a combat pilot with Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). His decision to enlist mid-season in July 1940 created a massive publicity storm in which the popular sportsman left behind far more than an empty stall in the locker room.

Renowned aviation writer, Stanley Brogden, said this about him: ‘For more than any other single man, Truscott had been accepted by the public as the prototype of Australian flying men... Probably no other

FACTFILE

Born: 17 May 1916

Died: 28 March 1943 (aged 26)

Awards: Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar, Service Medal 1939–1945, 1939–1945 Star, Air Crew Europe Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal

Accomplishments: 1939, 1940 Premierships (Melbourne Football Club)

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Australian was so dear to the public as Bluey Truscott. He was more than a hero... Bluey was one of the mob. Every man in Australia felt that Bluey was part of him, but much bigger. He was idolised and idealised, but not put on a pedestal.’

Under the Empire Air Training Scheme, Truscott undertook the Initial Training Course before moving on to No 3 Elementary Flying Training School at Essendon, Victoria. His new career path, however, nearly ended in abject failure. Despite his sharp mental and physical abilities, the talented sportsman struggled – especially in the cockpit of the notoriously temperamental De Havilland Tiger Moth. He repeatedly levelled out about six meters too high during landings in the bi-plane trainer and required extra flying time to avoid being washed out.

DOUBLE DUTIES

The gregarious redhead would eventually apply the same determination and dexterity in the air that had made him a champion footballer. He performed double duties when the RAAF allowed him to play in the 1940 Victorian Football League grand final held at

the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Head Coach Frank ‘Checker’ Hughes would later describe how his vaunted front line included ‘that redheaded bullet, “Bluey” Truscott’ as the Demons defeated Richmond, 107-68.

After completing domestic flight training, Truscott received further instruction at Camp Borden in Ontario, Canada, where he earned his coveted ‘wings’ and a commission as a pilot officer. The newly minted aviator then shipped off to the UK for more advanced instruction in the spring 1941.

Whatever teething difficulties he had experienced in training quickly disappeared with his transition to the Supermarine Spitfire. Posted to 57 Operational Training Unit, RAF Hawarden in Wales, he also excelled at gunnery practice, relying on his well-honed hand-eye coordination.

Truscott joined the newly formed No 452 Squadron – the first RAAF unit to be raised in the UK – which became part of 11 (Fighter) Group stationed at RAF Kirton in Lindsey. Under the command of RG Dutton DFC and Bar, the pilots consisted mostly of Australian newcomers flying a variety of Mk I, Mk II and Vb ‘Spits’.

The squadron also featured a

handful of experienced airmen from the British Commonwealth as well as other nationalities, including Dublin-born ace, Flight Commander Brendan 'Paddy' Finucane. The Irishman, known for his shamrock-adorned Spitfire, would serve as an invaluable mentor to the Aussie, who bagged his first kill on 12 August 1941 after shooting down a Me109E.

The squadron saw thick action from the onset, engaging in fierce dogfights, patrols, and nerve-racking escort 'Circus' missions over the English Channel and occupied France. Shortly after relocating to RAF Kenley in Surrey (and subsequently to RAF Redhill), the squadron – led by Paddy and Bluey – went on a tear against Luftwaffe targets. 452 Sqn became the top-scoring unit in RAF Fighter Command from August to November of 1941, making its dynamic duo famous worldwide.

The men also fostered a shared sense of camaraderie over beers and banter at London-area watering holes. As the rowdiest member of the motley crew, Truscott could usually be found plotting his next his prank. Naturally, he found Paddy's custom paint scheme irresistible, and temporarily added kangaroos to the legendary aircraft.

CRUCIAL MISSIONS

The Australian's highly competitive nature didn't always sit well among his fellow pilots. After destroying two Bf 109s during a sortie over northern France, he shot at a German parachutist who had managed to bail out – and justified the action, having recently witnessed an enemy pilot fire on a parachuting RAF pilot.

Truscott's close friend and crew member Clive 'Bardie' Wawn DFC Fellow later confronted him. 'You're a bastard, shooting at that Jerry in the parachute,' Wawn said. Bluey merely shrugged, flatly replying: 'He might have gone up tomorrow and shot you down.'

Truscott's success earned him a promotion to Flight Lieutenant and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He would later add a Bar. Additionally, his notoriety resulted in a fund-raising drive in which redheaded Britons 'bought' their hero his personalised Spitfire. Fittingly, he named it 'Gingerbread'. In late January 1942, he took command of the unit as Acting Squadron Leader.

The following month, he spearheaded an attack on a Kriegsmarine fleet attempting to flee through the English Channel. Although the Germans ultimately succeeded

RIGHT A sketch of Truscott, c. 1957. The red head was both a war hero and sporting icon in his native Australia.



during the infamous 'Channel Dash', Truscott received credit for damaging a destroyer, adding to his impressive total of 16 kills and four probables of Luftwaffe planes during his time in the ETO.

The Japanese bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942 necessitated the re-assignment of Australian pilots to the Pacific Theatre. Truscott joined RAAF 76 Squadron and posted to the strategically crucial eastern tip of Papua New Guinea. In addition to fighting a determined enemy, the pilots faced treacherous flying conditions marked by constant rain, low clouds, and a slippery, ramshackle airstrip. The deadly spread of malaria and other tropical diseases exacerbated the misery.

Flying a P-40 'Kittyhawk', Truscott took part in several crucial missions, including a decisive victory during the Battle of Milne Bay. The relentless air support helped secure the first major victory of the war against Japanese ground troops. He was later Mentioned in Dispatches and had a bronze oak leaf added to his DFC and Bar.

Ironically, the ace also found himself at odds with top brass during the campaign. Truscott had refused orders to evacuate his warbird to a more secure location at Port Moresby. Instead, he chose to stay behind with the ground crew members, vowing to fight with bayonet and rifle if necessary.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

No 76 Sqn later moved to Australia's Northern Territory, performing the more tedious role of patrolling the long, desolate coastline against the threat of invasion. Naturally, Truscott went looking for trouble. The redheaded squadron leader frequently challenged Japanese aircraft by turning on his navigation lights at night to attract fire and expose the enemy's position.

His devil-may-care swagger paid off in late January 1943, shooting down a Mitsubishi Type 1 G4M1 'Betty' bomber near Darwin. The scalp would be his last.

On 28 March 1943, he crashed his P-40E while carrying out mock attacks over Western Australia near Exmouth Gulf. The impact killed him instantly. A nation mourned the loss of its sporting icon, who became an ace and emerged as the best-known Australian pilot of the war. His remains were buried with full honours at Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth.

Numerous tributes followed, including the RAAF re-naming of Truscott Airfield in the Northern Territory. Also, his Spitfire Mk II (later upgraded to Mk V) can be found on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and the Melbourne Football Club annually awards the 'Bluey' Truscott Memorial Trophy for the best and fairest player. •

BELOW Keith Truscott aboard a P-40 'Kittyhawk' at Milne Bay, New Guinea, September 1942. He took part in several crucial and treacherous missions in the Pacific Theatre.



Images: Australian War Memorial