

Wing Commander Noel Constantine: a great Australian

Bryn Evans

Military Historian¹

Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales

29 July 2017 was the 70th anniversary of the death of Wing Commander Noel Constantine, one of Australia's outstanding fighter pilots of World War II, who was shot down by Dutch air force fighters while flying a humanitarian mission in Indonesia in 1947. As a consequence, Constantine's remarkable service has been largely forgotten. Bryn Evans recounts Constantine's story.

Key words: Noel Constantine; World War II; Indonesian war of independence; Battle of Britain; Burma Campaign; India; Royal Air Force; Japanese Army Air Force; Dutch Air Force.

At 30,000 feet in the skies above Calcutta on 20 January 1944, a veteran fighter pilot of the Battle of Britain looked down on two huge formations of Japanese fighters and bombers. Estimates at the time put their number between 50 and 100. Undaunted, Australian Squadron Leader Noel Constantine led his nine Mark VIII Spitfires of No. 136 Squadron Royal Air Force (RAF), onto the massed enemy fighters some 10,000 feet below.

In the confused and chaotic engagement that followed, and on his eighth diving attack, Constantine found two of Japan's new 'Tojo' *Shoki* (Demon) fighters on his tail. "I went into an inverted spin and blacked out completely. I came to, thought I was in hospital, and remember calling for tea."

Seconds after recovering some control of the Spitfire, Constantine passed out again. "When I recovered the second time, I was very near the jungle, and found the two Japs were firing immediately ahead of me. At treetop height, I darted down some gullies and luckily lost them."

Despite being vastly outnumbered, the Spitfires made good use of their clear edge in performance. In the ensuing dogfights, lasting about 20 minutes, Constantine's pilots claimed five victories, four probables and six damaged. Five days earlier on 15 January, Constantine's No. 136 Squadron had claimed eight enemy aircraft destroyed and nine probables or damaged, out of a total of 15 victories that day by all fighter squadrons. One British newspaper caption declared – "RAF 15, Japan 0!"

Constantine's War Service

At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Australian Flying Officer Noel Constantine was a fighter pilot in the RAF. He had been born in 1914 in Moama, New South Wales, and later lived with his widowed mother on Phillip Island, Victoria. After studying pharmacy at Melbourne University, in 1937 he

had travelled to London, where in 1938 he joined the RAF on a short-service commission.

Throughout the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, and the following winter, Constantine served with No. 141 Squadron RAF. He survived baling out twice, once to hang caught up in tree branches, and another time into the North Sea, before rescue. In late 1941, Constantine was promoted to squadron leader and posted to command No. 273 Squadron RAF in Ceylon, reaching there in March 1942. In mid-1943, he was appointed squadron leader of No. 136 Squadron, based close to Calcutta in India. It was one of the squadrons selected to convert to Spitfires. They and other Spitfire squadrons would lead the fight to wrest air superiority from the Japanese air force.

In the first half of 1944 when the Japanese invaded India, the Spitfire squadrons were thrown into a desperate 'last ditch' battle against the Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF). As in the Battle of Britain, they were the last line of defence as they fought for ascendancy in the skies above the crucial battles, first of the Admin Box, then Kohima and Imphal. Constantine's No. 136 Squadron became the highest-scoring fighter squadron in the Burma campaign. In late March 1944, in acknowledgement of his courageous leadership, Constantine was promoted to Wing Commander Tactics at Far East Command headquarters.

The eventual air supremacy gained over the JAAF enabled Allied ground forces to be supplied totally by air, putting the Japanese at a decisive disadvantage. It also allowed Allied air forces to eliminate air reconnaissance by the JAAF, minimise enemy interception of Allied air reconnaissance flights, and intensify their air-to-ground offensives against the Japanese army.

Wing Commander Constantine made a vital contribution to the Allies' defeat of Japan in the Burma campaign. Only the hard-won air supremacy established by Allied air forces in 1944 allowed General Slim's XIVth Army the essential logistics and air protection needed to drive back into Burma and finally recapture Rangoon in May 1945.

¹E-mail: bryn.evans@ozemail.com.au. These are his personal views.



Squadron Leader Noel Constantine (centre) with four pilots of No. 136 Squadron RAF

[Source: Private collection of Noel and Geoff Constantine; and Interservices Public Relations Directorate, India, Ref pen 547]

Indonesia 1947

Noel Constantine survived the war and resigned from the RAF in December 1946. On the afternoon of 29 July 1947 near Yogyakarta in Indonesia, Constantine was piloting a C-47 'Dakota' (VT-CLA) transport aircraft on a flight from Singapore into its final approach to Maguwo airfield. Constantine was accompanied by his wife Beryl, whom he had first met in Britain during the war. Constantine's Dakota was carrying medical supplies from the Malayan Red Cross for the Indonesians fighting for the recently declared Republic of Indonesia, and its independence from the Dutch East Indies colonial power. Earlier events at Maguwo were probably unknown to Constantine before he took off from Singapore. On that morning of 29 July, aircraft of the newly-founded Indonesian Air Force, *Angkatan Udara Republik Indonesia* (AURI), had attacked Dutch army positions. Later, two Dutch Kittyhawk fighters strafed Maguwo airfield and Yogyakarta.

Constantine was accompanied by another pilot, Squadron Leader Roy Hazelhurst, and on board, in addition to his wife Beryl, there were three senior officers of the fledgling Indonesian Air Force. A movement signal of the flight's route to Yogyakarta was sent from air traffic control (ATC) Singapore to ATC Batavia (Jakarta), who acknowledged the signal. Mid-flight, however, two Dutch P-40 Kittyhawk fighter planes intercepted the Dakota and, for a time, flew alongside observing. It had appeared to be a routine patrol. Now, suddenly in the final approach to Maguwo, machine-gun tracer fire zipped past the Dakota's wingtips. The two Kittyhawk fighters of the Dutch East Indies air force had fired at Constantine's aircraft.

Soon after being fired upon by the Kittyhawk fighters, Constantine's Dakota crashed in a village near the Maguwo airfield. Eyewitnesses said that the defenceless Dakota had lowered its under-carriage for landing when the Kittyhawks fired upon the Dakota and destroyed the port engine. One witness to the tragedy, Lieutenant

Colonel Peter Radcliffe of a London press agency, said: "Without question this is the most cowardly and brutal single action of folly, that I have ever seen ...". Only one passenger, Handokotjokro, survived the crash. Multiple bullet wounds from the Dutch fighters' attack were found in the victims' bodies.

The tragedy caused a flurry of international outrage and allegations involving Australia, Britain, the Netherlands, India, Indonesia, Malaya and other countries. The Netherlands Government in 1951 agreed to pay an *ex gratia* payment of compensation for the loss of lives and the plane. By inference, one can assume that they had no grounds for defending the actions of their fighter pilots.

Since then, 29 July has been marked by the Indonesian Republic as Indonesia Air Force Dedication Day. The three AURI crew members killed in the crash have had airports named after them, such as Adisutjipto in Yogyakarta. Wing Commander Alexander Noel Constantine, his wife Beryl Constantine, and his co-pilot, Squadron Leader Roy Hazelhurst, were buried in a cemetery in Yogyakarta where an AURI memorial commemorates their deaths.

After many years when it was thought that Constantine's grave had been lost, Michael Kramer, of the Australia/Indonesia Association, and the nephew of Noel, Geoff Constantine, in 2016 arranged for a headstone to be erected. On 29 July 2017, Michael Kramer, Geoff Constantine and representatives of the Indonesian Air Force and the Australian and Indonesian governments held a commemorative ceremony at Noel Constantine's graveside.

Conclusion

For nearly five years, Constantine had flown fighters in some of the toughest combat operations of the Second World War, including the Battle of Britain, before leading the highest-scoring fighter squadron in the skies of India and Burma against the ferocious and fanatical JAAF. Just to survive such knife-edged conflicts was in itself remarkable. Now, while flying a humanitarian mission, fate had caught up with him.

In the book *Wings of the phoenix: the official story of the air war in Burma* by the British Air Ministry, first published in 1949, Constantine was described as "a great Australian and an inspiring leader". The author, Wing Commander Leslie Kark, wrote that Noel: "... was a great and well-loved friend ... one of the finest fighter pilots of the Burma War ... so genuine and grand a person".

Because of his death in 1947, it meant that Constantine never received the wider recognition he deserved for his outstanding service during the Second World War and his support for the Indonesian independence struggle. He became, like so many others, just another statistic of whom most people know nothing. Perhaps, with some of his story recently retold², a little of his sacrifice will become better known.

²Bryn Evans (2016). *Air battle for Burma: allied pilots' fight for supremacy* (Pen and Sword: Barnsley, UK) Ursula Davidson Library call number 950 EVAN 2016 – reviewed in *United Service* 68 (1), 27 (March 2017).