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THE FLYING PRIME MINISTER

One day in 1940, a twenty-nine year old orchardist from Victoria's mallee country, walked into a recruitment office dressed in the tattered working clothes he wore on his orchard and said he wanted to be a fighter pilot.¹

The enlistment officer dubiously looked him over and muttered something about the educational qualifications required to be a pilot.

"I have a Master of Arts degree from Oxford" said John Grey Gorton who was to become one of Australia's post-war Prime Ministers.

A married man of his age with two children, a pregnant wife and a protected industry had no need to enlist but that was John Gorton.

At a farewell function in his home town of Mystic Park, some romantics said they hoped he would return with many battle ribbons. Gorton replied that it was his earnest wish to get an RSL badge.



Pilot Officer John Gorton, 1941.

During the Battle of Britain, he was training at Wagga Wagga on Wirraways and Tiger Moths and, having gained his commission as a Pilot Officer, he was posted to the RAF in Britain.

He found himself flying Spitfires from Honiley in Warwickshire until he was posted to No 135 Squadron in the Middle East.

By the time his ship had reached Durban, Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor and was advancing down the Malay Peninsular.

The Squadron and the crates containing Hurricanes were trans-shipped in a convoy to Singapore.

He was attached to No 232 Squadron and flew his Hurricane from Kallang aerodrome against the Japanese Zeros.

Towards the end of January, he crash-landed on Bintan Island about 48 km south-east of Singapore.²