



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PAPER NO: 48

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DATE: 23 November 1998

### 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

He suffered severe facial lacerations, fractured cheek bones and nasty wounds to both arms. A Dutch doctor treated some superficial wounds and a RAF sergeant, who had made the trip in an air-sea rescue boat, took one look at Gorton's black and bloated mutilated face and returned to Singapore without him.

A week later, another Australian pilot was forced down on Bintan and this time the rescue boat took both men back to Singapore.

On 12 February 1942, Gorton left Singapore on board the 4,900 tonne, partly unloaded ammunition ship, *Derrymore*, bound for Batavia, which managed to avoid the bombs and shells raining down in the harbour.

The *Derrymore* spent the night in the Java Sea about 70 km from Batavia (now Jakarta) waiting for daylight and the raising of the harbour defence booms.

About 9.00 pm on the 13th February, she was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine.

There was one lifeboat, a small dinghy, two rafts and three floats for 250 men. Then there was the ammunition that had not been unloaded at Singapore, another possible torpedo and the ever-present sharks.

Gorton found a tin of carrots, a bottle of whisky and a tin of fresh water and took to one of the rafts. There were so many survivors that the waterlogged raft floated below the surface and Gorton's tin of fresh water became spoilt. To add insult to injury, someone stole his whisky!

The culprit soon identified himself by singing loudly and providing, as it happened, much needed morale boosting entertainment for the men on the raft and in the water.

Gorton's injuries, which had received only superficial treatment and which were still extremely painful, now suffered further from the effects of sun and salt water.

Even so, Gorton rallied the men and had them row using their shoes as paddles and, when he was just about at the end of his tether, the Gorton luck struck again. when HMAS *Ballarat* steamed over the horizon. 3.

Her Captain, A.D. Barling, took on board his small corvette, with a crew of 90, the 215 survivors.



Balanced precariously on a half-submerged packing case, which once held the wing of an aeroplane, Gorton and other survivors from their torpedoed ship *Derrymore*, hail HMAS *Ballarat*.

John Gorton was plucked from the sea by Able Seaman William Ross who loaned him one of his uniforms whilst the overcrowded corvette made for Batavia. 4.

Gorton was hospitalised in Batavia and would eventually have been taken prisoner but for another stroke of luck when an old school mate discharged him to enable him to board a vessel for Fremantle.

There were 750 on board the small freighter and there was insufficient food and water but they arrived unscathed at Fremantle on 3 March 1942 where Gorton finally received proper medical attention. It wasn't over yet!

After a short leave, he was posted to No 77 RAAF Squadron to fly Kittyhawks. He was 31, his commanding officer was 21.

Whilst based in Darwin, he crash landed on Melville Island where he spent six days living like Robinson Crusoe on boiled turtle eggs!

His squadron then moved to Milne Bay where Gorton did it again. This time he crashed at the end of the runway. It was another miraculous escape.

Later in 1943 he was posted to an Advance Training Unit at Mildura not far from his family and, in 1944, with the rank of Flight Lieutenant, he was demobilised and he returned to his family and orchards with not a single decoration to show his local well-wishers.

On 5 February 1948, Flight Lieutenant John Grey Gorton MA was made a mason in Kerang Lodge No 100 United Grand Lodge of Victoria.<sup>5</sup>

In 1949, John Gorton was elected to the Senate and from 1958 to 1963, he was Minister for the Navy.<sup>6</sup>



John Gorton when Prime Minister.

Tragedy nearly struck again when, in 1961, he was a passenger in a RAN Dakota which circled Canberra for 4 hours while its crew tried to repair a faulty undercarriage. The Gorton luck saw him through and the aircraft landed safely. Aeroplanes and the navy again.

Perhaps, just perhaps, Bro John Gorton should have joined the army!

On 4 November, 1978, Able Seaman William John Ross was initiated in Lodge Hercules No 452 United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.<sup>7</sup>

Bill Ross discovered that John Gorton had attended a special international meeting held on 22 May 1970 at Northbridge and he invited him to attend his installation in Lodge Hercules in December 1982.<sup>8</sup>

Bro John Gorton sent an apology, and a letter of congratulation and best wishes, so Bill Ross was denied the opportunity to ask him to return the uniform he had given him 38 years earlier.

One wonders what Bro Bill Ross thought when he received the strong grip in masonry to assist mariners in landing when he was advanced to the Mark Degree in Roseville Royal Arch Chapter No 25.





The Prime Minister, Bro. John Gorton, at Lodge Frenchs Forest International Night at Northbridge on Friday, 22 May 1970 and, below, in a lighter vein.



#### NOTES

1. Alan Trengove, *John Grey Gorton - An Informal Biography*, Cassell Australia, 1969.
2. Australian Knowledge, *Australia's Prime Ministers*, Brodie Publishing, Sydney, 1985.
3. Frank Doak, *Royal Australian Navy - A Brief History*, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986.
4. William J. Ross, Personal information.
5. Grahame Cumming, *Freemasonry - Australian Prime Ministers*, The Masonic Historical Society of New South Wales, 1994.
6. *Who's Who in Australia*, Melbourne, 1998.
7. The United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and The Australian Capital Territory - Membership Records.
8. *The NSW Freemason*, Vol 3 No 2, August 1970.