



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Paper No. 202

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Date: 28 May 2012.

Wor. Bro. FREDERICK FOSTER COWPE
(HEROIC SPITFIRE PILOT)
1919-2011

Fred Cowpe was one of a rare breed, the Australians who flew Spitfires during World War II in the Royal Australian Air Force No. 453 Squadron. He was part of the air defence over the English Channel on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and two months later was hit while strafing a German truck convoy in Normandy. Despite his plane being on fire and being badly burnt and shot in both legs, he managed to fly safely to an Allied airfield. For his conspicuous bravery, and leadership, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the French Legion of Honour.

Frederick Foster Cowpe was born in 1919 in Parramatta Hospital to Annie Amelia (Nee Mackell) and Harry Barnes Cowpe.

The poultry farm where he grew up in Rooty Hill was a good place for an active, inquisitive boy. School years were spent at Marist Brothers in Parramatta where he enjoyed tennis, cricket and shooting. At 18 years of age Cowpe was the Penrith Rifle Club Champion.

He began work as an apprentice boilermaker/fitter with the NSW Rail Authority, and fell in love with a local girl, May O'Brien.

Then war broke out, Cowpe joined the Militia, 20/54th Infantry, but after the Battle of Britain was keen to fly and in 1941 was transferred to the RAAF as an air crew trainee.

He and May announced their engagement before his departure from Sydney on November 2, 1941, on board the Queen Elizabeth with the 6,500 AIF and 160 trainee pilots. First stop Egypt, and then on to England to learn on Tiger Moths and graduate to Spitfires. Skills were honed during three months flying in snow storms and gales in the Orkney Islands as part of the defence of Scapa Flow, the main anchorage of the British Fleet.

After D-Day, Cowpe was transferred to armed reconnaissance in Normandy. Due to his horrific injuries he spent three and a half months in Botley's Park Emergency War Hospital, Surrey, becoming one of the first servicemen to undergo trials using penicillin as a treatment for burns.

In 1945 he was discharged from the air force as medically unfit and needed rehabilitation to learn to walk again.

Cowpe returned to Australia and married May in 1945 at St. Oswald's Church of England, Haberfield.



Conspicuous bravery ... a painting of Fred Cowpe in his Spitfire and, right, Cowpe in his later years.



Money and materials were scarce in those postwar days, so it was with the help of mates that Cowpe built his first and only home in the then sleepy village of Mt. Druitt in western Sydney. The foundations were kerosene tins filled with concrete.

He trained as a meteorology officer working for a time at RAAF Schofield, and then at RAAF Richmond.

A daughter was born, Carleen May, named after the Spitfire he shared with another pilot on D-Day. A son, John completed the family.

Retirement at 60 years was the next milestone, and he and May travelled to Japan and Europe.

May died in 1991, so Cowpe travelled alone to Normandy for the 50th anniversary of D-Day.

The local community meant a lot to Cowpe and he worked hard for its success. He was a founding member of Rooty Hill RSL and worked on many committees and action groups. He served on the St. John's parish council, was a Past Master of Lodge Warragamba, as well as the View Club, the Historical Society, the airforce and the Spitfire associations, Probus and the Happy Wanderers Travel Club.

He made time to attend Grandparents' Day, athletics carnivals and other performances involving his grandchildren.

In 2004 he was awarded the keys to the city of Blacktown, and Fred Cowpe Reserve was named in his honour.

Cowpe did not speak much of the war to his family, but in 1995 the Australian Government launched the "Australia Remembers" documentaries and Cowpe's war career became public knowledge.

Fred Cowpe's version of his D-Day activities is typically tongue-in-cheek. After a 5 am briefing they had flown over the Channel to Omaha Beach. "There were Allied planes everywhere, and you had to keep a good lookout not to collide with another plane."

He chased two Mustangs thinking they were Me-109s and returned to base. After several sorties, he shot down a barrage balloon that had broken its moorings.

"That was my D-Day, four sorties, one balloon."

Despite ill health and blindness in his last year, Fred Cowpe kept his sense of humour and the ability to take what life dealt and get on with it. He is survived by his daughter, son and four granddaughters.

FREEMASONRY:

Frederick Foster Cowpe was Initiated in Lodge Warragamba, No. 541, aged 38, on 25th August 1958.

He was Passed Fellowcraft on the 24th November 1958 and raised a Master Mason on 26th January 1959.

He was Installed as Worshipful Master of the Lodge in October 1964.

His Master Mason's Certificate is No. 260054.

REFERENCES:

The Sydney Morning Herald *Timelines* 29 November 2011.

The UGL of NSW and the ACT - Membership Records.
