

A MAORI IN THE RAF



It is rumoured that someone in England is contemplating writing a book on the life of a young New Zealander named Bert Wipiti.

It is to be hoped that the rumour is true, and that the prospect can indeed be seen to fruition, through the medium of a book (Bert Wipiti was a New Plymouth lad), such a book would pay a long overdue tribute to those whose Maoris whose military service in the Second World War tended to be carried out rather much in the shadow of that most illustrious fighting formation, the 98th (Maori) Battalion.

It is with a sense of sadness that one refers to the proposed book as being the "life" of Bert Wipiti, in terms of years it was not much of a life, for it was ended at a time when most other young men consider their lives to be really war-ming up.

BIOGRAPHIES

Anyone who cares to pick up any of the official New Zealand war histories of the 1939-45 conflict and read the brief biographies that appear at the bottoms of many of the pages will quickly recognise that New Zealand's war heroes were certainly not "to the manor born." Great deeds were performed, and decorations won with equal merit by those who came from the homes of the landed gentry and from the rudest of bush cottages.

Certainly there was nothing in Bert Wipiti's background to suggest that he might become a war hero, other than, perhaps, the fact that he chose to try out for the air force rather than the army.

Bert Sam Wipiti was born on January 16, 1922. His family lived on Mangorei Road in what is now the suburb of Merrilands. After leaving the New Plymouth

Flt/Sgt E. Karatau (the first Maori Spitfire pilot) and P/O E. Bennett.

AIR DEFENCES

In 1941, in the face of the threat to peace in Asia and the Pacific, Britain made a belated bid to build up its air defences in the region. There were already bombers, torpedo bombers, seaplanes and reconnaissance aircraft in



Flt/Sgt C. T. Kronk, Napier (born Taranaki).

Malaya, and to them were hastily added four squadrons of fighter planes.

Australia and New Zealand were called upon to help. New Zealand provided 488 Squadron RNZAF and Australia sent 453 and 21 Squadrons RAAF. To these squadrons was added one RAF unit, 243 Squadron. This squadron had first been formed during the latter stages of the First World War as a seaplane unit on coastal defence work. It was disbanded after the war and reformed for the first time at Kallang Airfield, on Singapore Island, on March 11, 1941.

This RAF squadron was a

McNabb and Claude Ellingham. (In fact, there were 26 New Zealanders in all in 243 Squadron).

FARE EAST

As all service people did in the fabled Far East, the New Zealanders of 243 Squadron found the life to be indolent and pleasant, spoiled only to a certain degree by the knowledge that other of their countrymen were in action over Europe and North Africa while they were luxuriating in the tropical sun with all the comforts normally showered upon the paying tourist.

At some time during the war Bert Wipiti sent home a small photograph album, some of the pictures from which are reproduced with this article. It contains pictures taken on the sea voyage from Canada to Singapore and others taken in Malaya and Java during the idyllic lull before the great storm. Among the latter are a number of snaps taken at a Singapore rubber estate named Ulu Tiram. It was run by a New Zealand couple, Mr and Mrs Pincott, and the luxurious home stood with its doors ever open to the New Zealanders when they were on leave.

IDYLLIC LIFE

The idyllic life had to end. Looking back today, it seems so appalling that it should have ended so "unexpectedly." That idyllic life had been part of a great malaise of arrogance and apathy which affected both the civil and military populations of the Far East and the defence planners back home in England.

The story of what Winston Churchill so bitterly referred to as "a disgrace to British arms" is a well enough known one. Unfortunately Churchill's

outburst still tends to reflect on the courage and fighting abilities of the soldiers, sailors and airman who fought in Malaya. In fact, they fought as well as their equipment and the achievements of the planners would allow. The bitterness over the fall of Singapore even pervaded the ranks to cause ongoing miscarriages of justice.

OUTCRIES

During the fight for Malaya, and even long after the war, for example, outcries were heard against the air force's apparent absence from the skies. And they were justifiable outcries too, coming as they did from people who saw Japanese planes bombing them with absolute impunity without there being a sign of any British air force opposition. But while there were those who cursed the RAF, there were others who knew and understood how desperately a gallant "few" had tried to do even more for so many than those of their fellow countrymen who had so earned Churchill's re-sounding praise a year earlier in the Battle of Britain.

Between them, when the war started, the four fighter squadrons in Malaya had 43 Brewster Buffalo planes between them. The Buffalo was certainly not a pilot's dream. It was already obsolete when the war started. It was slow, heavy, terribly reluctant to respond to the pilot's demands, poorly armed and too lightly armoured itself. Furthermore, those allocated to the Malaya squadrons were all but worn out and were without tools, spare parts and accessories.

The terrible inadequacies of the Buffalo were made evident on the night of



Flt/Sgt B. S. Wipiti, DFM and Bar (1922-1943).

December 8, 1941, when the Japanese began making their landings on the northeast coast of Malaya. The RAF air forces in Malaya had done no training in night fighting, but up went the fat little Buffaloes just the same, only to suffer the incredible humiliation of not even being able to climb fast enough to reach the impudent bombers.

On the next day the Japanese flew arrogantly over all of the British airfields in Malaya. British planes were destroyed on the ground in their dozens, taken completely by surprise! Fighters which managed to get off the ground managed to give their pilots another round of humiliating experiences in either not being able to get within "coo-ee" of the enemy, or of being so easily batted out of the skies by Japanese fighters that literally ran rings around them.

LOW LEVELS

At Kallang airfield 243 Squadron, which had the responsibility for protecting the city of Singapore, went through all of these humiliations. The Japanese raided Singapore daily with as many as 80 planes at a time, flying over in great sheets at ridiculously low

levels. Each time they came over the Buffaloes heaved themselves up into the air. Those who managed to climb to within reach of the enemy were invariably batted back down again, but all too often it was the simple humiliation of toiling painfully upwards, foot by panting foot, only to see the raid come to an end and the bombers veer away for home just as the desired altitude was reached.

By mid December 243 Squadron had ceased to exist as an entity. It is recorded as having been officially disbanded at that time. It was disbanded all right. It was down to three or four planes, which were kept in the air only by the cannibalising of parts from those that had fallen victim to enemy action and sheer exhaustion. Indeed it was fortunate for the squadron that there was a complete respite in the bombing of Singapore after the first week and up until the first day of 1942.

EVACUATE

The raids came every sometimes directed at the city, at other times at the various airfields or at the ships trying so desperately to evacuate Singapore's (Continued on Page 8)



Ice cream at sea, en route from Canada to Singapore. From left, Bert Wipiti, Claude Ellingham, Steele Tanner, Ron McNabb, Jack Warner and Charlie Kronk.

Boys' High School, Wipiti trained as a refrigerator serviceman. On the outbreak of war he hurried to join the RNZAF and trained at Ohakea to emerge as a fully qualified pilot.

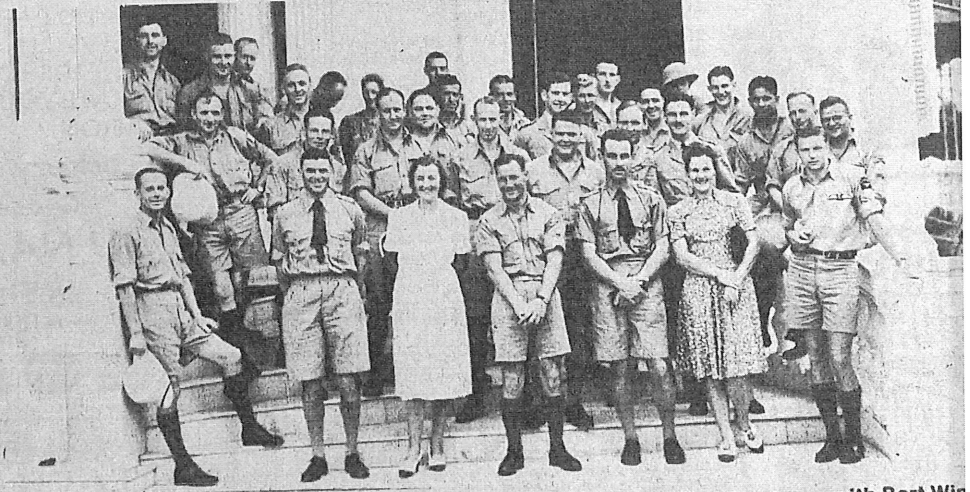
FIRST MAORI

When he was sent from New Zealand to Canada for further training, it was with the honour of being the first Maori pilot to leave New Zealand — the first of a comparatively small but illustrious group who carried the traditional Maori skills-at-arms with signal honour into a strange new area of war.

Incidentally, the first Maori pilot to reach England was Flt/Sgt P. Poho. He was to die in the massacre of escaping POWs from Stalag Luft 3 in 1944. Others to make names for themselves and their race included F/O J. Wetere, F/O M. Milich,

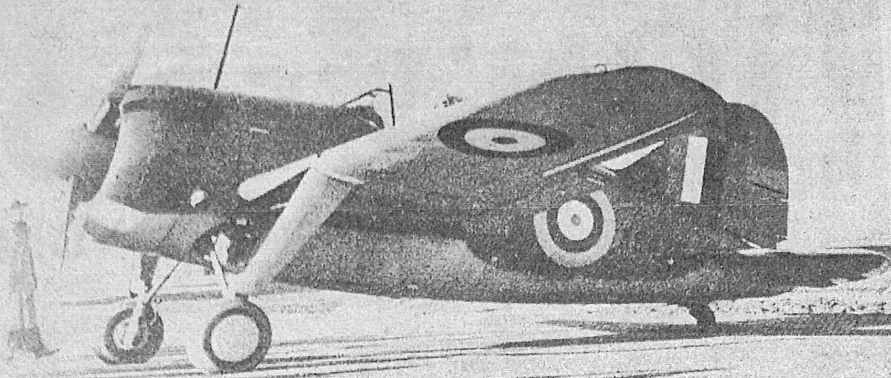
scratch one in every sense of the word. It was formed around a small core of experienced officers, spared only in miserly fashion from the embattled homeland. Pilots were recruited largely from among surplus members of the Malaya-based bomber squadrons, and were put through crash courses in "changing down" from Blenheims and Wildebeeste's to lumbering, snub-nosed Brewster Buffaloes.

The shortfall was made up of New Zealand pilot trainees who had been earmarked for service in England, but were now hastily diverted to Singapore. Among these men were six New Zealanders recalled from their training in Canada. They were Bert Wipiti, Charlie Kronk (from Kohuratahi), Jack Warner, Steele Tanner, Ronald



Members of 243 Squadron on leave. Charlie Kronk is on the right in the front row, with Bert Wipiti sitting up behind him.

Maori in the RAF



(Continued from Page 5)

civilian European population.

It seems incredible that in all this time, throughout all of these low-altitude and level-flown raids, not a single Japanese plane had been brought down; it speaks volumes for the utter uselessness of the Brewster Buffalo as a fighter plane. It was not until January 10 that the first rectification was achieved.

Besides trying to protect Singapore city from bombing, 243 Squadron's main task was to patrol out over the sea in order to be able to give early warning of the Japanese seaborne invasion of the island that everyone still imagined would take place.

TARANAKIANS

At first light on January 10 the first pair of planes took off for the day. They were piloted by 243 Squadron's two Taranakians, Flight Sergeants Bert Wipiti and Charlie Kronk. As their fat little planes mumbled and muttered their fractious way up toward their patrolling altitude before setting out on their sweep out to sea, neither of the pilots could have had any idea that they were about to make history.

One of their long and painful climbing circles took the two planes over the seaward end of the Straits of Johore. Suddenly they found themselves sharing air space with a single Japanese bomber, a pathfinder plane, leading the day's flock of bombers toward Singapore.

For the first time in the war a pair of Brewster pilots found themselves actually above a low flying enemy plane. Wipiti fired first, at long range, and a burst of smoke swelled from the engine. Kronk followed. His burst of machinegun fire sent the Japanese plane tumbling away into the jungle in flames.

In the midst of a war in which Battle of Britain plane losses had been counted in their hundreds, this single kill in the skies over Singapore was quite a sensation. It is difficult now to ascertain exactly what Wipiti and Kronk did achieve. Certainly they brought down the first Japanese plane over Singapore, but it was also claimed at the time that they were the first British Empire pilots to notch up a combat success in the war against Japan.

It was a gallant gesture; but it was only a gesture. On January 15 the RNZAF 488 Squadron shot down the second Japanese plane, and another two on the 18th, but time, planes and pilots were running out fast. With the loss of the mainland on January 27, and with preparations being made to defend Singapore Island against the undreamed-of landward attack, the evacuation of the remaining air force personnel began. There was nothing more that they could do, and they would soon be needed to better advantage elsewhere.

SURVIVING

243 Squadron was one of the first to withdraw, by way of the Dutch East Indies, to India. Rather, it was the surviving members of the squadron, as the squadron had long since ceased to exist. Its members were taken to Calcutta for retraining and posting to new units. While there, Flt/Sgt Bert Wipiti was awarded a Distinguished Flying Medal. His citation stated:

"Sgt Wipiti carried out a large number of operational flights against the enemy and has displayed outstanding courage and determination whilst engaging large formations of enemy aircraft. He has set a fine example to all."

Unfortunately much of the gilt was taken from the occasion for Bert Wipiti

because his longtime comrade Charlie Kronk, was killed at Calcutta in a flying accident in May 1942.

From India Bert Wipiti went to England where he was posted to the New Zealand Spitfire Squadron. With the rank of Warrant Officer he soon earned a bar to his DFM.

On October 3, 1943, he was on an operational flight over the English Channel when his formation was engaged by enemy planes. A confused melee ensued among lowering clouds. When it was over, Bert Wipiti did not rejoin his flight. He was never seen again.



HOSPITAL VISITING,
WEDNESDAY, 11TH
NOVEMBER: Stuart
Hayton, Ron Harding and
Ted Malcolm, Visitors to
Rangimarie and Barrett
Street Hospitals are Reg
Adams, Trevor Casey, Bok
Brighthouse, Bill Cubbon and
Eddie Stevens

CAFETERIA MEALS
Please note that Thursday
meals have been discon-
tinued. Friday meals are
lunch from 12.0 to 2.0 p.m.
and the Smorgasbord from
6.0 p.m. to 8.0 p.m. and on
Saturdays.

Smorgasbord meal
available at the same time
AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION:
The Air Force Association
will join the Brevet Club
for Christmas Function
December 5th, meeting
5.00 p.m. More details
Newsletter, or from Ger
85-064 or Nancy 89-080.

R.S.A. WOMEN'S SECTION
COFFEE MORNING:
WEDNESDAY, 18TH
NOVEMBER. (Tradition
table.) The Women's Section
Christmas social will
be held on Wednesday, 5th
December, at the
Clubrooms commencing