

Local hero

The modesty and mild manner of Wilf Goold, a former furniture salesman with a penchant for painting, give no hint of the ace flier's colourful war history, writes **Chad Watson**.



Many of the young men pictured were shipped overseas but never came back. Goold learnt to fly Tiger Moths at Tamworth, where he became friends with a bloke called Bob Frith, who belonged to the famous retail family from Lake Macquarie.

'Turns out we were second cousins,' he says. 'Our maternal antecedents were the Creberts, as in the street at Mayfield.'

Goold did further training at Wagga Wagga then was granted seven days' leave before being told to report in Sydney for 'embarkation'. That was just long enough for him to travel home and propose to his sweetheart Phyllis, who waited three years for him to return.

Family and friends were not allowed on the dock when Goold and the other fresh-faced Australian servicemen boarded the *SS Awatea* bound for Canada.

'Bob Frith told me his wife had hired a launch to follow us down the harbour ... we saw her and waved,' he recalls. 'That was the last time Bob saw his wife as he was killed in the Middle East.'

Goold, hooking up with Gamble, landed in Vancouver then caught a troop train across country, before heading for England.

Goold and Gamble signed up with a charity organisation that placed visiting airmen with British families. They were billeted to Sir Alan and Lady Rae-Smith and often shared lunch with their daughter, Mary, who once invited her friend Sarah Churchill (as in Prime Minister Winston Churchill's offspring).

'My first glimpse of war came when we were having drinks in the Royal Bath Hotel,' Goold says. 'The air-raid siren went and suddenly these almighty explosions shook the building. Everyone dived for cover except the girls - they were used to it.'

Goold was eventually assigned to RAF squadron 607 stationed at Manston in Kent, which was the aerodrome nearest to France.

Goold had a close call searching for a 'bandit' in thick cloud above the English Channel.

'I lost my leader, so I let down my Hurricane through the cloud and came out over this ship which had coloured lights coming up,' he says. 'It was one of ours shooting at me! The Royal Navy believed in asking questions later.'

In early 1942, his squadron was involved in an unsuccessful attempt to stop three Nazi battleships from making a dash up the channel. 'Both sides lost something like 100 planes each,' he recalls.

The 607 squadron was transferred to India, where it was confronted by the worst monsoon of the century and swarms of Japanese 'Oscars'.

'There were 21 in the squadron but 12 of us would get scrambled at a time,' he says. 'We would go up against 50-plus, sometimes 100-plus, Jap planes flying in a beehive formation ... originally, I just concentrated on getting in and out alive.'

Goold, who endured two bouts of dengue fever, had an early airborne scare when the fuselage of his



Cover picture

Wilf Goold's portrait is superimposed over a painting by historian Jim Turner from the latter's book *The RAAF At War*. It depicts Goold's dogfight on February 9, 1944, over Burma with two Japanese 'Oscars', both of which he brought down.

AUSTRALIA'S Chief of Air Force, Angus Houston, had no time to waste during his visit to Williamstown RAAF Base last weekend.

Air Marshal Houston had flown in especially to oversee a parade by the award-winning No.26 City of Newcastle Reserve Squadron.

He was being briefed in the officers' mess when someone mentioned that a flying 'ace' - only 57 Australians earned the title during World War II - had arrived to watch the ceremony.

Although the formal proceedings were due to begin in half an hour and the 'ace' was not on the VIP list, Houston wanted to meet the 83-year-old gentleman from New Lambton Heights.

He promptly ventured outside to find Wilf Goold, whom *Weekender* was accompanying.

'I have to change into my uniform now but I wanted to say "hello",' the air force chief said with hand extended. 'It's great you could make it here.'

Goold needs a walking stick to get around nowadays but his mind is sharper than the front end of an F/A-18.

Houston had heard a little about the Novocastrian's decorated tours of duty on the Indian subcontinent and wanted to know more.

Goold confirmed he had scored 'five kills and a few probables' (not to mention eight 'damaged'), but he rarely boasted about them among civilians.

Houston revealed his father was a fighter pilot of similar vintage and had been held in the German stalg from which the 'Great Escape' took place.

The graciousness of the air force chief was as impressive as the modesty of the octogenarian.

(Goold revealed later that Houston was not the 'biggest brass' he had encountered. Sixty-odd years ago he escorted Lord Louis Mountbatten, the supreme Allied commander of South-East Asia: 'They both seem like decent fellows.')

Before disappearing back inside the mess, Houston turned to yours truly: 'It's important you are writing Wilf's story. It's people like him who established the traditions and values that the RAAF holds in such high regard.'

And what a story it is.

WILFRED Arthur Goold was born into a prominent Hamilton family on February 2, 1919. His father, W.J. Goold, was a noted businessman, city alderman and devoted historian.

'There's a room named after him in Newcastle Regional Library,' Wilf junior explains.

Wilf was a pupil at Hamilton Public School when his dad opened a furniture store in Hunter St, now the headquarters of NIB health funds.

Everyone expected Wilf, as the eldest son, to take over the business, which later moved to the corner of Hunter and Auckland streets, but he had other ideas. He left Newcastle Boys High at 16 to enrol in arts school, learning from respected teacher Reg Russom.

'When I told my father about my plans he "ummed" and "ahhed" but eventually agreed if I got a diploma,' he says.

Also studying watercolour landscapes under George Daniels, the teenager earned a 'patron' in the wife of the then Anglican Bishop of Newcastle, Francis de Witt Batty: 'She bought my paintings for £5 then passed them on as gifts.'

Goold went to Sydney on weekends for oil and portrait lessons from Archibald Prize winner Henry Hanke. 'Henry earned his money doing those sports posters you used to see on hotels,' he says.

Goold's burgeoning art career was cut short by World War II. Having joined the Citizen Military Forces after his 18th birthday in 1937, he realised the army was not his billy of tea so he enlisted in the air force upon war breaking out.

'I went to the recruiting depot hoping to get a job doing camouflaging or something,' he says. 'I told them I was an artist but there was nothing in that line so they suggested air crew. I had never been in a plane and my parents got into a flap about it.'

Their neighbour Les Irwin, a former 'fly boy' who happened to be in charge of air crew enlistment, stayed calm and set about classifying the 20-year-old as a pilot.

Goold was sworn in six weeks later at Woolloomooloo: 'My serial number is 403135. That's something a serviceman never forgets.'

It was at Woolloomooloo that he met his 'closest mate', Sydneysider and fellow trainee Keith Gamble. They kept bumping into each other by virtue of the military's penchant for alphabetical order and remain in regular contact today.

Tears form behind Goold's bifocals as he leafs through an album of photographs from this period.





Hurricane was peppered by machine-gun blast over Burma. But when the squadron switched to Spitfires, his dogfighting skills became legendary among the South-East Asian Command.

'I became quite knowledgeable about air combat,' he says. 'I could tell what the Japanese fighters were trying to do before they did it.'

Goold is lionised in many an RAAF history book. Most make mention of a particularly fearless assault during the battle for the Imphal Valley, considered a major turning point of the war.

'I got one Oscar and there was this huge white explosion before I saw a body fall out,' he says. 'Instead of pulling up like I normally did, I slipped under a couple more and hit another one that burst into flames.'

But even heroes are helpless when it comes to mechanical failure.

Goold was doing a run beyond enemy lines when his engine starting leaking glycol at 35,000ft.

'Before I knew it, there was fire all over the cockpit and my commanding officer was telling me to "bail out",' he says. 'There was no way I was going to do that over the jungle, so I turned everything off and the flames died out. I started gliding towards an airstrip in the distance. It was inside friendly territory but not by much.'

Goold crash-landed in the clearing. Dazed from a head gash and incapacitated by leg injuries, he was 'slightly alarmed' when four Asians in a jeep came tearing out of the trees.

'I thought they were Japanese,' he says. 'But they turned out to be (Nepalese) Gurkha coming to help.'

Flight Lieutenant Goold was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts in Burma. The citation refers to a 'most gallant and successful fighter pilot' whose 'skill, judgment and courage set a fine example'.

He declined a promotion offered as enticement to stay on the subcontinent. Half his original colleagues

were dead and he was concerned about becoming overconfident:

'They wanted to give me a squadron after three tours. I said "Thanks very much, but I think I've had enough".'

GOOLD married Phyll within a week of touching down in Australia in June 1944.

After being discharged from the military, he was solicited by a commercial airline but realised his father dearly wanted him to fill his spot as head of the furniture business. Wilf junior had logged some 1200 flying hours but never took the controls of a plane after folding up his uniform for the last time.

Entering the retail world was a difficult transition, especially as stocks were depleted due to the war.

'I was used to giving orders - not doing the orders for a store,' he says.

and closed about 12 years ago.

Bruce, meanwhile, inherited his dad's artistic streak. He holds his own exhibitions and has worked as an illustrator for a Sydney newspaper and a graphic artist for government authorities.

Goold rediscovered his own passion for art upon retiring 20 years ago.

'My children convinced me to try a private art course,' he explains. 'I only went to one class but it was enough to get over the mental barrier.'

A member of both the Newcastle Business Club and Newcastle Art Society, Goold's watercolour-and-ink creations hang in the offices and homes of well-connected folk throughout the city.

Despite suffering a minor stroke last year, he is still a prolific painter. Indeed, his home studio is overflowing with depictions of Hunter beaches, lakes, bushland and mountains.

High flier: Wilf Goold in the cockpit of a Hurricane in India in 1942, above, and in Burma in 1944, above left, and in his home art studio in New Lambton Heights, facing page, where he enjoys spending much of his spare time these days.

We would go up against 50-plus, sometimes 100-plus, Jap planes flying in a beehive formation ... originally, I just concentrated on getting in and out alive.

Goold decided to go upmarket and moved next door into a bigger Auckland St showroom (now used by Performing Arts Newcastle).

Calling on his artistic flair, he introduced a home-decorator service while concentrating on quality bedding and floor coverings.

Goold Interiors literally became a household name around the region.

He occasionally thought about returning to his brushes and palette but struggled to find time or inspiration between the business and raising a family.

He and Phyll have four children: Doug, Elizabeth, Bruce and Jillian.

Their eldest, Doug, took over the family operation in the mid-1980s.

The store became part of a multi-national franchise

BACK to Williamstown last weekend and Goold is being introduced to City of Newcastle squadron leader Linda New.

Goold is a little worried because he doesn't know whether to address her as 'sir' or 'ma'am'.

'There were no female commanding officers back in my day,' he says.

The pair shares a quiet word while the former takes a well-earned rest.

'You've got an impressive record,' notes New, who joined the RAAF in 1984 as a supply officer cadet and has a bright future in the force.

'In fact, my dad would love to talk with you.'

So would many people but Wilf prefers to stay in stealth mode. **W**