

# SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

## Memories Of Flight-Lieutenant Eric Griffiths

**F**LIGHT - LIEUTENANT ERIC GRIFFITHS has met his death on active service, a fitting end to an amazingly adventurous life. Had he lived a few hundred years earlier, he would have been a gentleman adventurer, conquering Heaven alone knows what worlds. Born out of time, he still followed the calling of adventurer, and while he conquered no worlds, he fought valiantly in the most heroic lost cause of our times, that of Republican Spain.

The tragedy of his early death—he was not yet 30—is that while he had lived fully and done so much, there was so much more for him to do.

I first met Eric Griffiths at a big aero display at Rongotai aerodrome, Wellington, shortly after his return from Spain; a big, bulky young man with a slow drawl and a fast little red sports car with which he used to frighten the lives out of any of his friends rash enough to ride with him. (Tyres worn to the wall didn't worry him nor abate his speed three miles an hour.) "If that so-and-so thinks he can pass me like that he's mistaken. I'll show him what this buggy can do." And down would go his foot.

At the aero display he was giving a commentary on a mock battle taking place thousands of feet up, a small fighter buzzing angrily round a lumbering bomber. "Don't forget that if it were actual combat the fighter would have to watch several machine gunners in the bomber," he cautioned. "From my experience, I would just as soon be in the bomber."

### Wounded by the Rebels

He should have known. He served with the Republican Air Force long enough to collect a bag of seven Rebels before he himself was shot down with a bullet in his shoulder. He and his squadron were flying crazy old Nieuports (top speed 140 miles an hour compared with the Italian 'planes 250, and two

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They will balance a little side-slipping of the three R's against a great accretion of civic experience, of co-operative effort, of a little learning of the trade instead of merely the tools.

Children shelling peas on a hospital lawn; children delivering A.R.P. sand to householders; children tending the city gardens, children finding their own way in little groups from job to job in their own city; children singing together, making puppets together; together studying their railway station, their fire brigade, their newspaper offices; sketching their city; working in their city; doing all this not idly, but purposively; that is the picture that Palmerston North education presents in an emergency.

Only permanency could make it a prettier picture.

machine guns firing forward through the propeller and occasionally shooting it off). One rainy day he and four other Nieuports were out on patrol; he became separated from his companions and, his job finished, he turned and headed for his field which was near Madrid.

But the story is best told in the slightly lurid language of Major Fred Lord, who wrote up the exploit in *Flying Aces*, an American aviation magazine. "Griff was sure none of the enemy would be crazy enough to be up in such weather, and so he must have relaxed his vigilance. And it was just at that fateful moment that streams of lead suddenly spanged across the storm-swept skies. That fiery hail of destruction was his first hint that two fast Fiat furies were smashing down on his aged, aching Nieuport. Frantically he jerked at his stick—jerked too late. An explosive bullet tore into his shoulder, almost blew his arm off."

### On Both Cheeks

Making allowances for the sensationalism demanded by readers of *Flying Aces*, that was pretty near how it happened, Eric told me. His arm went numb, and when he felt with his other hand, it came away wet with blood. He got home to his aerodrome somehow, fainted, and spent the next few months in hospital, intermittently tortured by probings after bone splinters.

When he was convalescent, he was given the rank of Captain, command of a training station, and a decoration. The ceremony of decorating him was carried out with typical Spanish emotion. Eric described it with slow good humour in a radio interview in New Zealand. "This general or colonel chap," he drawled, "pinned a medal on my chest and then kissed me on both cheeks. I kissed him on only one."

### Start of His Career

But to get back to the start of Eric Neville Griffiths's adventurous career. He learned to fly soon after leaving Wellington College, with the Wairarapa Aero Club, there met Squadron Leader M. C. McGregor, and promptly threw in his lot with "Mad Mac," as flyers affectionately knew him, and "Scotty" Fraser the parachutist. It was a daredevil apprenticeship; twice he doubled for Fraser in parachute jumps; he was just 17 at the time.

Early in 1932 he turned up in China, in the market for any flying job that offered, in spite of having flown only light aircraft in New Zealand. A provincial war-lord engaged him to ferry modern war machines from Shanghai to bases in the interior. The first were Armstrong Whitworth XVI's. "The first time you climb into one of these and open the throttle you don't know whether you're coming or going," he wrote home. He walked out of the wreck of the first one, but flew the others.

The pay was good, but the war-lord's paper money practically valueless, and after an interlude in a tank corps, he came home, to look round for whatever other adventures might be offering.

The Jacob Ruppert, bearing Admiral Byrd to the Antarctic, was in Wellington. Eric met Byrd in the lounge of a Wellington hotel, and signed on with the expedition as aircraft mechanic. He stayed in Little America just long enough to get bored, heard news of the Melbourne Centenary air race, and came home as fast as he could. Here he tried to raise money to buy a second-hand Lockheed Vega, and corresponded frantically at the same time with the Vultee factory in the U.S.A. Finance, naturally, couldn't be raised just like that, and the race started without him. Eric sold vacuum cleaners and worked as a hall porter in a hotel.

Then in England, a brief job on the ground staff of Imperial Airways was followed by a series of stunts, the full story of which will probably never see the light, but which eventually landed him in Spain in the Republican Air Force. This much can be told. Eric bought up, at bargain prices, no fewer than 40 obsolete 'planes from the R.A.F. and set about to ferry them to Spain to the Republicans. (In those days, remember, the Republicans were in low water indeed as regards equipment. They flew ancient Nieuports, Breguets, Vickers Wallabys, and Farmans, an occasional tri-motor Focker, Monospars, Miles Falcon. The Rebels had gun-bristling Italian Fiats and German Heinkels). Eric still, theoretically, owned a score or two of ancient aircraft, though the chances are they were scrap metal long ago.

### Fighting on Salary and Commission

Flying for the Loyalists, he was paid very much as he had been paid for selling vacuum cleaners—so much salary, so much commission. The salary was 1,500 dollars a month, the commission 1,000 dollars for every 'plane shot down. It was no routine job of ferrying, but war in grim earnest. Flyers carried automatic pistols and orders to save the last bullet, not as a death-or-glory gesture but as a very sensible precaution against falling alive into the hands of Franco's Moors. The mortality rate was high enough. Of the 20 in Eric's squadron 16 were killed, three wounded.

Flyers he met in other squadrons included Harold Dahl (who was saved from one of Franco's firing squads by the celebrated bathing suit photograph of a good-looking American girl who posed as his wife and traded on Franco's sentimentality) and the writer Olaf de Wett, author of *Cardboard Crucifix*.

After leaving Spain Eric paid a short visit to America, where he worked for a while for the Douglas Company and wrote radio plays which he would never be persuaded to show his friends. Back in New Zealand, he flew for Union Airways but soon got tired of tripping regularly from one place to another, and one day in Wellington he confided to me that he had had an offer from the Chinese Government to fly against the Japanese. It was another salary and commission job; so much a month, so



ERIC GRIFFITHS  
As a fighter for Republican Spain

much for every 'plane brought down, and a whacking bonus if he accounted for anything in the nature of a river gunboat.

### To China Again

Just before he left he was toying with the idea of making a fortune by taking newsreel close-ups of aerial dog-fighting. In Spain, American newsreel companies had paid up to 1,000 dollars for good shots. All he needed was a light, portable camera. I arranged an introduction to an executive of Cinesound in Sydney, but his second China venture did not turn out as well as he had hoped, and he came home again, this time to join up with the R.N.Z.A.F.

There is a certain melancholy irony for me in the fact that Eric apparently considered me a suitable companion for a Richard Halliburton-ish aerial jaunt around the world which he was considering at one time, and invited me to join him. Several things prevented me from even considering it, and Munich, which came shortly afterward, confirmed me in my decision. While in China, Eric met Halliburton himself, and was pressed to accompany Halliburton in a voyage from Hong Kong to America in a sampan. Eric cabled his wife in Wellington, asking her advice, and was strongly dissuaded. Halliburton sailed, and has not been heard of since. And now Eric Griffiths has gone too.

—J.G.M.