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**THE ‘MOROTAI MUTINY’:
Leadership and Morale in Australia’s Pacific Air War**

by

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Abstract

The 'Morotai Mutiny' is a unique event in the annals of Australian military history. In April 1945, with Allied victory in the Pacific within sight, eight senior Australian airmen submitted applications to resign from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to protest the parlous waste of life and resources they believed were occurring in their area of operation. While not a mutiny in the truest sense of the word, this radical action attracted immediate leadership intervention from the highest echelons of the RAAF. The personal involvement of the RAAF's Chief of the Air Staff ultimately resulted in both the removal of the senior leadership team of the RAAF's frontline air organization and a governmental inquiry which ultimately vindicated the veracity of the airmen's claims. With this event at its centre, this paper highlights the pivotal importance of engaged and effective leadership on the maintenance of combat morale. In doing so, this paper also explores how professional duty to the organization and the feelings surrounding personal duty to oneself and the nation can motivate military behavior.

From September 1942 onwards, the Allies prosecuted an increasingly successful campaign against the Japanese in the Pacific during the Second World War. While Australian forces had been pivotal in turning the tide against the Japanese advance in Papua New Guinea, General Douglas MacArthur increasingly used American air and land forces as the vanguard of the Allied advance towards the Japanese home islands. By early 1945, with the Philippines and Iwo Jima recaptured, the battle for Okinawa underway, and the invasion of Borneo imminent, Allied triumph was almost within sight. Despite this advantageous position, in April 1945 eight senior Australian airmen, including the country's highest-scoring fighter pilot, simultaneously requested immediate resignation from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to protest what they saw as a parlous waste of lives and resources to achieve final victory. This radical and remarkable action, since referred to as the 'Morotai Mutiny,' resulted in rapid leadership intervention and a governmental inquiry, which ultimately vindicated the officers' position. With this extraordinary event at its centre, this study will examine the critical importance of effective leadership on the morale of men in combat and explore the key participants' views of duty to the organization and their conscience as a motivating factor in their dissent.¹

The island of Morotai in the Dutch East Indies represented one of the stops along General MacArthur's 'island-hopping' campaign to retake the Philippines and advance to the Japanese home islands. Construction of major military facilities began on Morotai following the Allied invasion of September 1944, with the island becoming a stepping-off point for two different elements of the Pacific war effort – the American advance to the north into the Philippines and Australian efforts in Borneo to the west. Based in Morotai from October 1944, the RAAF's frontline organisation in the Pacific was the First Tactical Air Force (1TAF), consisting of 16,900 personnel and sixteen squadrons of fighter and attack aircraft, commanded by Air

Commodore Harry Cobby, Australia's greatest fighter ace of the First World War and a highly decorated airman.²

On 5 January 1945, in a letter to the commanders of all air forces in the Pacific, General George Kenney, MacArthur's air component commander, outlined the probable operations and air force dispositions for the first three months of 1945. For 1TAF and the United States' Thirteenth Air Force, Kenney indicated that their key role would be to defend the Allied flanks to the west and prepare for ground operations in the Dutch East Indies – in large part, to provide 'air garrison' duties by harassing Japanese forces on islands by-passed by the major thrust northwards. While cognisant that enemy forces needed to be contained as part of broader Allied strategy, a number of Australian aircrew, including squadron commanders, began to question whether the RAAF as a whole had been now been assigned an unimportant role in the war.³ Such questions were not isolated to Australian airmen. With Australian ground forces concurrently performing operations of doubtful value against a "strategically impotent enemy," observable discontent with a war in which Australians seemed to have been effectively sidelined began to appear increasingly in the Australian press, and in popular and parliamentary discourse.⁴

While tasks could be found for a number of 1TAF units, the organisation's fighter squadrons were largely underemployed. With Japanese air power in the south-west Pacific virtually destroyed, fighters from either American or Australian air forces could find little air-to-air combat. Australian commanders subsequently directed that 1TAF fighters, including Supermarine Spitfires, be utilised for ground attack, a role for which the Spitfire in particular had not been designed. This caused some considerable consternation amongst fighter pilots in particular, but was endemic amongst other aircrew as well. Regarding these concerns, the official RAAF history noted "there was a distinct tendency [from 1TAF Headquarters] for a maximum

output of sorties and flying hours to be maintained, even though targets were no longer...lucrative, and [as a result] some pilots were asking why they should be sent on missions where the results might mean loss of aircrew for little damage to the enemy.”⁵

Set to this background, Group Captain Wilfred Arthur, the commander of one of 1TAF's fighter wings, became increasingly concerned that such views were worthy of further investigation. A decorated veteran of both the RAAF's air campaign in the Middle East campaign over 1940-42 and the Pacific since January 1943, Arthur was well experienced in air warfare. In December 1944, he and wing intelligence staff drew up an 'operational balance sheet' for his wing – a war effort 'profit-and-loss' statement – and concluded that, in the previous two months, his wing had lost 11 men and 15 aircraft for the destruction of only 12 barges and six trucks.⁶ Armed with these facts, Arthur obtained an interview with Cobby who, sympathetic to his concerns, indicated he would seek out figures from his other wings for comparison. However, Cobby and his staff ultimately drew different conclusions from the collated data. Based on his staff's advice, Cobby indicated by signal to Air Vice-Marshal Bill Bostock, the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) RAAF Command and Cobby's superior, his belief that the squadrons had not suffered excessive losses in relation to the total sorties flown. In doing so, he and his staff appeared to have missed that “Arthur was not concerned with losses in relation to sorties, but losses in relation to results. In other words, was the effort worth it?”⁷

In subsequent months, Arthur received no advice from Cobby relating to this discussion; in fact, based on his observations, Arthur opined that operations had only grown more wasteful since he had put his concerns to Cobby. Convinced that something must be done and prepared to risk his career to do it, he began to sound out whether other senior officers were prepared to make a stand with him against the type of operations in which the RAAF was engaged. One of

the individuals Arthur sought out was Group Captain Clive Caldwell. Caldwell was the RAAF's leading fighter ace of World War II, whose exploits and achievements were well known to the Australian public through the media.⁸ Arthur and Caldwell had previously discussed the relative worth of the missions they were performing and had agreed on their inefficient nature. More importantly, in February 1945, Caldwell had already discussed similar observations with the RAAF's Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, telling Jones that the ground attack missions Caldwell was performing "had wasted a lot of time...and future operations were unlikely to be worthwhile."⁹ Not surprisingly, Arthur sought out Caldwell for support not only because of Caldwell's probable sympathy for the cause, but because he was widely known and respected both in the RAAF and beyond it. Caldwell's personal involvement also helped to garner the support of a number of the other officers ultimately involved in the 'mutiny.'

While Caldwell might have represented Arthur's 'jewel in the crown,' Arthur had also attempted to secure Cobby's involvement in this radical action. Cognizant that Cobby was partly to blame for the improvident missions and associated low morale, Arthur still felt that "his name with the public, together with Group Captain Caldwell, would give us a very considerable amount of public support...he was the prima-donna of one war, and...arm-in-arm with the prima-donna of the next war, we would...attract a lot of attention in the headlines of the newspapers."¹⁰ However, Cobby refused to align himself with his dissenting subordinates. He would later acknowledge that he viewed the level of discontent of which he was aware more as a positive sign of organizational health rather than a danger, inasmuch that it reflected his subordinates' disappointment that they could not do more than they were doing. However, Cobby was adamant that it was not within his power to provide them any more important or interesting work.¹¹ Whether or not that was so, Cobby's failure to respond to Arthur's personal

approaches in any adequate fashion by explaining the circumstances, or seek the counsel of his superiors regarding alternate tasking, led to considerable disillusionment and distrust on the part of Arthur and others towards Cobby and 1TAF leadership.

While Cobby was the head of 1TAF, he was not the only senior leader in whom Arthur and his fellow officers showed a decreasing amount of faith. Group Captains Robert Simms and William Gibson were Cobby's senior staff officers in 1TAF Headquarters (HQ). Cobby's election to live with these two officers, while probably representing the best use of available accommodation on Morotai, served in large part to physically and psychologically isolate Cobby from the rest of the officers in his command. A number of the officers who eventually joined the 'mutiny' not only believed that their efforts in the air were being wasted, but that Simms, Gibson and the 1TAF HQ staff were collectively "indecisive, incompetent and uncooperative."¹² Simms and Gibson had been permanent RAAF officers prior to the war and some tension could easily be attributable to their attitudes to the rapid advancement of officers recruited since the start of the war. Gibson described Arthur's operational balance sheet as an "ill-informed document," a view which no doubt influenced the advice he subsequently provided Cobby on how he should deal with Arthur's concerns.¹³ In short, Cobby seemed to be poorly served by his staff officers, and the combined performance of Cobby, Simms and Gibson was a pivotal element in the poor morale experienced by Arthur and other officers on Morotai.

Arthur had not been alone in trying to alert his superiors to the uneconomical nature of 1TAF's operations. While Arthur possessed the rank to pursue his agenda directly with Cobby, other lower-ranked officers had sought to take similar concerns up their chain of command. Following Arthur's example, Squadron Leader John Waddy, a P-40 squadron commander, had his intelligence staff draw up an operational balance sheet for his unit. Like Arthur, Waddy's

research confirmed that the squadron's losses were not compensated for by results achieved, yet Waddy's immediate superiors had taken little notice of his representations and elected not to question the status quo. These refusals would drive Waddy to join with Arthur's protest.¹⁴

Eventually, eight officers – two group captains, two wing commanders, and four squadron leaders ('the Eight') – would form the group to make their voices heard.¹⁵ During a series of meetings through April 1945, the group decided that they would have the greatest chance to bring attention to their position by submitting their resignations *en masse*. Having consulted with a RAAF legal officer on Morotai, the Eight knew that RAAF regulations would not permit them to resign during wartime; however, and more importantly for the effect they desired, there was no order that would prevent them from applying to do so. By applying, the group chose a path that they believed would not be seen as an attempt to deliberately unseat their superiors in the fashion of a true mutiny, but would serve to draw the attention of the RAAF's most senior leadership – and ideally that of the government – to their complaint. On 20 April 1945, they submitted eight identically-worded memoranda to Cobby that read simply, "I hereby respectfully make application that I be permitted to resign my Commission as an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force forthwith."¹⁶

Cobby was surprised by the applications and advised Air Vice-Marshal Bostock of this development. Bostock arrived on Morotai the next day and interviewed the officers, stressing the gravity of the situation and exhorting them to withdraw their applications altogether. Their sole concession to Bostock's urgings, noting the proximity of the Borneo invasion which 1TAF was to support, was to withdraw their original applications and re-submit them, replacing the word 'forthwith' with 'at the end of current operations.' The Eight revealed few reasons for their action, but Bostock gleaned enough to signal Air Vice-Marshal Jones, alerting him to the

applications and that, in Bostock's view, morale throughout 1TAF was "at a dangerously low level," that the applications represented "a reliable index of the widespread dissatisfaction which pervades the whole TAF," and that the TAF "HQ staff is incompetent, arrogant to a degree...and is generally unhelpful."¹⁷ He went on to recommend to Jones that Cobby, Simms and Gibson be relieved and replaced. Jones, clearly aware of the potential ramifications for the RAAF (and its broader reputation) of these events, flew immediately to Morotai from Australia – some 3000 miles – to get to the bottom of the matter. While the Eight were still unwilling to reveal the full extent of their discontent, Jones' interviews with the officers did reveal their broad dissatisfaction with the operational activities on which they were engaged. Having completed his investigation, Jones directed that, in line with Bostock's original recommendation, Cobby, Gibson and Simms be relieved of their duties. Of the Eight, seven returned to full duty, with Caldwell called to answer other allegations in Australia.

However, this was not the end of the matter for Jones, nor to some degree for the officers central to these events. While forcing a change of command might have been immediately beneficial to their situation, the Eight had wanted serious attention paid to the waste of the RAAF's men and resources, ideally by means of a public inquiry. During May 1945, following a recommendation by Jones, the Australian Government established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of liquor trafficking on Morotai, including the contention that Caldwell had played a role in such trading (the allegations to which Caldwell was responding in Australia). In an attempt to identify whether the collective 'resignations' of the eight officers were a means to draw attention away from the charges levelled against Caldwell, the inquiry's terms of reference were expanded to include an exploration of the reasons behind their actions.

Led by Justice John Barry, the inquiry took evidence from Caldwell from its first day, and Caldwell took an early opportunity to raise the issue of the RAAF's Pacific operations and the feelings of the Eight to the Commission:

To summarise it, we believed the operations that were carried out were ineffectual and wrong; that our sphere of operations is second-rate; and that the...basic administration of the Service is...inefficient. It was felt...that if the eight of us who thought the same way acted in concert...it would be worthy of comment and would attract sufficient attention to possibly achieve an investigation into the administration and operational programme of the RAAF.¹⁸

Based on Caldwell's early testimony, the inquiry's terms of reference were further expanded in late May 1945 to determine whether the resignations were connected to 1TAF's operational activities between November 1944 and 19 April 1945. In this way, the Eight had largely achieved their goal. Barry's inquiry interviewed 107 people in Australia and on Morotai and Leyte, including Jones, Bostock and Arthur.¹⁹ Submitting his report on 14 September 1945, with respect to the actions of the Eight, Barry concluded:

from about the beginning of January 1945 there was a widespread condition of discontent and dissatisfaction within 1st TAF at Morotai. The two main factors that brought about this condition were the opinions generally held about the nature of the operational activities upon which the wings were engaged and the attitude of the senior staff officers, Group Captain Simms and Group Captain Gibson. As that widespread condition developed and existed without his being aware of it, the AOC 1st TAF [Air Commodore Cobby] failed to maintain proper control over his command.²⁰

In short, in Barry's view, fundamental failures of senior leadership were critical to the 'mutiny' being launched at all. Members of the Eight had tried their best to make Cobby, Simms, Gibson and some of those senior officers' other subordinates aware of the deep-seated and widespread perceptions of waste across 1TAF to no avail. The experience in 1TAF aligned with that of Allied squadrons in Europe undertaking the Combined Bomber Offensive, where effective "leadership provided much of the day-to-day external support for staying in combat"

and where “leaders who took a genuine interest in the welfare of all personnel...were generally rewarded with better performance.”²¹ For Cobby in particular, Arthur’s original ‘profit-and-loss’ statement should have indicated very clearly that all was not well within Cobby’s command and that he would need to take urgent action to remedy the situation in some way. If Arthur’s initial approach was insufficient to alert Cobby to the problems in 1TAF, Arthur’s second approach – when Arthur asked if Cobby would consider joining the dissenting officers in resigning – should have been an indication of morale problems Cobby could not reasonably ignore. However, when presented with the eight resignations on 20 April, his surprise may have reflected his broader disbelief that the Eight would follow through on their proposal.

That they possessed the personal courage and confidence to do so reflected some of the Eight’s other motivating factors. As Barry’s finding indicated, the nature of 1TAF’s operational activities drove the Eight to seriously question whether they were performing their duty to the RAAF and their country in a way they could be proud of. The Eight were well placed to consider the question, with the majority having been veterans of the RAAF’s campaign in the Middle East prior to their commitment to the South-West Pacific Area. They had seen the RAAF grow into the fourth-largest air force in the world, were immensely proud of its achievements and capabilities, and were no doubt extremely frustrated to be put on the sidelines in the closing stages of the war as “the Americans took all the fighting plums.”²² Exacerbating their professional frustration was the more visceral observation of their countrymen’s lives being wasted for little appreciable return. Justice Barry concluded that the Eight’s motives had been honest and sincere and that they had acted out of an obvious sense of national duty.²³ Moreover, the inquiry entirely vindicated the position taken by the Eight, with Barry’s final report identifying that “upon the facts known to them, they were reasonably entitled to conclude that

the operations on which they were engaged were wasteful and unnecessary...and were of no real value in the prosecution of the war.”²⁴ Barry’s statement suggests that, if Cobby and his broader subordinate staff had invested a greater personal interest in communicating effectively with the Eight about their circumstances, or in taking up the cudgel with superior officers about their missions, they may have been able to prevent the Eight from becoming as disaffected as they ultimately did. To that end, Barry formally found that seven of the Eight, excluding Caldwell, had ‘resigned’ due to their obvious dissatisfaction with 1TAF’s activities. Barry found that disciplinary matters relating to Caldwell’s association with liquor trading were the primary factors surrounding his application to resign, rather than 1TAF’s operational condition.

Despite the exceptional nature of this affair, some key observations stand out for modern-day military leaders. As the local commander, the actions (or inactions) of Cobby and a number of his subordinates were central to Arthur and the Eight’s clear disaffection. In particular, Cobby had failed to remain engaged with his key operational airmen, an approach that seemed to pervade not only his headquarters but other leadership positions within 1TAF, indicated most clearly by the attempts by Squadron Leader Waddy to take his concerns up the chain of command being repeatedly rebuffed and ignored. For his part, Cobby’s failure to adequately address Arthur’s direct approaches to the top of the command chain – that is, to Cobby himself – fundamentally influenced the Eight’s subsequent behaviour. Given his rank and position, Cobby would have not only been privy to the machinations related to Australian forces undertaking ‘mopping up’ operations, but be aware the problem was very likely outside his immediate ability to influence in any significant way. Nevertheless, his failure to explain as much, regardless of how palatable the truth of Australia’s political and military situation may have been to Arthur, led Arthur and the Eight to believe that “the worthless operations were carried out with the

connivance of 1TAF” and that “there was something rotten in the administration of the RAAF” which required external intervention.²⁵ For the Eight, the failure of 1TAF leadership to adequately communicate with them was a clear sign that, not only was the collective welfare of their subordinates of little interest to commanders, but those same commanders had something to hide in the process. Now, as then, honest communication from the top down and genuinely engaged and effective leadership are critical ingredients in maintaining individual and group morale, and provide the necessary basis for trust and support by the commander’s subordinates.

The ‘Morotai Mutiny’ is unique in the annals of Australian military history and reflects an extraordinary course of action in the face of dramatically low organizational morale. Convinced that they were undertaking missions that were not militarily justifiable and with little faith in their leadership team to resolve or address the matter, eight senior RAAF officers took the unprecedented step of requesting resignation from an armed service conducting operations against the enemy. The action of these experienced combat veterans spurred rapid intercession by the RAAF’s most senior leaders, and laid bare for inspection the inadequate decision-making, communication and leadership demonstrated by Cobby, his senior staff officers, and 1TAF Headquarters. Motivated both by their professional duty to their organization and their personal duty to their conscience to take drastic action, the Eight’s behavior makes clear the pivotal importance of engaged and effective leadership on the maintenance of combat morale.

¹ Despite its extraordinary nature, the ‘Morotai Mutiny’ has not been the subject of wide study in Australia and certainly not beyond its shores. The event is discussed in less than eight pages of the 500-page official history of the RAAF’s efforts in the Pacific, is addressed only in passing in two more modern RAAF histories, is a ‘sidebar’ entry in the most recent release of Australian air power doctrine, and could be found as the subject of a single military journal article. Despite the salutary lessons this event might provide to military leaders in Australia and beyond, the possibility that its discussion – particularly if taken out of context – might reflect poorly on the Royal Australian Air Force and the nation at large might explain why so little exploration has been conducted.

² Cobby’s rank of air commodore is equivalent to brigadier-general. During the First World War, Cobby had destroyed 29 enemy aircraft and been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and a Distinguished Flying Cross. By October 1944, Cobby had been appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and had been awarded the George Medal for bravery for rescuing survivors of an air crash in which he had been a passenger in

1943. (Refer: Australian War Memorial website, *Air Commodore Arthur Henry (Harry) Cobby, CBE, DSO, DFC, GM*, <http://www.awm.gov.au/people/142.asp>)

³ George Odgers, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945; Series Three: Air; Volume Two - Air War Against Japan 1943-1945* (Canberra, Australia: Australian War Memorial, 1957), 384

⁴ George Odgers, *Diggers: The Australian Army, Navy and Air Force in Eleven Wars (volume 2)* (Sydney, Australia: Lansdowne Publishing, 1994), 305-6; further detail regarding the controversy surrounding Australia's war effort in the last two years of the Pacific war can be found in Max Hastings' *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45* (2007; New York: Vintage, reprinted 2009), 336-344

⁵ *Ibid.*, 387

⁶ Arthur's rank of group captain is equivalent to colonel; Arthur had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Flying Cross (the latter for shooting down four enemy aircraft in one sortie) and at 24, was the youngest Australian to have reached the rank of group captain. (refer: Alexander, Kristen, '*Cleaning the Augean Stables*' – the Morotai Mutiny. Article from *Sabretache: the Journal of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, Issue 2004-3; also, Australian War Memorial website: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/REL27812.001>); Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, op cit., 388-9

⁷ Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, 388

⁸ Caldwell had been active in the Middle East campaign (1941-42), shooting down more than 20 enemy aircraft. By April 1945, he had taken his total to 28 and had been decorated with the Distinguished Service Order and two Distinguished Flying Crosses (refer: Australian War Memorial webpage, *Killer Caldwell – Group Captain Clive Robertson Caldwell, DSO, DFC (and Bar) (1911-1994)*, <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/fiftyaustralians/6.asp>)

⁹ Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, op cit., 388

¹⁰ Alexander, Kristen. '*Cleaning the Augean Stables*' – the Morotai Mutiny. Article from *Sabretache: the Journal of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, Issue 2004-3

¹¹ Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, 449

¹² Alexander, op cit.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Waddy's rank of squadron leader is equivalent to major.

¹⁵ The rank of wing commander is equivalent to lieutenant colonel.

¹⁶ Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, 444

¹⁷ Alexander, op cit.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Helson, Peter. *Ten Years at the Top: an analysis of the role of Air Marshal Sir George Jones as Chief of the Air Staff, Royal Australian Air Force 1942-1952*. (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales, 2006), 214

²⁰ Odgers, *Air War Against Japan*, 446

²¹ Wells, Mark K. *Courage and Air Warfare: the Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War*. (1995; London: Frank Cass, reprinted 1996, 2000), 137, 142

²² Stephens, Alan. *The Royal Australian Air Force – A History*. (2001; South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, reprinted 2006), 123; Australian Government, Department of Defence, Royal Australian Air Force website: <http://www.raaf.gov.au/history/ww2.aspx>

²³ Helson, op cit., 214

²⁴ Alexander, op cit.

²⁵ *Ibid.*