

Last Post Ceremony - Australian War Memorial  
Friday 30th August 2019, 4.55pm  
to remember  
**Flight Lieutenant William Vyner Duckett White DFC**  
(1909-1942)

William Vyner Duckett White was one of some 300 Australian prisoners-of-war executed in February 1942 by Japanese navy personnel at Laha airfield on the island of Ambon in what is now Indonesia. Known both as Vyner and Bill, he was the middle of three brothers, born between Harold (1907) and Geoffrey Snr (1911) and thus the uncle of Rosemarie, Peter, Geoffrey Jnr, Tony, Gilly and Penelope.



Educated at Cranbrook School and Geelong Grammar, Vyner had gained his pilot's license at Mascot in 1937 and travelled to China where he attempted to join the Nationalist air force in the civil war. He was rejected on the grounds of his limited number of flying hours. Nevertheless he joined an international air squadron which included Australian and American aviators. He also worked as a journalist in Shanghai before returning to Australia in 1939.

Vyner enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force on 30 January 1940, five months after the outbreak of the Second World War. He gave his age as 26 to ensure that he could be selected as an officer and thus a pilot.

His Service Number was 260624.

Vyner's initial RAAF training was carried out by civilian aero club instructors at Mascot and Newcastle before being posted to Richmond, NSW, and then to Point Cook and Laverton, both in Victoria. There he joined No. 2 Squadron, flying Lockheed Hudsons.



Vyner (far left, back row) and fellow pilot officers in the No. 8 Navigation Course at the General Reconnaissance School, Point Cook

Lockheed Hudson, flying with 13 Squadron in Darwin December 1941. The Hudson was a medium bomber and reconnaissance aircraft.

With a crew of 4 or 5, it had

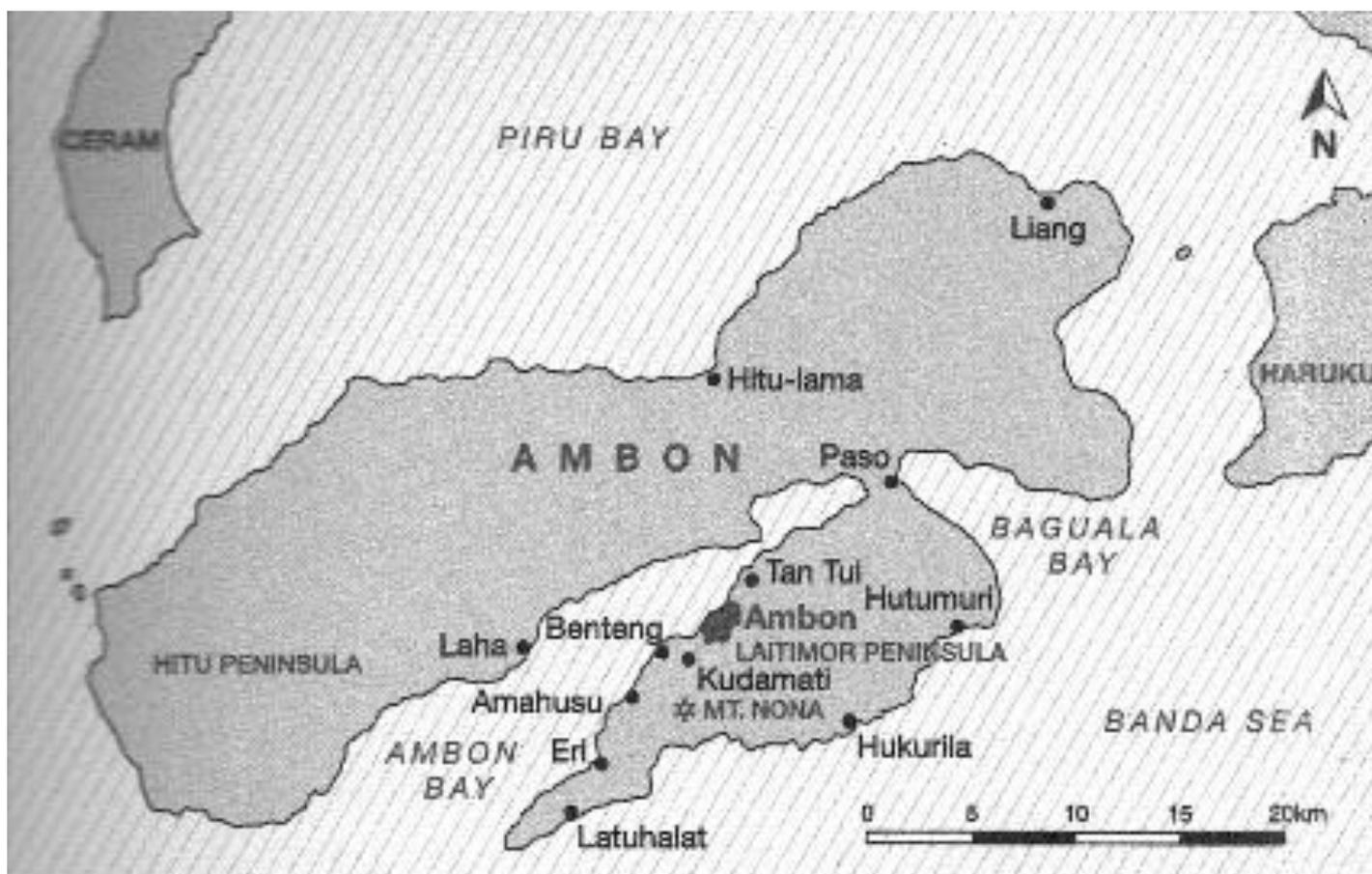
a range (full load) of 2168km. Maximum speed 355km with a ceiling of 7350m

In late 1941 the squadron was moved to Darwin, tasked with reconnaissance of enemy naval activity



in the Indonesian archipelago. Japanese forces had been expanding at lightning speed across the Pacific. The US naval base at Pearl Harbour was bombed on 7 December 1941 and Singapore fell to Japanese forces on 15 February 1942.

In the 1940s Australia's northern neighbour, Indonesia, was under Dutch rule and known as the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Although the RAAF was itself poorly equipped and inadequately



prepared to meet the Japanese threat, the Australian government had assured the NEI of air support.

Accordingly, in December 1941, RAAF aircraft were sent to Namlea on Buru Island, Koepang on Timor and to **Laha airfield on Ambon Island**. Australian army troops followed shortly afterwards. The 2/21st Battalion plus ancillary units - some 1100 men, collectively known as **Gull Force** - were sent to Ambon to bolster the 2500 local troops under Dutch command.

Conditions at Laha were desperate. Supplies (fuel, ammunition, fresh food, medicines) were inadequate and about 30% of personnel were suffering malaria, dengue, dysentery and other tropical diseases. The Japanese commenced bombing raids in early January 1942. The Hudson aircraft were no match for the enemy's Zeros. By the 25th January, No 2 and No 13 Squadrons had lost 13 aircraft. On 30 January only two Hudsons remained at Laha - Vyner's and Flying Officer Haythorn's. As they prepared for evacuation the remaining RAAF aircraft and personnel it was found that the main fuel line of Vyner's aircraft had been shattered by a bullet. Repair was impossible.

18 aircrew crammed into the one serviceable Hudson for the 4 hour flight back to Darwin. 11 RAAF personnel remained - Wing Commander Dallas Scott, three other pilots (Vyner, Meyer and Anderson) and seven aircrew. There are stories of some of those who remained insisting that others take their place on the Hudson that did get away. Japanese forces landed on 31 January. The Dutch surrendered the following day and Gull Force two days later.

The 17 remaining RAAF personnel set off to walk from Laha to the north coast of Ambon Island. There they purchased an Ambonese fishing vessel with the intention of sailing to the larger island of Ceram to the north where they would be rescued by a flying boat. However they were intercepted by a Japanese vessel and returned to Laha. There, between 5 and 20 February 1942, along with 300 other Australian prisoners of war, they were executed, some by beheading, others by the bayonet, by Japanese naval personnel and interred in mass graves. The Laha massacre was one of the grossest atrocities committed against Allied troops in the war but is almost unknown.

In April 1946 an 8 year old Geoffrey Jnr with his father and grandmother (Vyner's mother), attended the investiture ceremony for Vyner's posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) at Sydney's Government House. Because there was a gap between the appointment of governors in NSW the award was conferred by the Governor General, the Duke of Gloucester,

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**CITATION for Distinguished Flying Cross**  
**Flying Officer William Vyner Duckett White, No. 2 Squadron, Darwin**

Flying Officer WHITE enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force as an air cadet on 30.1.40 and, on completion of his flying course, was appointed to a commission with the rank of Pilot Officer on 4.5.40.

After serving in a number of units, he was posted to No. 2 Squadron, Darwin, on 12.8.40 and served at Darwin for several months as captain of an aircraft taking part in numerous seaward reconnaissances.

About the middle of December 1941, Flying Officer WHITE moved with his Squadron to Ambon and from there in the early stages of operations against the Japanese he flew continuously as captain of aircraft, both on reconnaissance flights and in operations against the enemy. His constant devotion to duty and the skill and daring displayed by him proved a shining example to his crew and the other members of his Squadron.

On the 29th and 30th January 1942, immediately preceding the Japanese invasion of Ambon, Flying Officer WHITE carried out an almost continuous reconnaissance of the large enemy invasion fleet. The enemy force was strongly supported by fighter aircraft but despite frequent attacks, Flying Officer WHITE courageously, persistently and with outstanding skill continued his reconnaissance until the enemy were within ten miles of their objective. As a result of repeated attacks his aircraft was so seriously damaged that it could no longer be flown but his successful reconnaissance enabled the land forces to occupy the most favourable positions possible prior to the attack.

Flying Officer WHITE's actions during this trying and difficult period constituted an epic story of courage, determination, skill and devotion to duty.

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Vyner and Bob (later Air Commodore) Dalkin DFC

In 1989 I (Tony) was greatly honoured to join the Gull Force Association annual **pilgrimage to Ambon**. Geoffrey Jnr unfortunately was unable to participate. The 21 pilgrims represented several facets of the Ambon story:

7 had been prisoners of war (2/21 Battalion) and one of these was our tour leader, Rod Gabriel, who had been the Intelligence Officer for 2/21 Battalion.

5 were ex RAN who had been aboard the corvettes which picked up the pitiful survivors of the Ambon POW camp in September 1945.

4 were ex 13 Squadron personnel (Jack Bicknell, Ron Butcher, Fred Ulrich, Bill Woodford)

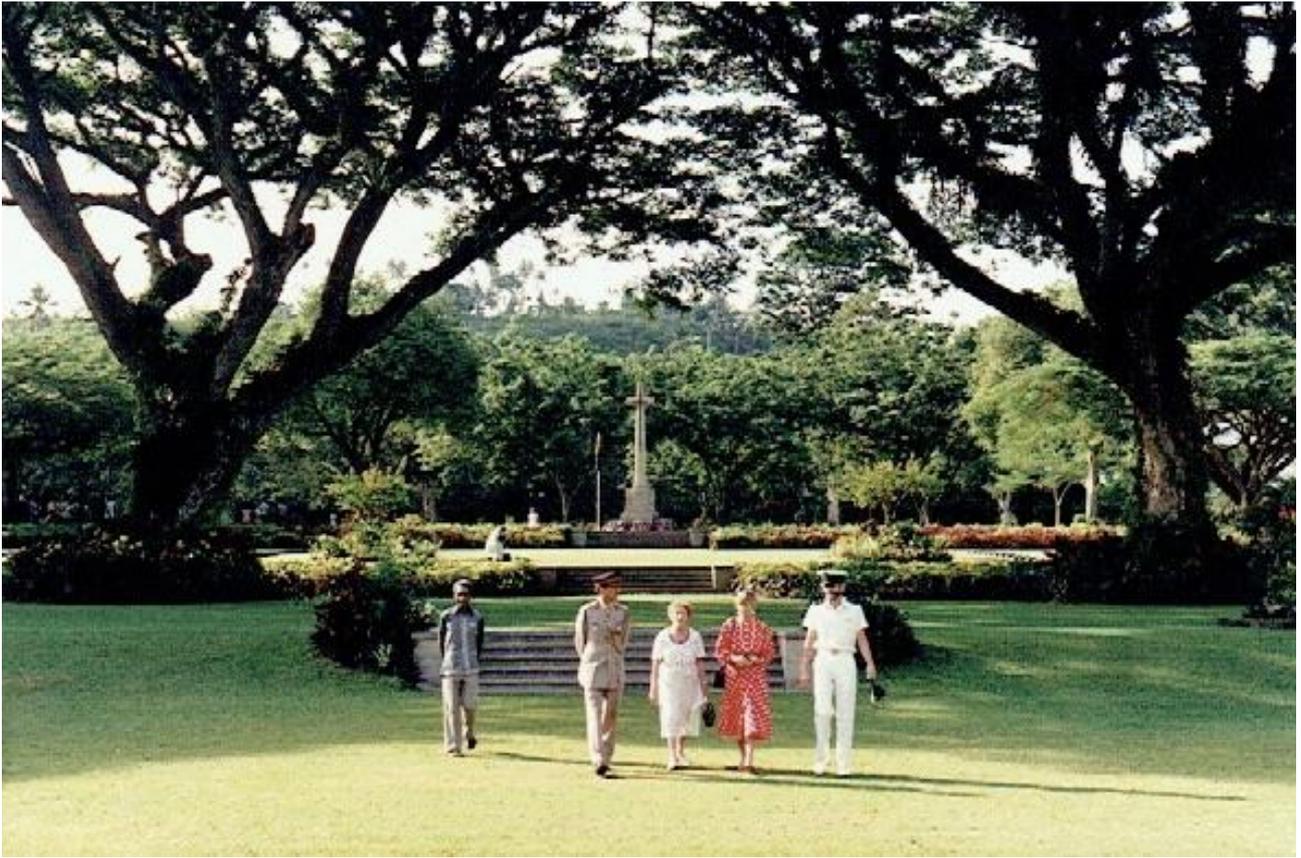


3 were the sons of POWs and included Alec Gabriel (Rod's son), and Trevor (son of Courtney Harrison, author of *Ambon: Island of Mist*)

Of particular interest to all members of the party was the company of John Williams. He had been Chief Prosecuting Officer at the Ambon war crimes trials. This was his first visit to Ambon since the trials (1946).

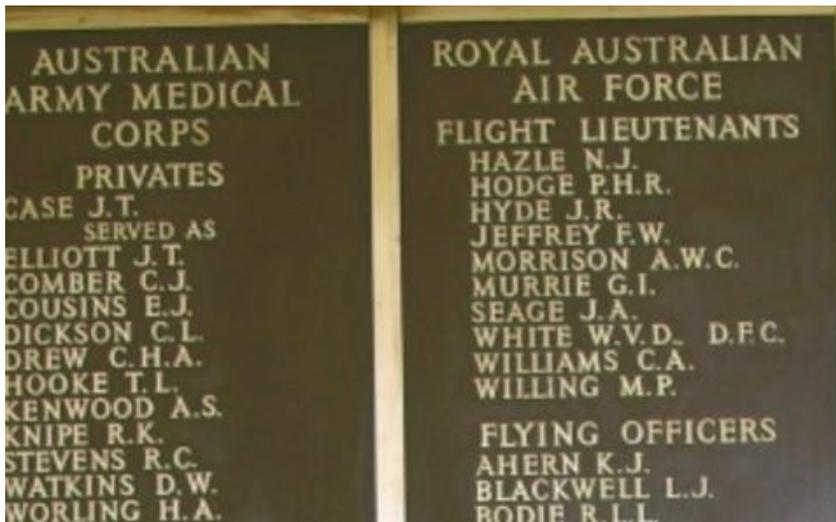
RAAF transport flew us (8 hours in a Hercules) from Sydney to Darwin. We stayed in RAAF accommodation overnight before flying on to Ambon (4 hours in a Caribou) the following morning.

The main formal event was the **Anzac Day Service**. This was conducted in the Australian War Cemetery which is located on the site of the former TanTui prisoner-of-war camp, about 5km north-east of Ambon town and overlooking Ambon harbour. The cemetery was beautifully laid out and maintained to perfection by workers employed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The service was attended by representatives of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, the British Military Attache to Indonesia and the most senior officers of the three armed services from Darwin. The Army provided a bugler and the Indonesian Navy mounted a Guard of Honour.



The **Ambon Memorial**, stands on a lawn terrace at the front of the cemetery and is approached by a broad flight of steps on the central drive leading from the entrance gates. It is in the form of a shelter building with the roof supported on columns and with bronze name panels affixed to the inside walls. In the centre of the building a low altar-like stone contains the Register box and bears a bronze panel with the following inscription:

**1939 - 1945 HERE ARE RECORDED THE NAMES OF OFFICERS AND MEN  
WHO DIED IN THE REGIONS OF THE CELEBES AND MOLUCCA ISLANDS  
ON LAND AT SEA AND IN THE AIR BUT TO WHOM THE FORTUNE OF WAR  
DENIED THE KNOWN AND HONOURED BURIAL GIVEN TO THEIR COMRADES**



#### IN DEATH.

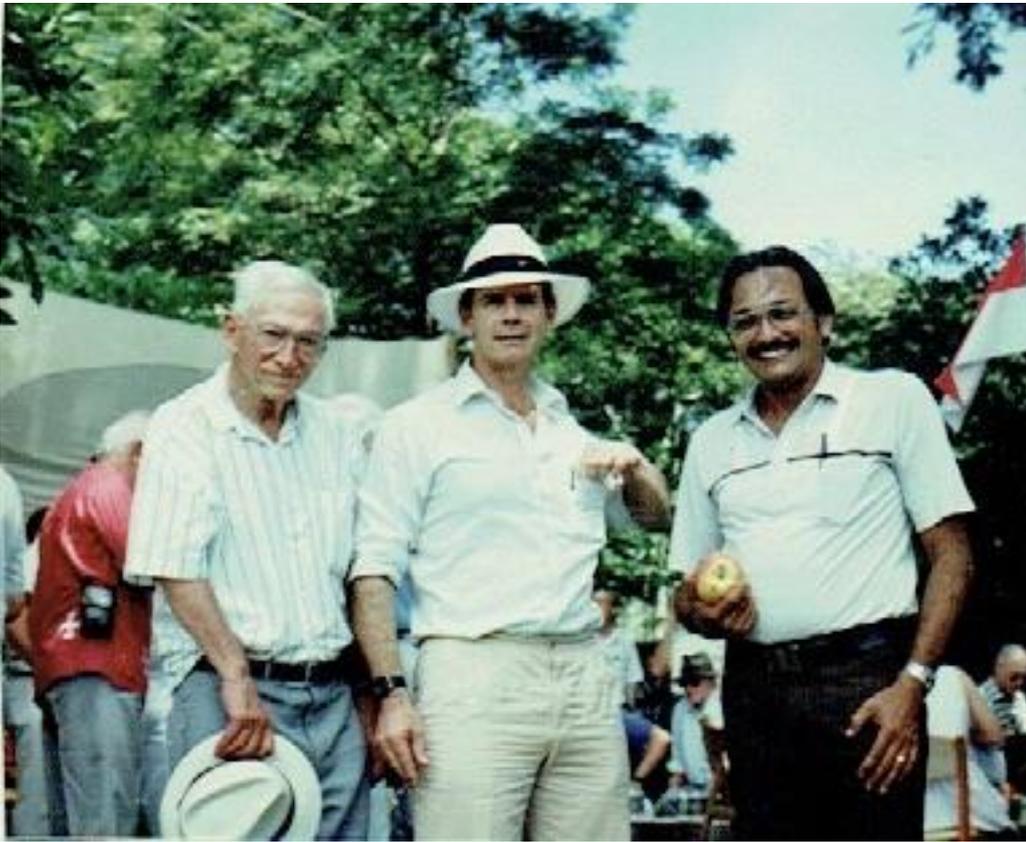
The memorial commemorates 442 officers and men of the Australian forces who have no known grave. Of these, nearly 300 belonged to the Australian Army and over 150 to the Royal Australian Air Force; they lost their lives in Ambon, in other islands of the Molucca group and in Celebes.

We drove around much of the island over 4 or 5 days. I found the visit to the execution site at Laha particularly moving. There is a plain cairn set among coconut trees in the village of Tawiri. Here a brief memorial service was held and wreaths were laid. Rod Gabriel gave a simple account of the Laha chapter, an appalling story that requires no embellishment. His straightforward recita-



tion of events had a profound impact.

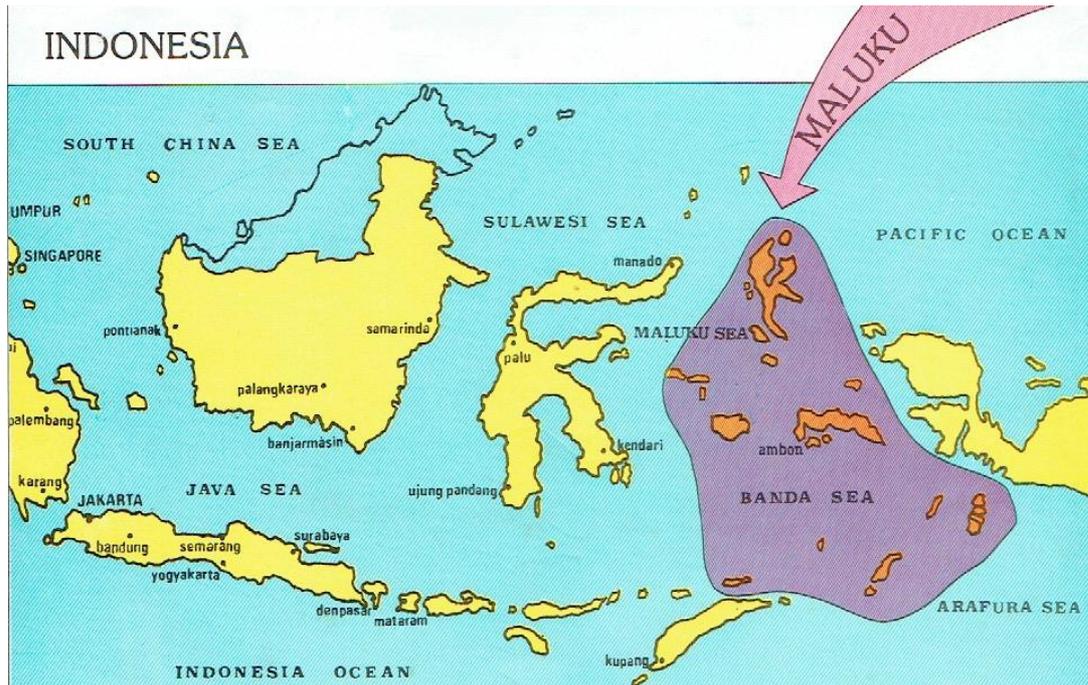
Memorial at Laha massacre site: Tour leader and ex POW Rod Gabriel & HADW



Below: Rod Gabriel (to L of palm tree) recounting the Laha history  
John Williams , Chief Prosecuting Officer at the Ambon War Crimes Trial, HADW  
and Albert Nikijuluw, nephew of the key witness to the Laha massacre)

Ambon is a small (52x18km) island 933km north of Darwin, close to the south west coast of Ceram in the Maluku group of islands. Its strategic importance lay in its harbour which is long and deep. The town of Ambon is on the southern shore of the harbour. It serves as the capital of the Maluku islands. These were formerly known as the Moluccas and, in earlier times, as the Spice Islands. Ambon was also known as Amboina or Amboyna. Celebes is now Sulawesi and

Ceram is spelt Seram.



There is a long history of European contact. Portugal had established a garrison there in the sixteenth century. Sir Francis Drake had sailed into the Moluccas in 1579 on his galleon the *Golden Hind*. The Dutch wrested control from the Portuguese in 1605 and ruled - apart from the war years of Japanese occupation - until the NEI archipelago attained independence as Indonesia in 1949.

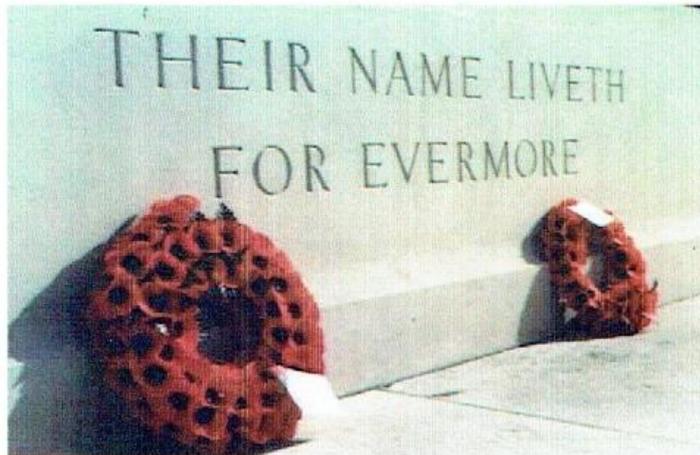
Gull Force Association was not solely concerned with the past. Over the years it has made big contributions of hospital equipment to Ambon Hospital, village health centres and schools. In the 20 years of pilgrimages up to 1989, donations had totalled some \$85,000.

**In Memory of  
Flight Lieutenant WILLIAM VYNER DUCKETT WHITE**

**260624, Royal Australian Air Force  
who died age 32  
on 20 February 1942  
Flight Lieutenant WHITE, Son of Harold Albert  
Duckett White and Constance Mary White, of  
Edgecliffe, New South Wales, Australia.**

**Awards  
DFC**

**Remembered with honour  
AMBON MEMORIAL**



**Commemorated in perpetuity by  
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission**