

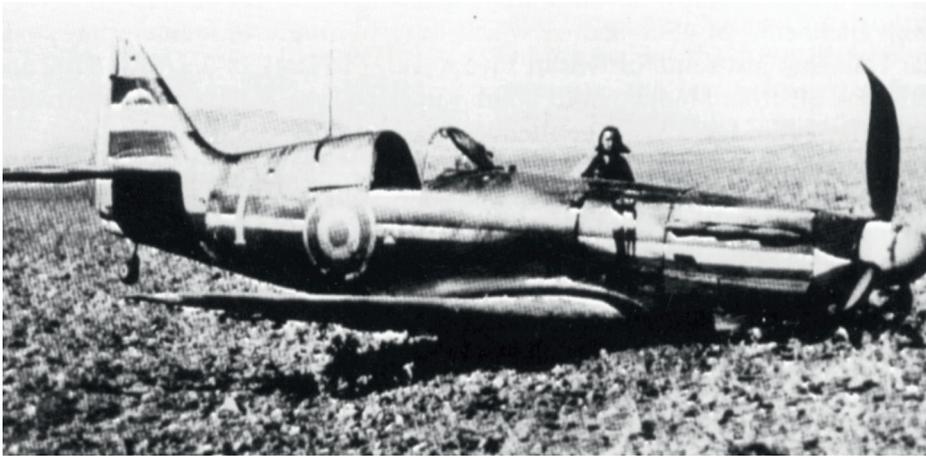
Wing Commander  
Robert Henry  
Maxwell Gibbes  
DSO, DFC & Bar, OAM



'Bobby' Gibbes as a  
squadron leader and OC 3  
Squadron, RAAF in 1942  
VIA ANDREW THOMAS

# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



The Vichy French Dewoitine D.520 No.332 '1', GC I-3 shot down by Gibbes on July 11, 1941 VIA CJE

Fighter pilots don't come any more colourful or adventurous than Wing Commander Bobby Gibbes. The rugged Australian had plenty of brushes with authority and even more with the enemy during an eventful World War Two career with the Royal Australian Air Force. Recommended for the Victoria Cross, which he was *not* awarded, he still ended the war as one of Australia's most decorated airmen.

Robert Henry Maxwell Gibbes, known from a young age as "Bobby", was born in Balgowlah, New South Wales, on May 6, 1916. He was the only son of Henry and Cora Gibbes, and he came from a family that had long been involved in government and the military. His father was a farmer while his uncle, Fred, had been a Sopwith Camel pilot during the Great War, only to be killed in action.

Bobby was educated at various schools including All Saints College, Bathurst. His early interest in flying meant he joined the air cadets, having lied about his height as he was slightly too short for the role. After leaving school, he worked as a jackaroo (farm hand on a sheep/cattle station) and, later, a salesman. However, his fascination with flying never left him.

In an interview long after the war was over, he said he had personally paid for flying lessons before enlisting in February 1940. However, after war was declared in 1939, he thought, "I'd wait for King George to pay for the rest." During pilot training in New South Wales and Victoria, he deliberately failed his bomber training because he wanted to become a fighter pilot. His gamble paid off when he was transferred to fighters, and he was then commissioned as a pilot officer in June 1940. He was initially posted to 23 Squadron, RAAF, flying out of Archerfield, an RAAF station in Queensland. Gibbes was promoted to flying officer on Boxing Day, 1940.

In April 1941, Gibbes was posted to the Middle East as 450 Squadron's adjutant. Just a month later, he transferred to 3

Squadron, which at this point was flying Hurricanes. In June of the same year, after converting to P-40 Tomahawks, the squadron began operations in the Syria-Lebanon Campaign. Gibbes quickly made his mark being credited with a "probable" victory over a Junkers Ju 88 near Beirut on June 13. On July 11, he claimed his first "kill" this time a fighter, a Dewoitine D.520, belonging to the Vichy French and which was shot down over Aleppo. Another pilot, John Jackson, had been involved in the victory, after which the pair spun a coin to take full credit for it, and Gibbes won.

In September 1941, 3 Squadron transferred to the Western Desert. There, Gibbes established a reputation as an aggressive pilot, attacking enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground. Although not a crack shot, he had superb eyesight, proving adept at locating enemy aircraft and alerting his fellow airmen to the dangers. Another 3 Squadron airman, Tom Russell, highlighted another skill Gibbes possessed: "If we got scattered in a dogfight, he had the uncanny ability to get us back into formation in a very short space of time."

### Incredible rescue

Gibbes' abilities were noted by senior officers and, in February 1942, he was appointed as his squadron's commanding officer. Ever the extravert, Gibbes emblazoned his aircraft with a cartoon depicting a kangaroo kicking a dachshund up the rear. More successes followed in the air, particularly after the squadron was re-equipped with superior P-40 Kittyhawk fighters. However, on May 26, Gibbes was shot down by return fire from a Junkers and forced to bail out. Part of his parachute became entangled with his tailplane and so, as he landed, he broke his ankle. Typically, he was back in action just six weeks later with his leg in plaster.

On July 28, 1942, Gibbes was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross when his citation championed his "exceptional skill



A cheery Gibbes walks away from his aircraft at RAF Aqir, May 1941 R GIBBES

*“Recommended for the Victoria Cross, which he was not awarded, Gibbes still ended the war as one of Australia’s most decorated airmen”*

and gallantry". More successes followed, including claiming the squadron's 200th victim, a Bf 109F, during the Battle of El Alamein on October 28. Gibbes and his fellow airmen were congratulated for their "double century – not out" by the Australian-born Air Marshal Sir Peter Drummond, Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East.

In December 1942, just four days before Christmas Day, Gibbes carried out arguably his most daring exploit of the war. Having led his squadron in an attack on an Italian airfield in the Western Desert, during which he personally destroyed two aircraft on the ground, he and his men came under heavy anti-aircraft fire. One Kittyhawk was shot down and another was forced to crash-land only a few miles from their target.

Although Gibbes' own aircraft had been hit, he went to the aid of his stricken fellow pilot, landing in the desert close to the crashed aircraft. Next, Gibbes jettisoned his fuel tank to reduce the weight in his aircraft before pacing out a makeshift take-off strip. Having evaded the attention of Italian troops, the stranded pilot ran to meet Gibbes, who then ditched his parachute to create more room in the cockpit. Gibbes invited the airman to sit in the only seat before climbing in after him, sitting on his lap. As they hastily took off, the undercarriage hit a ridge, causing the port wheel to fall off.

Escorted by other pilots from his squadron, the two men then headed back to their base. Gibbes chose not to make a belly landing, instead coming down skilfully on one wheel with little damage to the aircraft and no major injuries to either man in the cramped cockpit.

### Desert trek

It was for this outstanding act of courage that Gibbes was recommended for the VC. Instead, after consideration, he was almost immediately awarded the Distinguished Service Order. This was announced on January 15, 1943, when the citation praised his "outstanding qualities of leadership and enthusiasm".

Yet the very day before his citation was made public, Gibbes was involved in another dramatic incident. During a sortie, he crash-landed some 180 miles behind enemy lines. In an attempt to trick the enemy, he walked away from, rather than towards, Allied lines. Three days later, and having walked some 50 miles in the desert, he was picked up by a British patrol when his first words were, "G'day mate, got any water?"

Largely for this feat, Gibbes was awarded a Bar to his earlier DFC when his citation highlighted his "exceptional leadership, skill and courage, contributing in a large measure to the success of the squadron he commands". This third gallantry award made him the most decorated airman in the RAAF.

On January 22, 1943, Gibbes claimed his final "kill" meaning, he was officially credited with 10¼ victories. However, he is sometimes given 12 victories, having apparently shared in two other victories. To add to his impressive tally, he was also credited with five "probables" and 16 "damaged" enemy aircraft. Furthermore, during his gruelling tour of the Middle East, he flew 274 sorties and became 3 Squadron's longest-serving wartime commander.

In an interview, Gibbes later admitted that he was in a state of terror when he was flying in combat, adding: "Man becomes animal when he thinks he is about to die. As you fly back to your base, now safe at last, a feeling of light-hearted exuberance comes over you. It is wonderful to still be alive and it is, I think, merely the after-effect of violent, terrible fear."

Gibbes stepped down as CO of 3 Squadron on April 19, 1943, and in the same month was confirmed in the rank of squadron leader having previously held the rank temporarily. For the next six months, he served in RAAF Overseas Headquarters in London. Later, he was posted back to Australia,



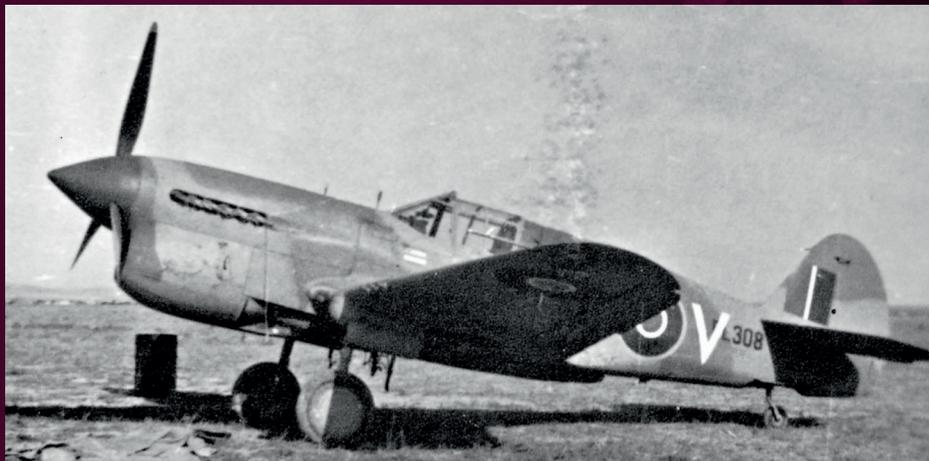
Bobby Gibbes, as a flying officer, unwinds and plays cards with 3 Squadron airmen at Sidi Haneish, Egypt, November 1941  
VIA ANDREW THOMAS

via Canada. In January 1944, he joined 2 OTU at Mildura, Victoria, where he was appointed chief flying instructor in March. On July 1, he was promoted to temporary wing commander. While in the role of wing leader in 80 Wing and flying from Darwin he suffered another crash-landing – this time due to engine failure.

While being treated for burns received in the crash, he met – in his own words – "a little dark-haired popsy". Her name was Jeannine Ince, a Red Cross volunteer who treated his injuries. They married on January 23, 1945, and went on to have two daughters together.

### Entrepreneurial spirit

In spring 1945, Gibbes was one of nine senior officers who became involved in the so-called Morotai Mutiny. The group resigned their commissions in protest at what they saw as their sidelining from the main fighting theatre against the Japanese. It was a time of political in-fighting in the RAAF. Although Gibbes and his fellow protesters were persuaded to withdraw their resignations, he and three others were then court-martialled for smuggling three bottles of whisky into their quarters in what some saw as "trumped-up" charges connected to the "munity".



P-40 Kittyhawk Mk.II FL308 CV-V was flown by Gibbes and was his last assigned Kittyhawk R GIBBES

*"Three days later, and having walked some 50 miles in the desert, Gibbes was picked up by a British patrol when his first words were, 'G'day mate, got any water?'"*



Wing Commander Gibbs in the cockpit of his Spitfire, 1944 VIA ANDREW THOMAS

In July 1945, Gibbs was assigned to the staff of RAAF Headquarters, Melbourne, before being discharged from the RAAF in January 1946. His next job was as a stock and station agent in Coonamble, New South Wales. He spent much of the next three decades in Papua New Guinea. It was here, in 1948, that he established his own airline, Gibbs Sepik Airways, using war surplus aircraft, including three former Luftwaffe Ju 52 transports, to develop links across the inaccessible highlands. By the time he sold his share of the airline a decade later, he was firmly established in the country's tea and coffee plantations. Further, with his entrepreneurial spirit, he also built up a large chain of hotels.

Gibbes sold his interests in New Guinea in 1972 and afterwards spent time in the Mediterranean. When in his 60s, he sailed his 42ft catamaran, *Billabong*, from England to Australia single-handed, braving heavy seas and Malaysian pirates on the way.

Youthful in spirit, he was still flying in his eighties, when he built an aerobatic aircraft in his living room. However, he had to demolish a wall in his home after miscalculating the wingspan. Gibbs flew this aircraft until – much to his annoyance – he was grounded by the civil aviation authority, aged 85. In 1994 he published his memoir, *You Live But Once*. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in January 2004 for services

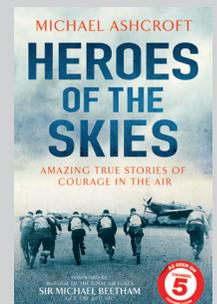
to aviation and tourism, particularly in Papua New Guinea. After suffering a stroke, Gibbs died at Mona Vale Hospital in Sydney on April 11, 2007. He was 90. His funeral was attended by 350 mourners. He was survived by his wife of 62 years, his two daughters and five grandchildren. **BW**

### HEROES OF THE SKIES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Heroes of the Skies*, was first published in 2012. For more information, visit [heroesoftheskies.com](http://heroesoftheskies.com).

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London (until June 1, 2025). For more information, visit [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft



Gibbes' personal Spitfire Mk.VIII, A58-602 RGV, on New Guinea in 1945 VIA ANDREW THOMAS