

**LIFE
AND
DEATH
OF A
'FIRE-BUG'**



BILL NEWTON WAS ALREADY AN INSPIRATION BEFORE HE CLIMAXED HIS WARTIME FLYING CAREER WITH TWO ASTOUNDING FEATS OF VALOUR. **STEVE SNELLING CHARTS A SAGA OF DEATH-DEFYING COURAGE IN A LITTLE-KNOWN CAMPAIGN WHICH WAS SAVAGELY ENDED BY ONE OF THE MOST INFAMOUS WAR CRIMES OF THE PACIFIC WAR.**

The sky over Salamaua was a blur of flak and flame as the six Bostons swept, one after another, across the Japanese-controlled base on the north-eastern coast of New Guinea. Flying fourth, below and to the right of Flight Lieutenant Bill Newton's diving bomb run, Flying Officer Dick Fethers was momentarily distracted by the fire that seemed to erupt all around. In the jarring, smoke-shrouded confusion of explosions on the ground and ack-ack lacing the air and peppering his aircraft, he flew too low, decapitating a line of coconut palms with his starboard propeller. Breaking away from his strafing attack, he caught sight of Newton's Boston emerging from the

maelstrom of shot and shell, its fuselage "a ball of fire". With the raid continuing behind him, Fethers watched his friend's ghastly progress as the stricken bomber flew on across the Huon Gulf, trailing flames and smoke and losing height and speed all the time.

Somehow, the doomed aircraft made it beyond Laupui Point, a little over two miles south east of Salamaua, before ditching. In the last moments before splashing down, both engines burst into flames and the burning bomber was seen to skim and bounce 150 yards before settling down by the nose about a thousand yards from shore. Banking left, Fethers circled the aircraft as close as he dared in an effort

to catch a glimpse of any survivors. Two men wearing lifejackets were observed in the water before Fethers realised he had forgotten to release his bombs. Returning to the target area, he completed his mission before flying back to find the two men swimming steadily for the shore protected, albeit temporarily, by a circling screen of Bostons. From their height it was impossible to identify the men in the water, but the clear sighting of the pilot's hatch in the closed position seemed to indicate >>

FAR LEFT
With belts of cartridges slung round his neck Bill Newton poses for the press while undergoing pilot training.

BELOW
A graphic illustration of the kind of low-level sorties carried out by the crews of 22 Squadron. This picture shows two Havocs, the American version of the Boston bomber, carrying out a strike against a Japanese seaplane base along the coast of Dutch New Guinea on July 22, 1944.





ABOVE
Bill Newton, seated far right, was a gifted all-round athlete who excelled at cricket. Seen here with the Melbourne Grammar School team of 1936.

BELOW
Official war artist Roy Hodgkinson's rendering of one of the raids on Salamaua

beyond reasonable doubt that Bill Newton, having pulled off a masterly ditching in a crippled aircraft, had been unable to escape. His commanding officer, Wing Cdr Keith Hampshire, duly reported: "The fact that the dinghy immediately behind the Pilot's head was observed by fifteen other Aircrew, not to inflate, appears to confirm this. If the Pilot's hatch opens the dinghy must escape and float. There is no other escape for the Pilot..."

Hampshire and his aircrew, however, were wrong, though it would take another seven months for the events

of 18 March 1943 and its grisly aftermath to be fully revealed.

'STREAK OF DEVLMENT'

Bill Newton was already a legendary figure within the ranks of 22 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, long before the attack on Japanese installations, buildings and store dumps that freckled the north-western foreshore of Salamaua harbour. Hampshire regarded him as "one of the outstanding officers in the unit" whose operational career was marked by a "tenacious

courage" that was matched only by his morale-boosting ebullience on the ground. What Hampshire described as his "unfailing cheery nature, blended with a nonchalant air and an infectious laugh" made him universally popular among aircrew and ground crew of all ranks. To fellow squadron pilot Charles Learmonth, he was "a constant source of happiness", while another friend and future squadron commander John Hickey remembered him as "a boyish young pilot who bubbled over with enthusiasm" and an airman of exacting standards who nevertheless retained "a strong streak of devilment off-duty and a desire for fun".



ABOVE Bill Newton while serving as a reluctant instructor at No 2 Service Flying Training School at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, in 1941.





equipping with American Douglas DB7 Boston attack bombers in place of their out-dated single-engine Wirraways.

The Japanese 'blitzkrieg' was in full swing. And having already occupied a vast swathe of South-East Asia together with countless island groups in the South-West Pacific, the Imperial Japanese Navy turned its attention towards Australia. At the end of May, three midget submarines penetrated Sydney Harbour, increasing fears of an impending invasion and diverting the aircrew of 22 Squadron to the unaccustomed and totally unexpected role of anti-submarine operations off the coast of New South Wales. Weeks of mostly uneventful sorties followed during which Bill Newton, already one of the most experienced pilots in the unit, merely added to the 900 flying hours recorded in his logbook prior to joining 22 Sqn. Such was the alarm raised by the attack that it was not until October that the bulk of the squadron finally headed out to New Guinea and a role for which they were far better suited.

Newton, however, would have to wait a little longer for his chance. For a further two months he was occupied ferrying aircraft up and down the east coast of Australia before he eventually caught up with his squadron >>

Born in St Kilda, Melbourne, in 1919, the son of dentist Charles Newton and his second wife Minnie (née Miller), William Ellis Newton seemed to have it all: charm, good looks, intelligence and a splendid physique. A fine all-round sportsman, he excelled on the cricket pitch, where his skill as a fast bowler earned him a call-up for the Victorian Second XI. But his greatest ambition was to join the RAAF and learn to fly. It was a desire delayed, for the sake of his mother, until February 1940 when he quit his job in a local silk warehouse to enlist. Commissioned as

a pilot officer in June, he completed his advanced pilot's training in September only to have his talent rewarded by a posting to a flying school in New South Wales teaching novice aviators the rudiments of flying. According to John Hickey, Newton was "a very good instructor, patient and tolerant", though his patience was sorely tested when it came to his craving to see action. To his immense frustration it was not until May 1942, as a newly-promoted Flight Lieutenant, that his wish was finally granted with his posting to 22 Squadron, then in the process of re-

LEFT

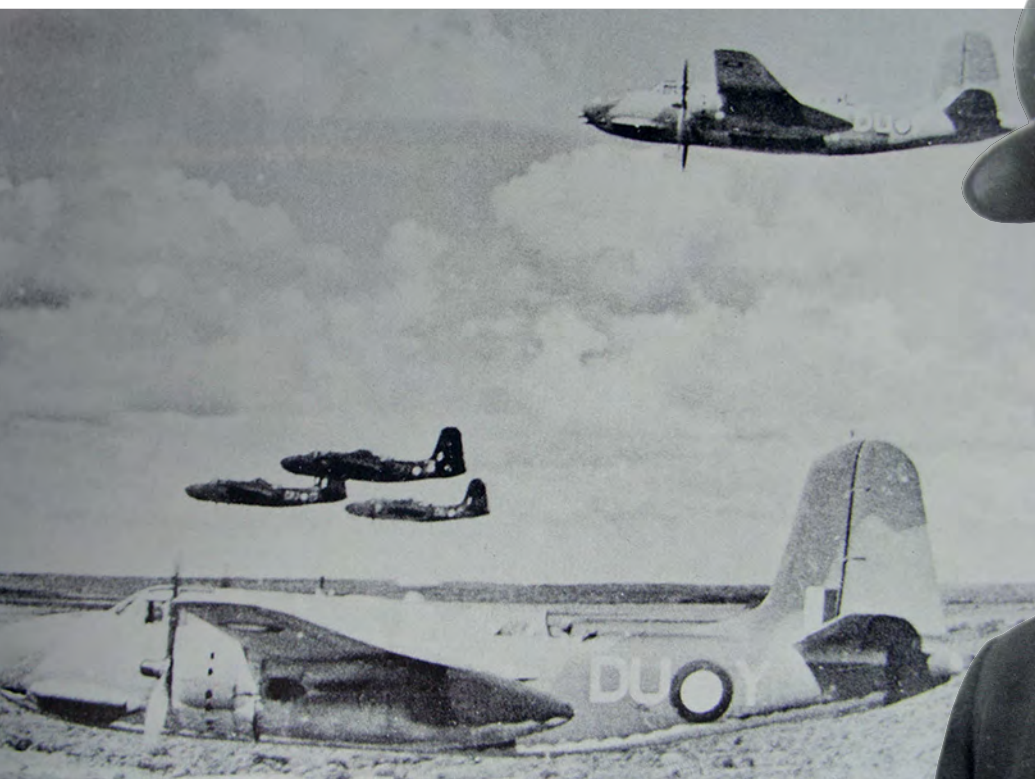
Bill, third from right, with fellow instructors in front of a Wirraway training aircraft at Wagga Wagga.

BELOW LEFT

Bostons of No 22 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, flying in formation with A28-3, the aircraft in which Bill Newton was shot down on his 52nd operational mission, in the foreground.

BELOW

Flight Lieutenant William Ellis 'Bill' Newton (1919-1943). He was one of three half-brothers who served in the army, navy and air force during the Second World War.



RIGHT

22 Squadron personnel at Ward's Strip, Port Moresby. The picture features many of Bill Newton's closest friends who flew with him on a series of hazardous sorties, including 'Rocky' Mullens, seated third from left, Charles Learmonth, seated sixth from left, Keith Hampshire, seated seventh from left, and Dick Fethers, next to him.



at Ward's Strip, Port Moresby just four days before the end of 1942.

'FIRE-BUG'

In his absence, 22 Squadron had been busy, supporting the Allied ground offensive on Buna and Gona by low-level strafing and bombing attacks and taking casualties in return. Due to their losses, which were, in part, a result of defective bombing techniques, and a shortage of equipment, the squadron was rarely able to muster more than eight aircraft for any operation, as Newton quickly discovered for himself. For his first operation in New Guinea, his Boston, A28-7, was one of only three aircraft slated for a New Year's

Day attack on the Custom House at Salamaua, followed by a strafing run against enemy positions near Sanananda Point. That initial mission left an indelible mark after mechanical problems on the return flight forced him to detour to Dobodura, an emergency strip within 10 miles of Buna. Forced to wait three days while spare parts were located, delivered and finally fitted, he had plenty of time to contemplate the squalor and suffering that were a legacy of the recent heavy ground fighting.

Anxious to avoid upsetting his mother, he likened his baptism of fire to "going into bat in a cricket match" while reserving his true feelings for

BELOW

A 22 Squadron Boston blown to pieces during a strike against Japanese positions at Gona in late 1942.



his mess-mates back in Moresby. To one of his fellow pilots, he insisted: "Until all the army fellows involved with the fighting around Kokoda-Buna and Wau-Salamaua had got two medals each, none of us in the RAAF should be considered for one."

That first op proved a portent of things to come as Newton found himself in the thick of a relentless air campaign targeting the key Japanese staging posts at Lae and Salamaua, along with shipping movements in an effort to disrupt the flow of reinforcements and supplies.

During January and February he clocked up 10 missions, many of them involving long flights over mountainous terrain to carry out hazardous daylight

bombing and strafing strikes against well-defended enemy strongholds often at no more than tree-top height. He piloted one of four Bostons which staged a daring low-level attack on Lae airfield just as enemy aircraft were preparing to take off in support of an in-bound convoy. On another occasion, he narrowly escaped destruction over Salamaua when ground fire hit an engine, forcing him to shut it down and divert once again to Dobodura for emergency repairs. His regular Boston (A28-15), dubbed Spirit of Sport, displayed a cartoon version of the Japanese war leader Tojo being clobbered with a boomerang that seemed to reflect his devil-may-care personality and desire to inflict maximum damage on the enemy.



ABOVE

A Boston bomber sweeps low across a Japanese 'Betty' bomber during an attack on Lae airfield. Newton took part in two such sorties in the space of less than 48 hours in early March to prevent enemy aircraft operating in defence of a troop convoy bound for New Guinea.



MIDDLE LEFT

The line-up includes Dick Hunt, far left, Charles Learmonth, third from left, Dick Fethers, fifth from left, and Alec McKay, seated on the bomb. Fethers, Hunt and McKay flew on both of Newton's 'VC missions' with McKay's Boston sustaining damage to its nose, bomb bay and cockpit cover during the March 16 sortie.

According to Keith Hampshire, an analysis of his 'ops' showed that 90% of them were flown in the face of "heavy fire". And such was his reputation that he was "constantly", in the words of his squadron commander, "allotted targets in heavily defended areas in order that the junior members of his squadron could be given less difficult targets". Bold and brash in equal measure, Newton was renowned not just for the accuracy of his bombing but the determination displayed in delivering his attacks, "disdaining evasive action against enemy fire to the detriment of the allotted task".

"Time and time again," observed Hampshire, "he has been seen in vulnerable positions to shoot it out with non-deflection shots, over an area a mile long, with as many as 15 to 20 pom-pom and .5 guns opposing him."

His record for "initiating fires in enemy grounded aircraft installations, buildings and dumps" was second to none and earned him the nickname 'The Fire-bug'. To his comrades he was "a man amongst men" and to the Japanese, who came to know him as 'Blue cap' on account of the battered old cricket hat he habitually wore on his low-level sorties, he was regarded with a mixture of dread and respect. As for Newton himself, he appeared to revel in his notoriety. "No matter what happens," he wrote his mother, "I am enjoying myself."

'RAGING INFERNO'

There was to be no let-up in operations. Determined to retain their foothold in New Guinea, the Japanese assembled a 16-ship convoy with 9,000 reinforcements bound for Lae. But American and Australian air force units, alerted by a system of coast watchers, were ready and waiting. At dawn on 2 March, six Bostons from 22 Sqn, including Newton's A28-11, swept across Lae airfield, bombing and strafing as they roared through a wall of close-range fire to temporarily put the strip out of action.

The raid, which heralded the start of the so-called Battle of the Bismarck Sea in which 12 ships were sunk and about 3,000 enemy troops killed in what one writer described as "a land battle fought at sea and won from the air", was followed by another carried out against the same target the next day. >>

LEFT

A 22 Squadron Boston sheltering beneath trees on the edge of Ward's Strip, Port Moresby.



RIGHT

22 Squadron Bostons raining destruction along the foreshore at Salamaua on March 16, the first of Newton's 'VC missions'.

BELOW

Flight Sergeant John Lyon flew around 40 sorties with Bill Newton. Separated after capture, he was bayoneted to death two days later according to official records. His body was discovered by chance five years later and re-interred in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Lae.

BELOW RIGHT

A Japanese destroyer makes desperate efforts to avoid destruction during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in which Bill Newton played a key supporting role.

Newton's was one of three aircraft that struck in a repeat of the previous morning's assault. Making two runs against ferocious anti-aircraft fire, they turned the strip into an inferno of fire and smoke to once again prevent support reaching the embattled convoy.

Next up for Newton, following a further aborted trip to Lae, was another familiar 'hot-spot' - Salamaua, scene of his first New Guinea 'op' and his closest brush with disaster a few days later.

As one of the enemy's key bases in the Huon Gulf, Salamaua, with its array of storage depots and headquarter buildings, was protected by one of the most formidable anti-aircraft defences in the South-West Pacific, manned by army and navy gunners considered to be among the most accurate of any in New Guinea. Armed mainly with 40mm and 20mm cannon, together with 12.7mm heavy machine guns, they were most heavily concentrated along the foreshore at a point known as MacDonald's Junction where a narrow isthmus wriggled out towards a towering rocky headland on which was perched an observation post.

Seven Bostons, led by Squadron Leader 'Stace' Dillon, were slated for the 16 March raid: their objectives being two newly-installed 40,000 gallon fuel tanks and nearby buildings close to where the defences were thickest. As had become customary, Newton and his crew, Scottish-born Flight Sergeant John Lyon, wireless operator/upper

gunner, and Sergeant Basil 'Herbie' Eastwood, lower gunner, were given the most important and demanding task aboard A28-7 for what would be his 51st mission.

Following their usual flight path, the Bostons roared in over the 5,000-foot high mountains to the west before diving down onto their targets along the foreshore. They were met, as expected, by a hail of fire, but Newton did not deviate. According to



ABOVE Salamaua isthmus seen from the air during a 22 Squadron strike against its headquarters buildings, jetties and storage facilities.

what Hampshire described as the largest fire he ever saw during the Pacific war.

Still not done, Newton then proceeded to brave the cauldron of fire all over again in his battered and tattered bomber, strafing enemy installations while more bombs rained down. By the time it was over, three of the Bostons had sustained extensive damage, but none more so than A28-7. Newton's bomber, later described as "the most badly damaged aircraft anyone had seen fly", was a flying wreck, riddled with shell holes. In all, the aircraft had sustained

four direct hits, damaging both wings, puncturing fuel tanks and seriously damaging the port engine which Newton shut down before deciding on his next course of action.

Hampshire, his aircraft was hit "time and time again during the approach" as he headed straight for the fuel tanks with his wingman, Dick Fethers', flying lower and slightly behind, blazing away at the gun positions. His death-defying charge paid off in spectacular fashion as his bombs struck home, rupturing both tanks and igniting "a raging inferno" of fire and smoke rising to 8,000 feet in

four direct hits, damaging both wings, puncturing fuel tanks and seriously damaging the port engine which Newton shut down before deciding on his next course of action.

He could have diverted to Dobodura, but with the strip lacking engineering facilities he knew that would have meant the aircraft being written off at a time when the squadron needed every machine it could muster. He, therefore, took the brave decision to limp back 180 miles across the Owen Stanley range to land with a flat main tyre back at Ward's Strip, where an examination found no oil left in one engine, the ignition leads shot off in the other and around 100 holes ranging from 1-16 inches wide freckling the aircraft's fuselage, tail and wings. It was a remarkable feat of flying at the end of an extraordinary display of low-level bombing which prompted Hampshire to prepare a recommendation for the Victoria Cross for 'the Fire-bug'. It was still a work in progress when Bill Newton set out, two days later, on his 52nd and final mission.





LEFT
An aerial reconnaissance photograph of Salamaua taken in early 1943. MacDonald's Junction, with its conglomeration of anti-aircraft guns, was situated close to where the isthmus joins the mainland.

'PURPOSEFUL COURAGE'

Flying Boston A28-3, Newton, Lyon and Eastwood, all of whom had come through their latest ordeal miraculously unscathed, were among six 22 Squadron crews listed for another daylight strike against Salamaua. Their objective was a former cinema converted into a storage building which was sited "adjacent [to] the same AA [positions] which had damaged his aircraft so extensively". Hampshire considered it "an extremely difficult target" and "an even harder one" than the heavily-defended oil tanks which he had destroyed at considerable peril fewer than 48 hours before. And yet, as his squadron commander later observed, he undertook the mission "without quibble... fully conscious of the danger".

The attack was carried out at a little after 0900 followed the pattern of all the others. 'Stace' Dillon and 'Rocky' Mullens led the way, Mullens strafing enemy anti-aircraft positions around MacDonald's Junction while Dillon roared in at tree-top height to disgorge his 11-second time delay bombs. They were followed by Newton and Fethers. It was almost a re-run of two days earlier with Fethers cast as low-level wingman to Newton's diving attack through a storm of fire. Only this time fortune did not favour the brave. The flak was intense. "Black puffs were all

over the area at about 1,000 feet," wrote Fethers' gunner, Fred 'Shorty' Jacobson. "Plenty of light AA was fired at us from all positions. We were too low for the heavy stuff..." Newton, however, was not. Hurting down from 7,000 feet at a speed of 300mph, he was met by the full fury of the enemy's heaviest weaponry. With 700 yards still to go to the target, 40mm cannon shells tore into his port engine.

As the building loomed ever larger, the Boston was hit repeatedly, but Newton ploughed on, employing the same "purposeful courage" that had become his trademark. As his old Aussie Rules Football team-mates later remarked, "If he needed to run through a brick wall to get to the ball and win the game, he would." It was a hazardous approach that had served him well, but not this time. Almost as soon as he released his four instantaneous fuse bombs, unstoppable fires broke out in his smashed port engine and rear fuselage. Even as his target erupted in a sheet of flame and smoke it was apparent that they could not make it back to base. His only thought was to save his crew while putting as much distance as he could between them and a vengeful enemy.

Other crews looked on in awe as he kept control of the blazing Boston, turning to bring it nearer to the shoreline, "at the same time

maintaining flight as long as possible, to take him away from the enemy locations, before throttling off and executing an excellent alignment on the water..."

The scorched, bullet-raked wreck floated for a while before sinking, its pilot's hatch closed, leaving two >>

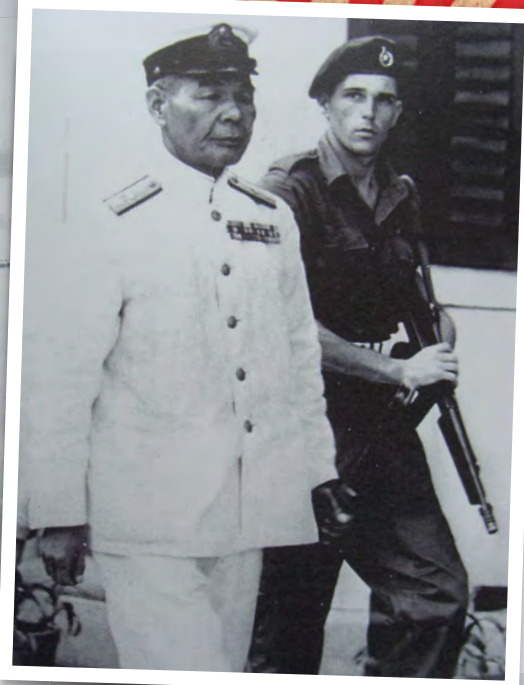
BELOW
Ground crew replenishing ammunition for a 22 Squadron Boston's .5 inch machine-gun while another man works on its .303 inch guns at Ward's Strip.





ABOVE

The burning fuel storage tanks which Newton set ablaze on March 16. According to Keith Hampshire the smoke and flames rose to 8,000 feet and could be seen 50 miles away.



ABOVE RIGHT

Rear Admiral Ruitaro Fujita, the Commander of No 7 Naval Base Force covering Lae and Salamaua who ordered the execution of both Bill Newton and John Lyon, in Hong Kong after the Japanese surrender in 1945. He died in 1947 before he could face a war crimes trial. Newton's executioner, Lieutenant Uichi Komai, a unit commander in No 5 Sasebo Special Naval Landing Party, was killed in action in the Philippines in February 1945.

men, assumed to be Lyon and Eastwood, swimming towards a palm-fringed beach. Circling above them, Fethers' crew watched their progress. "At first it appeared that one of the WAGs [wireless air gunners] was helping the other, as they swam towards the shore about 900 yards away," wrote 'Shorty' Jacobson. "After they had swum about 300 yards it was plain the two were swimming side by side and making fair headway by breast stroke..."

Taking off his Mae West, Jacobson threw it down to them before reluctantly turning and heading back to Ward's Strip. Two of the other bombers diverted to Dobodura where they refuelled before returning to search for the airmen in the hope of initiating a rescue operation. Flying low over Laupui Point they saw Newton's target still wreathed in flames, but nothing of their comrades save for tracks leading from the sea, across the beach and into the jungle, and others along the shore which suggested a manhunt was already under way.

Back at Ward's Strip reports were duly collated which served only to reinforce Hampshire's original VC recommendation. With details of the second sortie added, it was promptly endorsed by Air Commodore Joe Hewitt, Air Officer Commanding No 9 Operational Group, RAAF, in Papua, who called Newton's final exploit "a pre-eminent act of valour for which he paid the supreme sacrifice".

Writing home on March 19, Newton's close friend and fellow

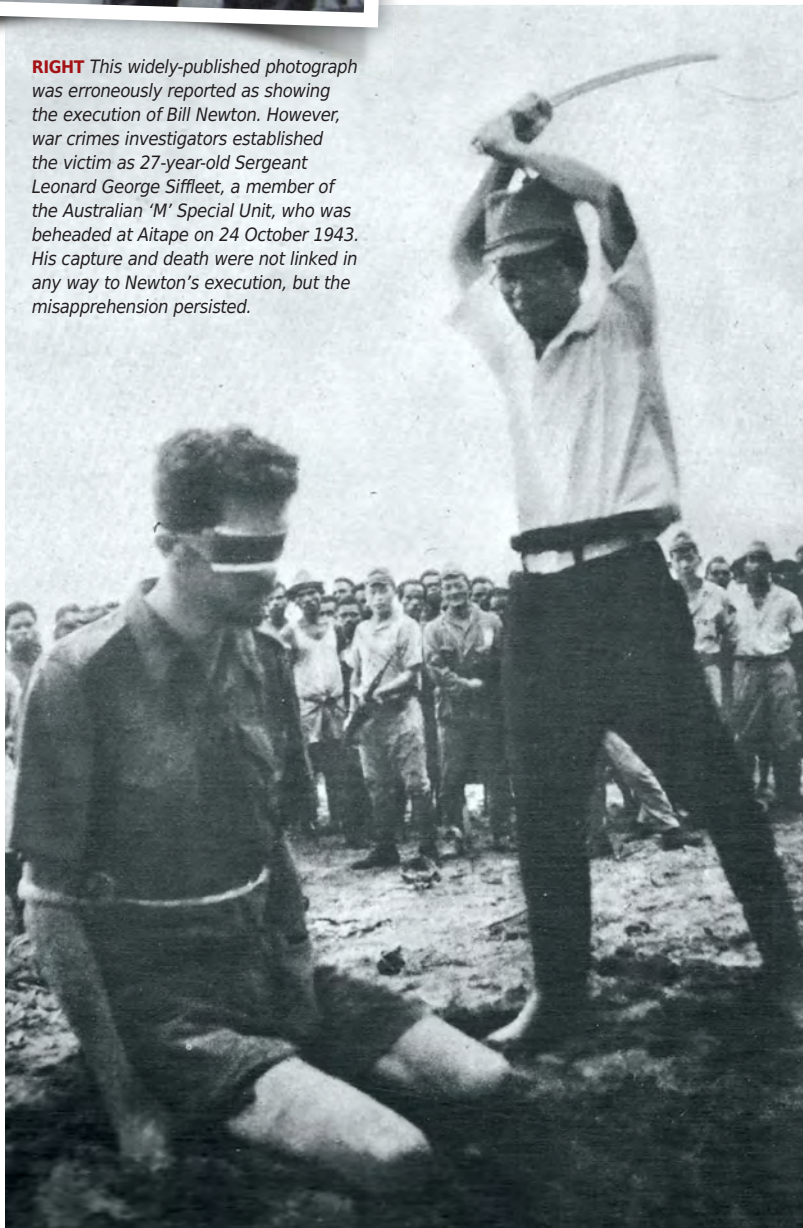
pilot Charles Learmonth confided: "We will miss him in the Squadron as he has almost been the body and soul of the whole place. It's funny how it's always the best chaps who go..."

Heartfelt though it was, it would prove a premature lament for, contrary to all the evidence, Bill Newton was still very much alive when that mournful tribute was written, although his eventual fate was to be far more gruesome than originally feared.

'COLD SHIVER'

Only later, as the full doleful story emerged, did it become clear that Newton had contrived to escape from the Boston and to swim ashore in company with his wireless operator, John Lyon. There, they met with two friendly natives who led them into the

RIGHT This widely-published photograph was erroneously reported as showing the execution of Bill Newton. However, war crimes investigators established the victim as 27-year-old Sergeant Leonard George Siffleet, a member of the Australian 'M' Special Unit, who was beheaded at Aitape on 24 October 1943. His capture and death were not linked in any way to Newton's execution, but the misapprehension persisted.



jungle with the intention of delivering them to an Australian coast watcher, one of a band of intelligence-gatherers operating behind enemy lines. But they never made it.

Perhaps influenced by the sight of aircraft searching for them, the airmen decided to separate from their guides and made their way back to the coast where they were captured by a Japanese patrol.

After being subjected to a brutal interrogation, first at Salamaua and then at Lae, they were split up. Lyon was taken to the perimeter of Lae airfield where he was made to dig his own grave before being bayoneted to death under the gaze of the base commander, Rear Admiral Ruitaro Fujita. Newton, who was considered on the basis of his comrades' search and rescue efforts, to be a "person of importance, possessing considerable rank and ability", was returned to No 5 Sasebo Special Naval Landing Force based at Salamaua. It was there, near to the scenes of his greatest successes, that was added to a saga of skill and courage a final horrific chapter revealed in the captured diary of a Japanese serviceman.

Incorporated in a press release on October 5, 1943, the translated entry for March 29 told how Newton, who was not named in either the diary or the report, was given a last drink of water before being driven from the base guardhouse to a place of execution, on



LEFT
Bill Newton's grave marker with the poignant inscription: 'For God, My King, My Country' in Lae War Cemetery.

the edge of a water-filled bomb crater. There, Newton was made to kneel. The entry continued: "He is apparently resigned; the precaution is taken of surrounding him with guards with fixed bayonets, but he remains calm. He even stretches out his neck, and is very brave... The Unit Commander has drawn his favourite sword... It glitters in the light and sends a cold shiver down my spine. First he touches the prisoner's neck lightly with the sword. Then he raises it overhead. The prisoner closes his eyes for a second and at once the sword sweeps down..."

Five days after the report was made public, a headless corpse, wearing Australian pattern service slacks and shirt, was recovered from a bomb crater some

30 feet from the shoreline at Kila Point.

A little over a week later, the London Gazette announced the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Flight Lieutenant William Ellis Newton for his "many examples of conspicuous bravery". The citation made no mention of his execution despite the Australian Government's attempts to have it re-written.

His savage death marked the end of a short and gallant life that "served as an inspiration" to his comrades in arms. Summing him up, Keith Hampshire listed his many qualities before concluding: "Bill is one of those rare fellows I shall miss for a long time and... remember for an age".

LEFT
Lae War Cemetery, close to the mouth of the Markham River on the Huon Gulf, where the remains of Bill Newton and John Lyon are buried together with 2,816 named and un-named servicemen killed in the struggle to free the east coast of New Guinea from Japanese tyranny. The body of Basil Eastwood, who died either in the attack on Salamaua on March 18 or when their aircraft ditched in the sea, was never found and he is commemorated on Panel 7 of the Lae Memorial.

[PICTURES FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION AND COURTESY OF THE LATE CHAZ BOWYER AND 22 SQUADRON ASSOCIATION, RAAF.]

