

# Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

## Captain Bryan Taylor LUSCOMBE

(1928-1952)

Bryan Luscombe was born at Tamworth on 14 May 1928, the younger child of Francis Taylor Luscombe a manager with the Bank of New South Wales and an ex-AIF officer, and Queen Walsh. Luscombe attended no less than seven primary and secondary schools in Western NSW, Bellevue Hill and Hale School in Western Australia, all the outcome of his father's peripatetic career. He was known as 'Jo' and became accustomed to periodically making new friends and adapting to changing curricula.

Luscombe entered RMC, Duntroon, in 1946 and graduated 22nd in a class of 43 in 1948 and was allotted to Artillery. His knowledge of military art was better than 'very fair'. He excelled at cricket, was reliable and sincere and tried hard at all games. He was a highly regarded AFL player who quickly adapted to Rugby. He played in the RU Kentwell Cup for the North Head XV, and at cricket was an accomplished leg spin bowler.

After courses at the School of Artillery, Luscombe was posted to 'A' Battery in March 1949. Later that year the Chifley Labor government resolved to break a coalminers strike by bringing in the Army. Luscombe was plucked from his battery to join 'Westforce', a temporary military camp within the confines of Marrangaroo RAAOC Ammunition Depot. The Force was to protect engineers and transport troops from possible union violence. Major Ken Fullford, Camp Commandant, remembered him as "young, enthusiastic, intelligent, cheerful and willing to learn". He held his own against 'the old and bold' and, with 'the effrontery of youth', took decisions as if he was 'born to rule'.

Luscombe was one of six young lieutenant/captains who volunteered for flying training as Air Observation Post pilots in 1950 while serving with 1st Field Regiment. Another volunteer was Brien Forward (qv). Luscombe began flying training with the Air Observation Post Flight of No.3 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, RAAF Base Canberra. It was rigorous, subject to continuous assessment by his instructors (one of whom was Captain Ken Oram (qv)), the first Australian to complete Air OP training and gain instructors accreditation at Middle Wallop, UK. Another instructor was Peter Benjamin for the elementary, intermediate and exercise stages of Course 1/51. A good 'eye' was essential - 'coup d'oeuil', as the French say. Luscombe completed his training in September and was presented with his 'wings'. When the Korean War began, one pilot was to join RAF Air OP Flight 1903, which had been dispatched from Hong Kong. Luscombe and Forward tossed a coin for the first opportunity of active service. Luscombe won.

Luscombe arrived in Korea on 7 November 1951 and on the same day was initiated to the front by his flight commander, Major R. N. L. Gower, RA. After three flights with him Luscombe was judged ready to operate on his own, even though compared to his RA

colleagues he had fewer flying hours. Flight 1903, based at Fort George airstrip, used Auster Mark VI aircraft fitted with radio (tuned to RA command and regimental nets), and had oblique camera capability. On 11 November, he was adjusting fire of US 8 inch guns and four days later he was promoted Temporary Captain. As well as dealing with bitter winter weather the pilots also had to avoid enemy 0.5 inch and 37 mm anti-aircraft fire. The frightful flying weather, nearly claimed Luscombe when attempting to take off. Rime ice on the wings degraded the Auster's performance but Luscombe and another pilot escaped with a severe shaking. Spring brought improved flying conditions. He was by this time capable of doing any of the ground or flying tasks and was highly regarded by pilots of both 1903 and 1930 Flights, who shared the strip at Fort George. In May 1952, for example, he flew on 27 of 31 days and engaged in 40 shoots.

On 5 June, on what was to be his last flight in Korea, Luscombe was briefed by the 1st Commonwealth Division Counter Bombardment Officer for a dusk sortie to observe and photograph suspected enemy Hostile Batteries (HBs) north of the Imjin River. Captain de Grey, an Observation Post Officer of 14th Field Regiment, RA, reported five bursts of medium AA fire which burst near an Air OP, and immediately the aircraft turned away from the front towards the rear. Luscombe made two flat circuits to starboard of Fort George and, on the second, attempted a landing, but at 300 feet opened up the throttle and climbed away. Suddenly the aircraft did a violent 360 degree turn and then another of 90 degrees before it crashed into a cliff face near the Imjin River. Luscombe was killed instantly. A Court of Inquiry revealed that the primary cause of the accident was the failure of the port rudder cables near the sternpost that had been severed by shrapnel from a 37 mm shell. Luscombe had flown nearly 320 hours on sorties in the previous six months.

He was posthumously mentioned in dispatches. Of him, Major Gower wrote that:

'Despite his inexperience, he displayed great determination in his efforts to learn quickly and achieve results against the enemy. He was singularly successful on both counts. He had been responsible for the destruction of several enemy gun positions with precision shoots – he has always seen the task through in face of all difficulties, including enemy AA fire. His work on the tactical and photographic sorties has been on a consistently high order. Throughout the period he has displayed considerable courage, self-discipline and determination'.

Luscombe was the Flight's first casualty and his death was keenly felt by his colleagues. He was buried in the United Nations Cemetery, Pusan, Republic of Korea. He had married Shirley Hutcherson, of Cronulla on 10 October 1951. He was survived by his parents, wife and sister Lloyd.

As all Vietnam veterans will recall, the airfield at Nui Dat was named after him and subsequently the Holsworthy airfield was given his name. In 1990 at Middle Wallop, UK, a memorial service was held for all Air OP pilots who had perished on active service. Their names were commemorated by a tree planting with a nearby plaque, including Luscombe. AWM artist Ivor Hele also painted a portrait of him in Korea, now in the possession of his sister.

Sources: Mrs Lloyd Ramsay; RMC Archives; 1903 Air OP Flight, RAF Board of Enquiry File; email 12 Oct 2002, Brig R. K. Fullford (OBE); correspondence/records from Ross Harding (Army Aviation Historian) and Dick Knight; I. McNeill, To Long Tan, p. 385; Alan H. Smith.