

Clive Caldwell, Air Ace

Kristen Alexander

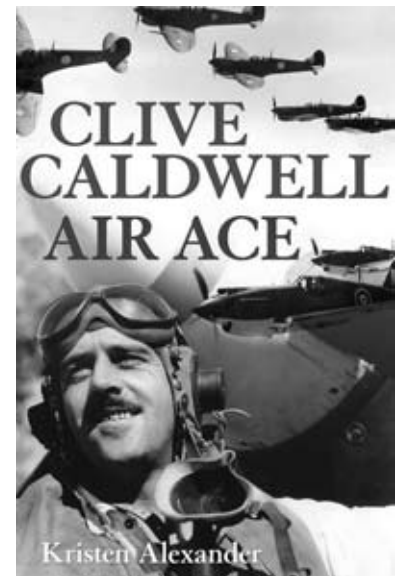
Reviewed by Mark Lax

There have been numerous controversial figures in RAAF history but perhaps none more so than Group Captain Clive Caldwell, Australia's highest scoring ace of World War II. With 27.5 confirmed victories and many more 'probables', Clive 'Killer' Caldwell became a household name during the war years and was feted everywhere he went. But it was not the high score that was to bring him later notoriety but a series of charges laid in 1945 under *Section 40* of the Air Force Act which related to his alleged running of liquor to units in the islands against orders. The subsequent court-martial was to end his RAAF career.

Caldwell was always going to be on the wrong side of the RAAF authorities. Although often portrayed as somewhat of a maverick, he was destined to be a great fighter pilot and war hero when the Australian public needed it most. Having rejected the opportunity of a permanent commission, he chose to train under the Empire Air Training Scheme so he could get into action as soon as possible, and this upset the permanent air force hierarchy who saw this as a snub to the establishment. Nevertheless, he was to serve with distinction, first in the Mediterranean theatre where he was initially posted to 250 Squadron, RAF, in May 1941. Here he began his fighter career. Within a month, he had claimed the first of many 'kills' and these rose steadily as did his rank and decorations. He was later to command No 112 Squadron, RAF where he acquired the rather unfortunate nickname of 'killer', an epithet he hated. With his record of 20 plus claims to his credit, he returned to Australia, tour expired.

After a short spell training new pilots, in 1943, Caldwell returned to operations leading No 1 Fighter Wing in the air defence of Darwin. Here he added another seven to his tally and qualified for ace status in both the Mediterranean and Pacific theatres, the only Australian airman to do so. With the war moving north towards Japan, the Australian airmen were eventually relegated to mopping-up operations which Caldwell felt were fruitless and he drew the ire of the senior RAAF leadership by telling them so.

While serving in Morotai, Caldwell traded booze with the Americans for equipment and luxury items in an effort to keep up morale and flying efficiency. To make matters worse, Caldwell and seven other decorated RAAF pilots resigned their commissions in protest at their operational tasking and treatment. Perhaps it was petty jealousies or retribution for his 'tall poppy' status, but this was the last straw for Air Marshal George Jones, the Chief of Air Staff. After a damning inquiry by John Barry, KC, charges against Caldwell were preferred and a court-martial convened in 1946. I found the description of the court-martial proceedings particularly well presented considering the usual dry nature of the topic and chapter 13 could well be used as a case study to train junior officers in such proceedings today.



Caldwell never wanted his biography written and threatened to sue anyone who tried. However, since his passing in 1994, this is the second biography on the ace to hit the bookstands. In my opinion it is far superior to its predecessor by Jeffrey Watson titled *Clive 'Killer' Caldwell* which appeared in 2005. Whereas Watson's book targets the popular and general interest market and is light on research, this book is highly detailed, draws on all available references and was compiled with the assistance and blessing of Caldwell's wife Jean and the Caldwell family. The 13 chapters follow his life in chronological order, with two-thirds devoted to his rise to quintuple ace status and the remainder to his downfall. A prologue describes the book's genesis and an epilogue tells of the great man's internal anguish in his later life in coming to terms with the human side of his air combat record. While he held no animosity towards his victims, nor was haunted by what he had to do during the war, he remained bitter towards Jones and the RAAF in general for his subsequent treatment right to his death.

The book pulls no punches and is very well written – Kristen Alexander is to be congratulated for her first effort – and readers will enjoy her literary style. Kristen, together with husband David, runs a successful Canberra military bookshop and she is also the Federal Secretary of the Military Historical Society of Australia. Her interest in military aviation figures goes back many years.

The book comes complete with detailed appendices of claims, citations and matters relating to the court martial, a reasonable index and 50 B&W photographs from the Caldwell family collection, most of which have never been published before. Finally, the strong support from Caldwell's wife Jean, and the anecdotes and personal commentary from Caldwell's contemporaries add life to the story. For those interested in key personalities in Australian military aviation history, this book is a must. Highly recommended. ♦

Kristen Alexander, *Clive Caldwell, Air Ace*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2006, Softback, 298pp., RRP: \$435.00.