

Qweekend

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TREE OF LIFE

The spirit of a fallen airman and
the boy he never knew

By Mike Colman





the other lone pine

Story Mike Colman Photography Russell Shakespeare

In a park in Brisbane's west stands a monument to a fallen airman – a 67-year-old tree planted in his memory.

It is 1997 when I first notice the tree. With two restless youngsters in the back seat of the car and some time to kill, I turn off Waterworks Road at Ashgrove in Brisbane's inner north-west and cross the bridge that leads into St Johns Wood, an exclusive enclave of renovated pre-World War II cottages and large contemporary houses with million-dollar views of the city skyline, which is just 4km away. A left turn into Royal Parade and I find what I'm looking for: a playground.

As my daughters entertain themselves on the equipment, I step away and spot a large rock in front of a giant kauri pine. On the rock is a small silver plaque, held in place by four chrome-plated plugs. It reads: *"To the memory of Flt Sgt Clifford Berger Hopgood, killed in air operations over occupied France 24th Feb 1944. This tree was planted by his friends of St Johns Wood."*

In my imagination I see the friends and neighbours of Hopgood, some still in uniform in the days after the war, planting a sapling, stepping back and bowing their heads in silence for a few moments before walking back to their homes. I imagine Clifford as a small boy growing up nearby and playing in the very park my children are now enjoying. I see him in short pants and Brylcreemed hair, running around with maybe a wooden toy plane. And I imagine him in his blue RAAF uniform leaving St Johns Wood and heading off to war, never to return.

There's a story here, I say to myself as I leave, vowing to one day tell it. It taunts me for over a decade, calling to me every time I drive past the turn-off to St Johns Wood. Finally last year I go back to The Woods Memorial Playground, write down the details on the plaque and begin my search for Clifford Berger Hopgood.

In time I will find that I was at least partly correct in my musings. There was a group of Hopgood's neighbours standing around the sapling; Hopgood did leave St Johns Wood in uniform, never to return; and there was a small boy playing in the park. Just a different boy.

TODAY, IT'S A LOT EASIER TO TRACE THE STORY of a fallen airman than it would have been when I first saw the tree. The internet has seen to that. The Australian War Memorial website informs me that Flt Sgt Clifford Berger Hopgood, official number 414565 from 460 Squadron RAAF attached to the RAF, was killed on February 24, 1944, aged 28, and buried in the village cemetery at Villers-Sous-Preny, Lorraine, France. A departmental manager, he was born in Toowoomba on August 3, 1915 and lived at 89 Royal Parade, St Johns Wood. Next of kin was his wife, Margaret Warren Hopgood.

Typing Hopgood's name into Google brings up a link to the Churchie Old Boys' Association ►

“List of the Fallen”, honouring old boys of Brisbane Church of England Grammar School killed in action in all conflicts from World War I.

Churchie archivist James Mason provides me with the details of Hopgood’s time at the school, where he was student number 683. He enrolled in 1928 as a “choir scholar”, meaning that on Sundays he sang in the St John’s Cathedral choir, earning a reduction in fees. A talented athlete (a report on Churchie’s 14th annual sports day in the *Brisbane Courier* of Saturday, September 8, 1928, notes that J. Javes won the junior cross-country “after a hard tussle from Hopgood and Nixon-Smith”), he competed in the school’s annual Pocket Swim around Norman Creek and scored tries in rugby matches against Nudgee and Brisbane Grammar in the 1930 season. Hopgood left Churchie at the end of 1931 after sitting his Junior Examination and achieving good B Level results in English, Latin, arithmetic, algebra and geometry.

As we speak, Mason’s fingers tap on his computer keyboard. “Have you tried the National Archives?” he asks. “Here it is ... 79 pages.” Those pages provide a poignant and heart-wrenching picture of the days and nights that followed the take-off of Hopgood’s plane, Lancaster bomber ND394, from RAF Binbrook airfield, near Brookenby, Lincolnshire, at 6:02 on that night in 1944. On board was a crew of seven, including Australians Warrant Officer D. W. Baxter, the pilot; Flight Officer A. D’Arcey, the bomb aimer; wireless operator Flt Sgt R.C. Ferguson; and upper gunner Warrant Officer W.J. Martin. The RAF’s Sgt P. Mallon was flight engineer and Sgt J. D. Dunlop rear gunner. Clifford Hopgood was navigator. The mission was to bomb factories in Schweinfurt, Germany.

According to the Australian War Memorial official history, “nothing was heard from the aircraft after take-off and it did not return to base; 17 aircraft from the squadron took part in the raid and two, including ND 394, failed to return.”

It was four days before Margaret Hopgood received notification of her husband’s presumed fate in the form of a telegram from RAAF headquarters in Melbourne. A copy, its edges torn and frayed, is held in the National Archives. It reads: “PERSONAL Mrs. C. B. Hopgood. Regret to inform you that your husband 414565 Flight Sgt Clifford Berger Hopgood is missing as result of air operations STOP Details are he was member of crew Lancaster aircraft detailed to attack Schweinfurt Germany which failed to return to base presumably due to enemy action STOP The Minister for Air joins with Air Board in expressing sincere sympathy in your anxiety STOP When any further information is received it will be conveyed to you immediately.”

The telegram was followed on April 6 by a



letter from Wing Commander H. D. Marsh, DFC, Officer Commanding 460 Squadron.

“Dear Mrs Hopgood,” Marsh says. “I write to offer you the sincere sympathy of myself and the Squadron, during the anxious time you will be passing through. Your husband was very popular in the Squadron and had carried out his duties in an extremely conscientious manner. It may be of some consolation to know that a number of missing airmen are eventually found to be Prisoners of War and I hope I will have the pleasure of passing such good news on to you before long.”

There would be no such good news. Not for Margaret Hopgood, anyway. On June 17, 1944, she received a second telegram from Australian officials: “Information received from International Red Cross that one Australian member of your husband’s crew Warrant Officer W.J. Martin is a Prisoner of War STOP Regret no news of your husband or remainder of crew.”

Six months later, Margaret wrote to Mrs M.C. Langslow, secretary of the RAAF’s casualty section in Little Collins St, Melbourne – a woman who in years of correspondence between the two would be Margaret’s contact at HQ and her source of early hope and ultimate sadness. Margaret’s neat, handwritten letter states: “It is with regret I inform you that I have had no news from him since he was reported missing.” Then on February 15, 1945, almost a year after her husband’s fatal flight, Margaret Hopgood received in the post a letter from Mrs Langslow.

“It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that the death of your husband has now been presumed for official purposes to have occurred on the 24th February, 1944. The Minister for Air and members of the Air Board desire me to extend to you their profound sympathy in your great loss.”

Margaret was sent a list of the personal effects of “the late 414565 F/Sgt Hopgood C. B.” Among

Indelible memories... (from left) The photo of Hopgood his wife Margaret kept on her bedside table; the watch she gave him on their engagement; and the couple’s 1939 wedding photo.



such items as 18 handkerchiefs, 24 socks and a leather tobacco pouch was “one wrist watch on leather strap, engraved “To Cliff from Margaret”.”

In November 1944, Margaret was informed by Mrs Langslow that two of her husband’s crew, pilot Baxter and bomb aimer D’Arcey, had escaped through occupied France and made their way back to England. The crewmen reported that the aircraft had been attacked by a night-fighter at 22,000 ft. The starboard engine caught fire and pilot Baxter instructed the crew to bale out. D’Arcey reported getting out with Hopgood at 15,000 ft but had “no further knowledge” of him or the rest of the crew.

It would not be until the months after the war that Margaret would learn about her

husband’s final moments. In September 1945, Mrs Langslow wrote that Flt Sgt Martin, recently repatriated from a prisoner-of-war camp, “was told by a German interrogation officer that your husband was found lying in a recumbent position in a field without any sign of external injuries. Further examination showed that his neck had been broken, apparently in landing as his parachute was open.”

Eight months later came another letter from Mrs Langslow. It was the last that Margaret would receive from her. It said: “A copy of a letter from Madame Schuller of Villers-Sous-Preny, addressed to the British Ambassador in Paris, has been received. As it is thought that the information may be of some comfort to you in your sorrow, a copy of the letter is enclosed.”

Written on October 21, 1945, and translated by the office of the British ambassador, Madame Schuller’s letter tells of the night the Lancasters passed over Villers-Sous-Preny. It was 10.25pm and “unfortunately the Luftwaffe were very active and hit your bomber in full flight”.

Villagers hurried to the crash scene and found a badly wounded Flt Sgt Martin. Madame Schuller’s husband, the local baker and grocer and for four years a member of the French Resistance, told the villagers to bring Martin to their house, where the town doctor treated his wounds. Baxter and D’Arcey were then brought to the house and hidden. With Martin needing urgent surgery the Schullers reluctantly notified the Germans, who interrogated him and took him away. Baxter and D’Arcey, who remained undetected despite a search of the house, were given false papers and assisted passage to England.

But it was the second part of the letter that resonated most with Margaret Hopgood: “The

following four airmen are buried in our little cemetery,” it read. “Hopgood, Dunlop, Mallon and Ferguson. My husband identified them by the names on their parachutes. I tell you straight away that they were killed instantaneously. The Mayor told us to pick up the dead – four young men cut off in the prime of life by the bloody war. But they had a funeral worthy of your glorious soldiers, as was proved by the long procession of mourners who attended the ceremony – there were more than 6000 people taking part in the funeral. You can imagine how furious the Germans were when they realised what had happened. There were Gestapo reports and interviews – these included my husband who brought the flowers and wreaths – and ramifications followed. The Mayor was fined 3000 francs for having allowed the ceremony to take place in his district and they threatened to take hostages.

“Tell their mothers that although there is only one grave, each man had his own coffin. They lie in our little village and their grave is decorated with flowers and wreaths and always has been, in spite of the Germans. Tell their mothers also that the French fully realise what this loss must mean to them ... I also had a son, who now lies side by side with his comrades.”

And that is where my story of Clifford Berger Hopgood would have ended, if not for another instance of his name in Google results. As part of the national Avenues of Honour Project, which is researching and documenting all war memorials as part of the centenary of Anzac commemoration in 2015, Brisbane City Council has produced a report listing and describing all memorials within its boundaries. The report, which appears online, includes a photograph of the tree, the rock and the plaque. Underneath are the words, “A local resident, Marjorie Summerville, recalls being present at the planting of the memorial tree ...”

“Yes, I remember being there,” 89-year-old Mrs Summerville tells me over the phone. “I’m not sure how many were there; [I assume] everyone who lived near the park. George Colville organised it. He was a soldier too. I never knew Cliff Hopgood. We moved there when my husband got back from the war in 1946 and the tree was planted not long after that. It was directly opposite their house. We were at 101 Royal Parade and when we came, there weren’t any houses in between us and them. I used to go down and use their phone; we didn’t have one then.”

We speak for a while as Mrs Summerville recalls the day they planted the tree. I ask if she knows what happened to Margaret. “Oh, she died,” she says. “The house is gone too. They cut it in half and took it away on a truck.” She then adds “... You know they had a son, don’t you? Robert. He lives on one of the islands.”

ROBERT HOPGOOD IS WAITING FOR ME AT THE jetty as the ferry pulls in to Macleay Island. A fit-looking, energetic 70-year-old, he takes me for a brief tour of the island in his four-wheel-drive.

“Would you like to have a look at this?” he asks as we pull up to a small but striking building; it’s the 100-seat non-denominational Macleay Island Church of the Holy Spirit. Robert leads the way inside. “When we came here 14 years ago there was no church on the island, so I designed this and we built it with volunteer labour,” he says. “The thing is, I never knew my father, so I can’t really tell you what he was like, but I thought maybe if you saw this place it might say something about him, and about my mother too. The person you become ... it has to come from somewhere, doesn’t it?”

A few minutes later I’m sharing a coffee with Robert and Alison, 68, his wife of 48 years, in the large eat-in kitchen of their waterfront home. We are seated on chairs manufactured by Harley Furniture, a division of the successful home-building, earthmoving and construction company Robert founded after graduating from the University of Queensland with a degree in architecture in 1963. The 180-degree view north across Moreton Bay is spectacular. The Hopgoods’ 13-metre catamaran *Eaglehawk* is moored nearby.

On the table before us are the few mementoes Robert has of his father: his parents’ wedding photo; the framed picture of Clifford in his air force uniform that stood on Margaret’s bedside table until the day she died; and “one wrist watch on leather strap, engraved “To Cliff from Margaret””. One of Robert’s earliest memories is the day his mother took him – aged five or six – on the tram to South Brisbane railway station. They sat silently on the platform waiting as a train pulled in. “Two servicemen in uniform got off and came up to us,” he says. “One of them gave me a little wooden toy. It was a penguin on wheels, with a couple of bits of leather that made a noise when you pushed it along. Then they gave something to Mum. I remember pushing this little toy and wanting Mum to look, and then I saw she was crying. It was the watch. They’d given her Dad’s watch.”

When Robert turned 13, Margaret gave him the watch. He wore it until it stopped working a decade later. “I’ve never worn a watch since,” he says.

The watch had been Margaret’s engagement present to Clifford. They had met in the mid-1930s. She was working at O’Brien’s Paper Bag factory at inner-city Spring Hill; he was sales manager at Holeproof, the hosiery company. Born in Charters Towers in 1911, Margaret had moved to Spring Hill in Brisbane with her father, two sisters and baby brother after her ▶

history

mother died in childbirth. Her oldest sister Sarah, 11 at the time, left school to help raise the younger children. The family struggled during the Depression, to the point where Margaret refused to marry Clifford until they had built their own home. "As a young girl, she'd been the one sent to tell the landlord that they couldn't pay the rent," says Robert. "She never wanted to go through that again."

The couple bought land in Royal Parade, St Johns Wood, and for several years their outings involved picnicking on the site as they saved to build the home, which they named *Glen Arran*. They married on May 27, 1939, just over three months before Australia entered the war against Germany.

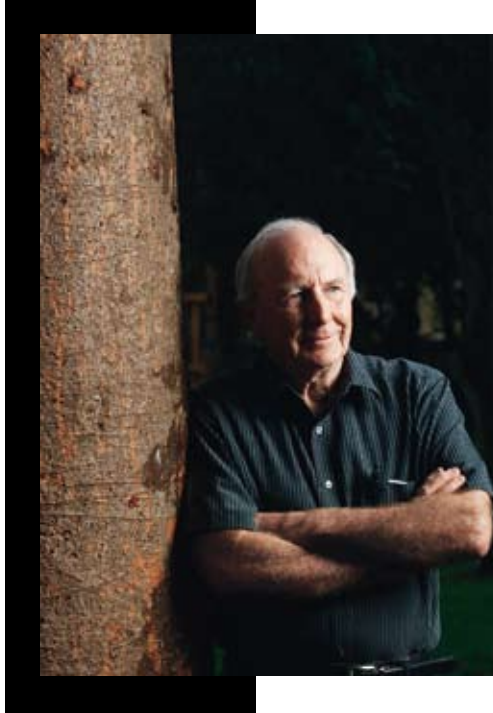
Robert was born on September 27, 1940, with Clifford promising Margaret he would not leave for the war until they had shared their son's first birthday. On October 12, 1941, Clifford left his office in the city and went to the Number 3 RAAF Recruiting Centre nearby to enlist, taking an oath to "resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's Peace to be kept and maintained, and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service faithfully discharge my duty according to law. So help me God!"

Following aircrew training in NSW, Clifford left Melbourne by troopship for Canada on November 2, 1942. Margaret rented out *Glen Arran* and took Robert back to live with her family in Spring Hill. Clifford arrived in England in early 1943. After completing a navigators' course and serving with RAF 625 Squadron, he joined RAAF 460 Squadron on November 28, 1943. Three months later he flew his final mission.

There were eight men who left St Johns Wood to serve in World War II. Clifford Berger was the only one who didn't come home.

By the time Margaret and young Robert returned to the family house in St Johns Wood in 1948, the tree was already there. George Colville had asked council for permission to plant it and they had supplied the sapling. A white timber and chain fence was constructed around it and the plaque affixed to a post. As soon as he was old enough Robert would clear the long grass around the memorial, first with a reaping hook and then a Qualcast mower that Margaret had purchased from a neighbour. Years later, when the fence was damaged by a council tractor, a giant granite boulder was brought down from Mt Coot-tha and the plaque attached. For Robert, who has always referred to it as "Dad's tree", the healthy kauri was a constant reminder of what he was missing. In many ways, the only reminder.

"The way that Mum and her generation dealt with grief was that there was no counselling," he says. "You just got on with your life and tried to lock out anything that hurt you. I learnt that at



Lean on me ... Robert Hopgood, son of Clifford, with the lasting tangible memory of his dad in St Johns Wood.

had been proclaimed in their honour and a civic reception held in the town hall following a march from the site of the plane crash. As Margaret stepped from the bus, there to meet her were the mayor who had been fined 3000 francs for authorising Clifford's funeral, the doctor who had attended Flt Sgt Martin, and Madame Schuller.

A year after Margaret's death in 2008, her daughter-in-law Alison persuaded Robert to also make the pilgrimage to Villers-Sous-Preny. From the day Robert first brought Alison home to meet his mother in 1958, she and Margaret had formed the closest of bonds. An accomplished choral singer, Alison performed with the Brisbane Eisteddfod Junior Choir and Margaret was her number one supporter, attending all concerts. "I wasn't all that keen to go to France but Alison talked me into it," Robert says. She adds, "I told him if you don't come, I'll go by myself."

The Villers-Sous-Preny Robert and Alison walked into in 2009 was a different village to the one that had welcomed Margaret 32 years earlier. The streets were deserted, the shops closed. "There's no work around," Robert says. "The whole place was empty."

They found the church and Robert stood before his father's grave. "Basically I was just standing there and thinking, 'This is him. I really do have a dad.' For the first time, I felt like I had a father."

HE PLACED SOME OF HIS MOTHER'S ASHES ON the grave, then he and Alison tried without success to gain entry to the church. "It was locked up, but just by chance I saw an old woman in a garden nearby," Robert remembers. "I somehow managed to explain what we wanted and she went to another house and a woman came out with a big old key and unlocked the front door for us. It was a lovely little church, beautifully looked after."

As Robert sat in a back pew, Alison stood at the front of the church and sang Margaret's favourite song, *These Are The Lovely Things*.

In her latter years Margaret Hopgood would sit quietly for hours on the verandah of the home she and her husband had built, looking across to the park at Clifford's tree, whose roots spread all the way to France. "I'm not going to die," she'd say, "until it's the tallest tree in the park."

Margaret passed away, aged 96, on July 25, 2008, with Robert and Alison at her bedside and their children Catherine, Clifford and David close by. A modern bungalow now stands at 89 Royal Parade. Two ageing corner fence posts are the only reminder of *Glen Arran*, the house Clifford Berger Hopgood left to go to war.

But the kauri pine grows strong at St Johns Wood. It is the tallest tree in the park. ■

a very early age. If I'd said, 'why don't I have a dad?' – or something like that – I'd have been told to eat my dinner. It was 'we don't talk about that'. The pain was completely washed out of me. I was like, 'Yeah, I had a father, he was killed in the war, so what?' It didn't mean a thing.

"At the same time the influence of Mum on my life, things like loyalty and work ethic, was quite unreal. It was hard for Mum. She became very independent, she needed to be, but at a very hard time in terms of social convention. She liked to take me away on holiday, but a woman sitting alone on a beach in those days was just not done."

Margaret returned to work at the paper bag factory and remained there until her retirement in 1971. She also became a stalwart of the War Widows Guild, representing the organisation at Anzac Day ceremonies. For young Robert, they weren't enjoyable experiences. "I went to as many Anzac Day services as anyone," he says. "I approached them with trepidation. As a war widow, Mum was expected to go back to the RSL club after the service. There would be all these drunk blokes and this young woman and it was very uncomfortable. I remember being upset and Mum saying to me, 'Robert, Anzac Day is that day of the year when those who've returned from the war remember those who didn't ... but we remember them every day.'"

IN 1975, MARGARET ACCOMPANIED A GROUP of 27 war widows on a tour of France. She had made arrangements to slip away on her own to visit Clifford's grave in Villers-Sous-Preny but when her companions heard of her plans, many of them went with her.

When their bus pulled into the village, they found the footpaths lined with people. A banner strung across the road proclaimed: "In Memory of Your Dear Deceased. Australian Friends, You Are Welcome in Our Village." A public holiday