



Bert Wipiti



Charles Kronk

# An enduring friendship

A research project on Maori airmen led historian **Bruce Petty** to a story about heroes, Hollywood, and the importance of good friends.

**I**N 2007 I interviewed **Geoffrey Bryson Fiskén** for a book I was writing about New Zealand and the Pacific War. Fiskén was New Zealand's top fighter ace in the Pacific, with 11 confirmed kills. He first flew missions in the skies over Singapore, and then later in the Solomon Islands where he added to his total. During the course of the interview Fiskén mentioned two others he flew with over Singapore and the Malay Peninsula, **Charles Kronk** and **Bert Wipiti**. He pointed out that Bert was Maori. Like most people who have an interest in New Zealand's

involvement in World War II, I knew about the Maori Battalion, but didn't know that Maori also served in the air arm until I interviewed Fiskén. With my curiosity piqued, I started digging around and discovered that there were quite a few Maori who served not only in the RNZAF, but also in the RAF. For example, one who flew with Bomber Command in Europe was **John Pohe**. He was later shot down and captured, and was among those who made the Great Escape of Hollywood movie fame. He was also among those recaptured and executed by the Gestapo.



Below [Charles Kronk Caption TK](#). Images courtesy members of the extended Kronk family and Lesley Skipper.



TWO NEW ZEALAND FLYERS who fought in Malaya. Sergeant-Pilot Kronk (left) and Sergeant-Pilot B. S. Wipiti, D.F.M., a young Maori flyer, who fell Singapore with several planes to his credit

Above A newspaper clipping, date unknown, on the young friends.

In the process of researching Maori airmen, I discovered that Bert Wipiti was born and grew up in New Plymouth on the west coast of the North Island, where my family and I have lived since 2004. He graduated from New Plymouth Boys High School and then took a job as a refrigerator repairman until the war came along. He applied for and was accepted into the RNZAF. He did his initial flight training in Levin, north of Wellington, and then at Bell Block, outside of New Plymouth. He completed his training at Ohakea, just north of the city of Palmerston North on the west coast of North Island.

It was during the early days of his flight training that he met and became friends with Charles Kronk. Charles was born in Kohuratahi, Taranaki, but grew up and went to school in Napier, on the opposite coast to New Plymouth. He was four years older than Bert, having been born in 1918, and in many ways was just the opposite of Bert. At 180cm tall, Charles appeared much bigger when standing next to the diminutive Bert Wipiti. Charles also had fair hair and blue eyes. Bert had dark hair and eyes. However, these two apparent opposites gravitated to each other and became the best of mates.

Family members recall Charles Kronk as a young man who had everything going for him. Academically, he was near the top of his class in high school, a star athlete, and also popular among his peers. Along with his father, he shared a love for raising and racing carrier pigeons, winning numerous ribbons and cups. He was a representative player for the Hawkes Bay hockey team, and after graduating from high school he worked in a clerical position up until the time he enlisted.

Prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, Bert and Charles were posted to Singapore to fly in 243 Squadron, made up mostly of New Zealand pilots flying already outdated Brewster Buffalos, an American-manufactured fighter plane. Brewster Buffaloes had served the Finnish Air Force well in that country's war against Russia in 1939-40, but proved a poor match against the more nimble ►

Japanese Zero they came up against in the early days of the Pacific War.

Lesley Skipper, who is related to the Wipiti family by marriage, became the family archivist and has retained most of the photos, letters and other documents related to Bert Wipiti. When I first met her she told me that before heading off to war Bert requested that the first boy born to one of his sisters be named after him. It was as if he had a premonition he would not return. Lesley's husband was that first-born.

Bert and Charles were almost inseparable. They bunked together, shared meals and flew together whenever possible. On 10 January 1942 they were credited with shooting down the first Japanese aircraft in the skies over Singapore. Bert first dove on the twin-engine Ki 46 with its two crew members, putting bullets into one of its engines and slowing it down. Charles joined in, and the two continued to blast away at it until it was seen to crash into the jungle in southern Johor, just to the north of Singapore.

On 21 January, Bert and Charles flew together again and were both credited with shooting down two more planes, though separately this time. A few days later, Bert shot down another Japanese

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plane, his third and last before he and what was left of his squadron escaped Singapore in the closing days of the battle.

By the end of January there were so few Buffaloes and so few pilots left from 243 Squadron that Geoffrey Bryson Fiskin, Bert, Charles and one other surviving pilot were transferred to another squadron. Charles flew one of the last serviceable Brewster Buffalos to Sumatra as the Japanese closed in. Bert escaped later by ship. However, just short of Sumatra, his ship, which was unnamed in his letters home, was sunk and Bert floated around in the water for over half a day before making it to shore. In the meantime, Charles, worried sick that his best mate was still in Singapore, was

**Right** May Kronk, Charles' mother. May corresponded with Bert after Charles' death, saying later that "his letters were a great comfort to me. He and my boy, Charlie, were very dear friends, and... each would have died for the other."



conspiring to fly back and rescue him even as the Japanese came ever closer. However, before he could commandeer a plane for this suicidal mission the Japanese bombed the field and destroyed the plane he planned to fly. Meanwhile, Bert made it ashore and when Charles returned to his tent he found Bert resting on his cot. According to witnesses, Charles was close to tears when reunited with his friend.

Not only did Bert and Charles love flying, but apparently they also loved combat, according to those who knew and flew with them. This probably explains why they were allowed to fly with the Dutch Air Force or what was left of it as the Japanese closed in on the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. Japanese paratroopers descended on the oilfields of Sumatra, one of their main objectives in going to war in the first place, and then rapidly moved to take Java and the rest of the archipelago. This ended Bert's and Charles' short enlistment with the Dutch Air Force. They then took a train to the south coast of Java and there boarded one of many ships evacuating the island. Some of those ships headed for Australia, while others, including the one with Bert and Charles aboard, headed west for Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Other ships, and also airplanes, evacuating military as well as civilian personnel were not so lucky. Many were sunk or shot down. Those who stayed behind spent the rest of the war in POW and civilian internment camps.

In talking to relatives, not much was said about any girlfriend waiting for Charles after the war.

However, in an album put together by his family, there is a photograph of a beautiful young woman he met during his brief interlude in the Dutch East Indies. It is not known if she escaped to Australia, as some did, or was lost in the attempt. If she stayed, then most likely she spent the rest of the war in a civilian internment camp, or worse. Some

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Dutch women were forced to become Comfort Women for the Japanese occupiers.

In Bert's case, it is known from letters that survived the war that he had a girlfriend waiting for him back in New Plymouth. They had known each other since high school, and in one of his letters to her he made it clear that whatever plans he had after the war they included her.

Bert and Charles eventually made their way to Calcutta, where they became part of 67 Squadron, flying Hurricanes, a much more advanced aircraft compared to the sluggish Brewster Buffalo. However, on 29 May 1942, Charles was killed in a flying accident after returning from a routine patrol. He attempted to do a roll above the field, stalled, and crashed into the ground. Bert had just lost his best mate. Letters between Bert and Charles' mother reveal to the reader how much Charles meant to him. Likewise, in Mrs Kronk's replies the reader is left with the impression that Bert had become almost a surrogate son to her even though they had never met.

In one of his letters to Mrs Kronk, Bert wrote, "Do you know, Mrs. Kronk, he [Charles] talked of you so much it seems I've known you for ages."

In this same letter, Bert also wrote, "I saw him many times charge into a Jap formation to upset them and usually came back with a bullet-riddled machine. Somehow, I think he enjoyed it. He wasn't afraid of anything with wings."

For men who go off to war, death is a face they see in the mirror every day, and share with comrades who fail to return. For Bert, who

survived multiple close calls in the skies over Singapore, the loss of his best mate had to be a terrible blow. And if that loss wasn't enough, he also suffered from the additional burden of what was referred to in British India as the "colour bar." Being dark-skinned, Bert suffered untold indignities from British colonial types. As a result, his superiors in 67 Squadron felt a change was in order, and had him transferred to England.

After arriving in England in late March 1943, Wipiti had various assignments before being checked out in Spitfires, and then assigned to 485 Squadron in August of that year. **George Couper**, another New Zealander, was his bunk mate and wingman, and the last person to see Bert alive. By then Bert had been promoted to Warrant Officer. Two months later on 3 October 1943, George Couper and Bert engaged several German fighters somewhere east of Caen in north-western France. Afterwards, George reported that between the two of them they shot down at least one of the German fighters, but then they became separated. George's Spitfire was badly hit during the encounter and he barely made it back to base at Biggin Hill. Neither Bert nor his machine was ever seen again. There seems to be controversy as to whether he went down east of Caen or in the English Channel. He was declared missing in action three months before his 22nd birthday.

One can only imagine how Mrs Kronk's grief was compounded when 16 months after losing her son, Bert also lost his life in combat in another part of the world. When news of Bert's death reached Mrs Kronk, she wrote to one of his brothers: "Bert and I became fast friends, and his letters were a great comfort to me. He and my boy, Charlie, were very dear friends, and I am told by boys who have come back that each would have died for the other."

Neither Bert nor his plane was ever found. However, recently, a street was named after him near the New Plymouth airport. More importantly, both Bert Wipiti and his best mate, Charles Kronk, left a legacy of friendship and dedication that friends and family want remembered by future generations. 🍷

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