In Indonesia, 29 July each year is celebrated as ‘Hari Bakti’ (Day of Consecration) of the Air Force, initially known by the Bahasa acronym AURI and later as the TNI-AU. The date commemorates events in 1947 which saw the TNI-AU come into being during the struggle for Indonesia’s independence against the Dutch, who were attempting to reimpose colonial rule over the former Netherlands East Indies (NEI) after Japanese occupation in World War II. It is not generally known—outside Indonesia at any rate—that a notable Australian airman of the war years featured in those events.

On 29 July 1947, eight days after the Dutch military forces invaded Republican areas of Java under the guise of a ‘police action’, the fledgling Indonesian air service struck back with dawn air raids against Dutch positions at Semarang, Salatiga and Ambarawa. Launched from an airfield at Maguwo, on the southern outskirts of Yogyakarta, the attacks were made against each place by lone aircraft. These were a single-engine Guntei monoplane and two Cureng (or Churen) single-engine biplanes left behind by the departing Japanese.

As soon as the third aircraft returned from its mission and landed back at Maguwo at 0620 hrs, it was quickly concealed like the others—in anticipation that the Dutch would hit back. This reaction duly came at 0705 when two Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawks roared in over Yogyakarta to deliver an intimidating display, although reportedly without causing any casualties. The Dutch were not finished, however, with retaliation for the attacks initiated from this area.

At 1730 hrs that afternoon, a C-47 Dakota transport approached Maguwo from the west. The aircraft bore the civil registration VT-CLA, as well as the words ‘Government of Orissa’ indicating its Indian identity. The aircraft’s owner was a member of the Orissa Legislative Assembly and a personal friend of India’s prime minister, Pandit Nehru. As it happened, the Dakota was arriving from Singapore with two tons of medical supplies provided by the Red Cross in Malaya.

After completing a circuit of the aerodrome, the aircraft lowered its undercarriage and commenced a landing approach. It was at this moment that two Dutch-flown Kittyhawks attacked, setting the Dakota’s port engine on fire. Moments later the aircraft struck a tree with one wing and crashed into a rice field in the village of Ngoto Balanda at Bantul (west Maguwo).

Eight of the nine people on board were killed, including three ‘pioneers’ of the TNI-AU, along with Indonesia’s Trade Consul in Malaya, and all three of the Dakota’s crew: an Indian technician, the British co-pilot (ex-Squadron Leader Roy Hazelhurst), and the Australian pilot, Noel Constantine. The pilot’s wife, Beryl, was also among those on board who died. The sole survivor was an Indonesian, the General Secretary of the Republican Ministry of Information.

The incident caused an international furore, not least because the Dakota’s mercy mission had been previously announced in messages broadcast by both Radio Batavia and Radio Malaya, even though no prior arrangements had been made with the Dutch authorities for a safe passage. The Dutch attempted to claim that the unarmed aircraft was mistaken for a ‘Helen’, a twin-engined Japanese bomber similar to a type alleged to have been seen over Semarang during the air raids earlier that day.

The two Dutch pilots, who were named in the press, were both former members of the NEI fighter squadron which had served in Australia as part of the RAAF during the
Pacific War. Their inability to identify the C-47, in broad daylight, as a type which other Dutch units had also operated as part of the RAAF as late as January 1947, lacked credibility. So did their claims that they had fired only warning shots, and that the Dakota had actually crashed while taking evasive action.

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Ratcliffe, a British military observer in Yogyakarta who later spoke to the foreign media about what he had witnessed that day, described the incident as the ‘most cowardly and single brutal action of folly I have ever seen or wish to see’. He said that he had viewed the corpses of the eight persons killed in the hospital mortuary that evening, and categorically stated that Mrs Constantine had been killed by a bullet through the left cheek.

Among the storm of protest which erupted, there were many assumptions made regarding Constantine’s Australian connexions. Even today, some Indonesian accounts refer to him as a former member of the RAAF, whereas in fact he never had any service or association with Australia’s Air Force. His service in World War II was entirely as a member of the Royal Air Force. Even some Australian accounts confuse the details of his personal story. Until recently, no-one has troubled to sort out the fact from the mythology.

**WGCDR Noel Constantine**

Noel Constantine was born on 13 December 1914 at Moama, NSW, and educated at Albury High School and apparently at Cowes on Phillip Island, Victoria, before directly enlisting in the Royal Air Force in July 1938. The flying career that he subsequently enjoyed from December 1939 was entirely with the British service. In July 1940 he became a member of No 141 Squadron, with which he flew Defiants throughout the Battle of Britain.

Soon after his promotion to Flight Lieutenant was gazetted in September 1941, he left England for the India-Burma theatre, where—in April 1942—he was made acting Squadron Leader and given command of No 273 Squadron at China Bay, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In June 1943 he was posted to command No 136 Squadron (a Hurricane fighter unit) at Baigachi, Burma, shortly before the unit moved back to India to re-equip with Spitfire VCs.

It was only after the squadron began flying fighter defensive patrols and escort missions over Burma from December 1943 that he shot down the six Japanese aircraft that made him an ‘ace’. Promoted acting Wing Commander in April 1944, he was placed in charge of Air Fighter Tactics until 1945, when he joined the headquarters staff in Delhi, India. It was about this time that he became pilot to Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander in South-East Asia.

Discharged from the RAF in December 1946, he was appointed unofficial civil aviation adviser to the Indonesian Government. So far as is known, he never became involved in civil aviation in Australia. His wife Beryl, a well-known London dress designer, moved to Singapore to be with him, leaving the couple’s two children back in England. She was in the news in February 1947 for her criticism of local fashions while visiting Australia to make contacts for an export business she planned to open, and again in May, after the couple’s home in Singapore was robbed of jewellery. Two months later, the Constantines were both dead, killed over Java.