The Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), instituted in 1918 by King George V, was awarded to Air Force officers for ‘an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty performed whilst flying in active operations against the enemy’. In 1932 this was altered to the simpler ‘for exceptional valour, courage or devotion to duty whilst flying in active operations against the enemy’. Each successive award of the DFC to the same person was referred to as a ‘Bar’. Since its inception there have been just under 22 500 awards of the DFC, together with just over 1000 first Bars and 60 second Bars. In the Australian context, the DFC was awarded to Australian military airmen who served in the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) and British air forces during World War I; to those who served with the RAAF, RAF, and other dominion air forces during World War II; to those who served with the RAAF during the Korean War and Malaya/Borneo emergencies, and with RAAF and USAF units in the Vietnam War. Only six Australians have been awarded the DFC three times—two while members of the AFC, and four for service during later conflicts, only one of whom was flying with the RAAF on all three occasions.

Captain Arthur Henry Cobby and Captain Ross Macpherson Smith were awarded their DFCs and subsequent Bars while serving in the AFC. Flight Lieutenant Frederick Anthony Owen Gaze, Squadron Leader Harold Brownlow Martin, and Flight Lieutenant Mack Donald Seale received theirs for deeds conducted during World War II. Wing Commander Noel Thomas Quinn received his DFC and first Bar during World War II, and subsequent second Bar for service during the Malaya Emergency. The exploits of Captain Cobby and Wing Commander Quinn are covered here in further detail.

Captain Arthur Cobby has the honour of being the first Australian to receive three DFCs. He was awarded his first DFC in July 1918 in recognition of his successes in combat, especially the destruction of heavily defended observation balloons that were considered a dangerous but valuable target. Known as a talented and aggressive pilot, on 21 May 1918 he attacked and destroyed an enemy balloon while flying a Sopwith Camel near Neuve Eglise. On 30 May 1918, after destroying another balloon near Estaires, Cobby was attacked by three German Albatross scouts, one of which he managed to shoot down. He then shot down a third balloon to the north of Estaires on 1 June 1918, following its descent to 2000 feet until it eventually burst into flames. That same day while leading an offensive patrol, Cobby shot down an Albatross scout near Merville. The falling aircraft also damaged the cable of an enemy balloon.

On 12 February 1919, it was confirmed that Captain Cobby was awarded both a first and second Bar to his DFC. The first was for his success in shooting down five enemy aircraft in 11 days including three German aircraft in one day, on 28 June 1918. The award of the second

As flight commander, the sterling and audacious operational work achieved by this officer, combined with his ardent fighting spirit, is worthy of the highest praise.

London Gazette 14/11/1944, p. 5205

(Award of 2nd Bar to SQNLDR H.B. Martin)
Bar was in recognition of his actions on 15 July 1918, for attacking five Pfalz scouts, resulting in two being destroyed—one fell in flames and one broke up in the air. The pilot of a second aircraft from Cobby’s squadron brought down a third machine. While engaged in this combat, they were attacked from above by five enemy Fokker triplanes. Displaying cool judgement and brilliant flying, Captain Cobby evaded the attack and returned to British lines in safety.

Cobby’s success as a leader is acknowledged as being not only due to great courage and brilliant flying, but also the clear judgement and presence of mind he invariably displayed. His example was of great value to other pilots in No 4 Squadron at the time.

Wing Commander Quinn is unique in that he received three DFCs while serving exclusively in RAAF units under RAAF command. Posted to No 8 Squadron on 17 April 1943 as a Squadron Leader, Quinn completed 31 operational sorties and night strikes operating Beaufort aircraft, that included conducting bombing attacks on a number of enemy airfields. He also conducted a torpedo attack on an enemy ship, later recorded as ‘probably successful’. Quinn made a considerable contribution to the successes of the Squadron, displaying courage, skill and exceptional leadership at all times. On 8 November 1943, after a long flight at night through very bad weather, he made a torpedo attack on an enemy heavy cruiser. Despite encountering exceptionally strong enemy air defences, he pressed home his attack with great skill and determination. Later reconnaissance showed that the cruiser was probably damaged. It was Quinn’s courage and devotion to duty in this instance that led to the award of his initial DFC.

Later, as commander of No 8 Squadron, on 4 December 1943, Squadron Leader Quinn led six Beaufort aircraft in a torpedo attack against a Japanese convoy near the Duke of York Islands. Information had been received by the Squadron that a 12 000 ton ship carrying bombs and ammunition would reach Rabaul approximately one hour ahead of the convoy. Poor visibility due to fading light at the end of the day prevented the convoy from being located, so Quinn made the perilous decision to fly low into Rabaul harbour. Dropping a torpedo on sighting the stern of a large merchant vessel, Quinn hit his target; the vessel exploded and sank almost immediately. Unfortunately his aircraft hit a cable at the same time and crashed into the water. Quinn and his observer survived the crash, but both were captured by the Japanese and taken prisoners of war. This daring attack by Quinn earned him a Bar to his DFC. It was also the last occasion in World War II that RAAF aircraft used aerial torpedoes.

Quinn’s determination and courage continued as commander of No 1 (Bomber) Squadron in 1952-54, earning him a second Bar to his DFC. Wing Commander Quinn flew over 200 hours in Lincoln bombers on operations against communist terrorists in Malaya. The squadron was eminently successful against the terrorists, and fulfilled all tasks that were allocated to it. This success was largely due to the leadership and enthusiasm that Quinn brought to his command duties, his excellent personal example in the air, and his determination to achieve mission objectives at all times.

From 1992, Australians were no longer recommended for Imperial Awards as the new Australian honours system, which commenced in 1975, had largely been complete by then. Today’s equivalent of the DFC is the Medal of Gallantry. Bravery such as that displayed by Captain Cobby and Wing Commander Quinn is instilled into RAAF personnel as part of its enduring culture of determination and courage.

Key Points

- Six Australians have been awarded the DFC three times for their acts of valour and courage.
- Only Wing Commander Noel Quinn received his awards while serving exclusively with RAAF units under RAAF command.
- The Imperial Awards, which included the DFC, were replaced in 1975 with the new Australian honours system. The DFC has been replaced with the Medal of Gallantry.