

# Twice in a Lifetime

by

Jeanne Helen Basson and Harry Booyens

One of my regrets is that I never sat down with him to listen to his story. He was a difficult man to communicate with, remote and unapproachable. In any case, that is probably why we never spoke about the most significant part of his life: his experience as a fighter pilot in WWII. And now it is too late. My father, Arnold Loubser “Bassie” Basson, died on 5 January 1984 at the age of 63. When finally, many years later, we saw the newspaper article about him belatedly receiving his membership tiepin for the Caterpillar Club<sup>1</sup>, having earned it twice in his lifetime, we just had to know more.

I asked my mother about my father’s wartime experiences. I also enlisted Harry’s help. He is quite knowledgeable about WWII and its weaponry, particularly airplanes. My father had somehow opened up to Harry and told him several little bits. We girls – that would be my sister and I - were not really entrusted with the war stories. We did know that my father had been shot down twice. The places where he was shot down were stated variously as being Italy and the Aegean Sea.

He had also told us about being lost in the North African Desert where he had to eat scorpions to survive. But we only heard this story when my sister and I did not want to eat up our dinner. So we always took that one with a pinch of salt. We certainly knew that he had hurt his back when baling out somewhere, because all the years we knew him, he suffered from back pain. It was to be some 22 years after my father had passed away that we would develop an interest in genealogy, and that we would start to bitterly regret that we had not demanded that he tell his WWII stories.

When we turned to my mother for answers, it transpired that, having married him after the war, she had also received the “ladies treatment” and he had not really told her much. She knew that he had been sensitive on the subject and therefore had never pushed him for information.

My mother had provided me with some research on the genealogy of my father’s family that I had used as a springboard for further investigation into the subject. After reading with great interest about the first Basson to immigrate to the Cape from Wesel, Germany, it became clear to me that here was no epic material within my clan of the Bassons for an exciting novel about the history of my native land. My particular Bassons had settled in the Western Cape and one can unerringly follow the series of Matthys Michiel Bassons like clockwork through the centuries.



*Lt. Arnold Loubser “Bassie” Basson : 7 Sqn. SAAF*

<sup>1</sup> The Caterpillar Club is an exclusive worldwide club for airmen – civilian or military – who have used parachutes to save their lives from crippled aircraft.

In fact, they seemed to have settled in the Swartland parish early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and stayed right there, growing wheat and raising their little Matthys Michiel Bassons. It seems that, of all my Basson ancestors, my own father had the most exciting story to tell. There was actually more drama from my mother's side of the family which includes French Huguenots, 1820 settlers and other motley arrivals from the British Isles.

One day I was surfing the Internet, trying to obtain some information about some of my mother's earlier Irish ancestors who supposedly had arrived in South Africa as part of a British military contingent to fight in a Xhosa War. In this process I came across a web site for the South African Department of Defence. The web site indicated that one could request copies of the service records of any servicemen. To this end it provided an email address<sup>2</sup>. On a whim, not really expecting any useful result, I sent an email asking for my father's service record. I was astonished when a few months later I received a letter by mail with a copy of this document. I immediately started to transcribe it and picked up some snippets that piqued my curiosity: *"Missing 3/10/43 (Cable old 12/10/43) Safe & well Castelrosso Island"*.

This seemed to correlate with events in the Aegean Sea, so we searched for and found Castelrosso Island just off the coast of Turkey. But what had happened to my father? Had he gone missing after being shot down? Had he been shot down and picked up by the Germans? The stories I had heard as a child did not include Prisoner of War camps. I also noted that he had been part of 7 Squadron of the South African Air Force when this event had occurred.

## The Aegean Adventure

Armed with my father's service record, we again consulted the World Wide Web and found an article about the so-called Dodecanese Disaster in the SA Military History Journal<sup>3</sup>. I was thrilled when a search under my father's name brought up the following snippet from this article, relating to 27 September 1943:

*"During the afternoon, while Major van Vliet and Lt. A.L. Basson were on patrol, they were attacked by Me 109s, two of which they shot down and then Lt. Basson was shot down, but baled out and was rescued."*

When I asked my mother questions about my father's wartime experiences, she went to look for information and unearthed his photo album and, amazingly, his wartime flying logbook from her garage and sent them to me in Canada. From these two sources we could confirm that my father had indeed been shot down into the sea, picked up by an Italian caique and taken to the near-by island of Kalimnos. In a 1970 newspaper article about him in the Eastern Province Herald my father recalls that, when he baled out, he was under heavy enemy fire. He landed in the sea near a German Arado 196 floatplane. However, when the Germans approached to capture him, he dived under the craft and the Germans could not find him. So they simply flew off. It was after he had been in the water for a few hours that he was picked up and taken to Kalimnos Island. My father had put this newspaper clipping into his photo album from the War.

The background to this event was the intense back-and-forth struggle between the SAAF and the Luftwaffe for air superiority immediately after the Allies had taken Kos. By the end of the day on 26 September 1943, only four airmen were still flying. One of these was Bassie. On the next day Major Corrie Van Vliet, with Bassie as his wingman, attacked seven highly experienced Germans in their Messerschmitt Bf109s from the famous Luftwaffe Jagdgeschwader 27 'Afrika'. This crack Luftwaffe unit had all the experience of the Battle of Britain, the Russian Campaign and the War in North Africa in support of Rommel. It had been the home of many of the famous German air aces, including Hans-Joachim Marseille. Today computer games are named after this uniquely successful unit. It was led in September 1943 by none other than air ace Maj. Ernst Düllberg, who survived the war with 45 victories to his credit. Jagdgeschwader 27

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<sup>2</sup> [sanfdoc@mweb.co.za](mailto:sanfdoc@mweb.co.za)

<sup>3</sup> SA Military History Journal <http://rapidtp.com/milhist/vol012dp.html>

'Afrika' had arrived at their base at Argos only four days before<sup>4</sup>. The choice of this illustrious unit proves that Hermann Goëring was set on driving the Allies off Kos. The little band of South Africans was not just up against the very best, but they also had not been supplied with oxygen for their aircraft cockpits, thereby forcing them to fight at low altitude. *Eagles Victorious, South African Forces WWII (Vol.)* reports on page 65:

*"Maj C.A. van Vliet and Lt A.L. Basson, operating from Lampi [on the island of Kos], intercepted seven [Messerschmitt] Bf109s south of Kos, and Basson was shot down into the sea, apparently by III/JG27. He was picked up by an Italian caique and taken to Kalimnos (Calino). Balancing this, Maj Van Vliet destroyed a Bf109, probably that of Unteroffizier Jakob Herweg of III/JG27, who baled out and was also picked up about 20km from Kos by an Italian boat which already carried some "Engländer". Herweg jumped overboard and swam to an Arado 196 when it alighted on the water nearby..."*

In fact, the book is wrong on the subject of Gruppe III. German sources are adamant that it was in fact the 9./JG27 group under Fritz Gromotka who was active over Kos that day. When one reads the entry in *Eagles Victorious*, it gives two paragraphs on the subject. It appears to indicate that he was shot down in the afternoon. However, a more careful read shows that the two paragraphs describe the events of the day in two areas, and not in two time periods. So we turned to another source of information, none other than the records of number 27 Jagdgeschwader of the German Luftwaffe itself. Given the fame of the unit, various people have gone to great trouble to list every single plane that was downed by them in some detail and this information is available on the Internet<sup>5</sup> from archival sources, complete with reference film numbers. We find four "kills" on 27 September 1943 for the entire *Jagdgeschwader 27*, all by Gromotka's flyers:

<i>Uffz. Hannes Löffler: 9./JG 27 Spitfire 10-15 km. N.W. Insel Kos: 100 m.</i>	11.18
<i>Ofw. Fritz Gromotka: 9./JG 27 Spitfire 1-2 km. N. Insel Kos: 200 m.</i>	11.20
<i>Ofw. Fritz Gromotka: 9./JG 27 Spitfire N.W. Flugplatz Kos</i>	15.17
<i>Ofw. Johannes Scheit: 9./JG 27 Spitfire N. Flugplatz Kos</i>	15.20

*Eagles Victorious* acknowledges on page 65 the third and fourth Spitfires shot down right at the airfield during take-off. Both SAAF pilots were killed. The second entry indicates that the "kill" was within 1-2 km of Kos. The events described in the article above do not correlate with this, because a German Arado 196 floatplane would not have put down so close to Allied anti-aircraft defences. We conclude that the relevant "kill" is the first entry, which is also consistent with Bassie being taken to Kalimnos located north and northwest of Kos.

In this way we can pin down that Bassie was actually shot down at 11.18 in the morning of 27 September 1943, at 300 foot above the ocean, northwest of the Island Kos, between the island Kalimnos and the Turkish mainland by Unteroffizier Hannes "Harry" Löffler. Löffler went on to become an ace, shooting down 11 Allied aircraft in total, seven of them American B17s and B24s. He went missing in action during aerial combat over the City of Paris on 29 June 1944. It obviously seems as though my very Afrikaans father was (one of?) the "Engländer" in the caique and the Arado 196 was no doubt the one my father had evaded earlier. However, when we approached some German experts, they assured us that the event with Herweg diving overboard was, in fact, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 1943 and not on the 27<sup>th</sup>. We are not inclined to argue with the Germans in this matter. Their logs are very detailed and precise and the South African ones were destroyed when our chaps evacuated the island.

With 7 Squadron of the SAAF having been finally forced from the sky over Kos on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the RAF flew in eight (one of nine had not survived the flight) Spitfires from Nicosia in Cyprus at 11:30 the next morning, and these went into action. They were from 74 Squadron, Sailor Malan's old unit of Battle of Britain fame. By the end of that day, three of the new Spitfires had gone down to Maj. Ernst Düllberg, Fritz Gromotka and Johannes Scheit.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.feldgrau.com/JG27.htm>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cieldegloire.com/jg\\_027c.php](http://www.cieldegloire.com/jg_027c.php)

## Escape to Turkey

None of this, however, told us what had happened when Bassie went missing between 3 and 12 October 1943. In the same Eastern Province Herald newspaper article already referred to above, however, it says that he escaped from a Greek island with his fellow airmen when the Germans landed. The escapees then sailed to Turkey. There is another newspaper article on this subject published in the Oosterlig newspaper of 20 August 1980. From this, we determined that he and his fellow survivors walked for 160 km until they reached safety, apparently on Castelrosso Island.

For clarity on this subject we turned again to the photo album and its yellowed newspaper clippings and documents. Here we found a fateful letter sent to his father, my Oupa, in Somerset West on 15 October 1943:

*"Dit is met diepe leedwese dat ek my telegram van 12 Oktober 1943 wat as volg lui moet bevestig:*

*'WRC.79/19806 DEPARTEMENT VAN VERDEDIGING MAAK MET LEEDWESE BEKEND DAT U SEUN 9336V LUITENANT ARNOLD LOUBSER BASSON OP 3 OKTOBER AS VERMIS AANGEGEE WORD OP EILAND COS STOP....'*

The letter has all the normal offers of help for distressed and grieving family and parents including a first and second postscript. It is the second postscript that contained the fantastic news:

*"N.S.: U plaaslike verdedigingsmag-skakelkomitee wil u die versekering gee dat indien u enige moeilikheid ondervind ten opsigte van die feit dat u seun vermis is, sal hy u graag behulpsaam wees.*

*N.N.S: Kabelberig nou net ontvang lui dat u seun veilig en gesond op Castelrosso Eiland Italië is. Klassifikasie bly as vermis totdat hy in Afrika aankom."*

One can only but imagine what went through the heart, mind and soul of Oupa Matthys Michiel Basson in Somerset West when he read the letter and had to proceed to the very bottom of the legal sized sheet, filled with statements of condolence, to find the second postscript informing him that his only son was in fact safe and well on some or other obscure Mediterranean island.

The story of the brief occupation of the Greek Island Kos by the Allies is told in excruciating detail in the book *Eagles Victorious*. The Italians had surrendered in September 1943, resulting in a situation where pockets of Italian soldiers on these islands were left leaderless. Some of them decided to submit to the Germans, while others welcomed the Allies. For a brief few weeks Squadron 7 helped to take the island and hold it while Allied troops were landed as part of a badly thought-out plan concocted by Churchill, who had a historic predilection for military gambles in the Mediterranean, such as the ill-fated Gallipoli venture of WWI in the same general area. However, there was little in the way of support for this invasion and the Germans counter-attacked from the air, finally landing parachute brigades and troops on October 3 and retaking the island. The Italians on the island surrendered to the Germans and their officers were summarily executed for what was seen as treachery by the Germans.

By this time there were 1600 Allied troops on the island, of whom only 100 escaped. Among these were Bassie and his fellow airmen from 7 Squadron who hijacked an Italian boat and set sail for Turkey. The escape is described in detail in *Eagles Victorious*. I found a BBC article<sup>6</sup> on the Internet describing what must have been the same event. To my utter frustration, the BBC refuses to provide us with contact information for the particular gentleman who shared the boat with Bassie.

By the marvels of Google Earth one can zoom in on the island of Kos with its airfield at Antimachia, which was used by 7 Squadron. One can also clearly see the village of Kardamena from which the airmen set sail for Turkey, as well as the nearby island of Kalimnos where Bassie had earlier been taken after he had baled out over the Aegean Sea. One can follow the coast of Turkey to the little island just off the Turkish coast

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/24/a8552324.shtml>

now called Megisti, a Greek island, even though it is so close to Turkey. This island was known as Castelrosso during the War and was Bassie's place of refuge before he and his comrades were flown to Port Said in Africa where they reunited at a pub to talk about their narrow escape. Bassie lost his logbook in the escape, probably destroyed when he and his comrades left the island for the coast.

So, in this way we put together the history of the first time that my father was shot down over the Aegean Sea and of his mysterious disappearance and reappearance ten days later at a little island off the Turkish coast.

## The Italian Event

The second time Bassie was shot down was in Italy. The book *Eagles Victorious* gives a day-by-day account of the activities of SAAF in the Italian campaign, including 7 Squadron. According to his service record, Bassie was posted to 7 Squadron in November 1944, after having served for some months in 41 Squadron in the Middle East. While in North Africa and the Middle East, he qualified on a captured and fixed Messerschmit 109, which became a prized "possession". This explains how the iconic Luftwaffe fighter plane appears on the rather long list of aircraft that his service record indicates him as having qualified on.

7 Squadron was based at Forli near the Italian Adriatic Coast, where the "leg" of Italy joins the mainland. *Eagles Victorious* gives a brief account of the events leading to Bassie having to bale out a second time. According to this tome, he and Lieutenant Potter were both hit by anti-aircraft fire and Bassie had to bale out over base. There is more detail in his logbook:

*"Potter hit in eye. Was hit twice by 40 mm & baled over Bertinore."*



*Lt. Arnold "Bassie" Basson with his prized Me109 sporting WWII SAAF roundels*

Again Google Earth comes to the rescue. Bertinore is a small town not too far south of Forli. Fortunately, there is more detail in a newspaper article from 15 January 1945, a mere twelve days after the entry in Bassie's logbook.

*"Basson was one of a formation which had to bomb an ammunition dump and then strafe the German lines facing the Canadian infantry in a sector west of San Alberto, on the Eighth Army Front. The Spitfires dropped their bombs successfully in the target area, and then began strafing in the face of intense ack-ack fire. During the first run Basson's aircraft received simultaneous hits by ack-ack shells in both wings. The hit on the port wing blew up an ammunition container, leaving a hole big enough for a man to crawl through, while the hit on the starboard wing severed the ailerons and turned the craft on its side. Basson had to fly round in circles without being able to put the aircraft on an even keel. Meanwhile another pilot in the same formation, Lieut. Peter Potter, of Mtubatuba, Zululand, was caught in a German screen of cross-fire from machine guns and was hit in the forehead by a bullet which left him the use of only one eye. Potter called over the intercommunication to the flight-commander:*

*'Will you please take me back to base as I can't see where I am going.'*

*Captain P. Hughes, of Southern Rhodesia, left the formation and gave Potter minute-by-minute instructions on what to do. Hughes guided Potter back to the aerodrome. Potter put down and excellent landing and taxied the aircraft up to a waiting ambulance where he was immediately treated. Hughes then returned to the front and found that Basson was still flying in circles but by this time had gained height. Together they edged their way back to the base and Basson prepared to bale out. But his flying boots became jammed and he had a hard struggle to free himself. Then he found that directly in his line of descent was a high tension cable, and another fight began, this time with his parachute lines. Afterwards, Basson said:*

*'That part of the trip was my biggest fright. It looked as though I couldn't miss the cable. I gave a terrific tug at the last minute and missed it by about three feet.'*

*The next day Basson was flying again over the same sector."*

According to his logbook, Bassie did fly the next day, January 4, 1945, but after that there is a two-month gap until early March 1945, after which there are entries for most days up to July 5, 1945. We know that Bassie hurt his back during the landing. He landed on his feet instead of bringing his legs up and rolling over. This war injury was to plague him for the rest of his life. In fact, when he and my mother were married, he was unable to kneel in front of the minister.

My mother confirms he was not a prisoner-of-war. He himself recalled that he was taken to the opera by the Italians. He thought it might have been La Scala in Milan. Since La Scala was very badly damaged in 1943 and only rebuilt in 1946, this too would seem unlikely. So I cannot determine from any of the records where he was during January and February 1945, while "the Italians looked after him". This aspect of his experience remains a mystery to us, unless another surviving member of 7 Squadron can put us out of our misery on this point.

We tracked down Bassie's notebook in which he says that he spent some time in a hospital in Rome over this period. From his logbook we were able to determine that he participated in the harassing of the German army as they withdrew through northern Italy. This continued until the end of April 1945, when the Germans surrendered while still in control of a major section of northern Italy. Bassie returned to South Africa in July 1945 and was discharged in October 1945 to continue with his life in the government service.

Bassie had volunteered for war service while in the early stage of his career at Sterkspruit in the Northeast Cape on 17 June 1940 as a 19-year-old.

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