

ST Patrick's College, Silverstream Old Boy

GEORGE LUONI (1935-38)      RIP (1922-09)

An incredible WW11 story in the Pacific 1942

By Roy Burke



George Luoni wore a curious lapel pin alongside his Rotary badge. It was a golden caterpillar with glowing ruby eyes, and thereby hangs a tale.

The pin identified George as a member of the Caterpillar Club, people who have parachuted to safety from a crashing aircraft.

George's story was more than that, on September 23, 1943, his RNZAF P40 Kittyhawk, was shot up by a Japanese Zero, in the Solomons Islands during World WarII.

He bailed out, was nine hours in the sea before making it to Mono Island, and evaded Japanese patrols for 42 days before being rescued. George was sent to New Zealand to recuperate, and then he returned for a second flying tour in the Pacific. He tallied 1200 flying hours.

He enlisted for the RNZAF at 19, trained as a fighter pilot, and was assigned to the Pacific theatre in 1942. George described in detail in an official report the events beginning on September 23, 1943. He was No 2 in a 17 Squadron mission providing eight aircraft as top cover for bombers raiding Japanese-held Kahili Airfield. Over the target as the bombers were going in the Kittyhawks were hit.

"The section was attacked by three Zeros underneath and in front. A burst hit the oil tank and cowling in several places. Oil spurted into the cockpit and over the canopy. Losing height I slowly broke away ... the oil pressure went off the clock. By this time the engine was running roughly and smoke

billowed into the cockpit. I rolled on to my back and bailed out at 12,000ft when about two miles north of Mono Island."

The time was about 11.00am and then in the water he inflated his dingy and Mae West life jacket (qualifying for membership of the Goldfish Club and the badge he was also entitled to wear). Four hours later he saw four Zeros so abandoned the dingy and swam about 20 yards away. "The Zeros passed overhead giving no sign of having seen me."

The dingy drifted away. He stripped to singlet and underpants, tied the Mae West to his chest, and started the long swim to land. He made it ashore about 8pm and fell asleep, exhausted, on the beach.

He became a modern day Robinson Crusoe with foot coverings made from the torn-up Mae West, regretting he had abandoned his jungle knife in the sea with his boots and clothing. He ate coconuts, tiny fish (raw), and land crabs (also raw). He saw Japanese soldiers but they didn't see him. He weakened from lack of adequate nourishment and was delirious when found by a group of Solomon Islanders at the north end of the island 32 days after bailing out. They hid him from the Japanese and fed him. He was concealed in a cave when an American destroyer shelled Japanese positions on the southern coast. "It sounded good."

He walked but was mostly carried back to the islanders' village to arrive among recently landed New Zealand troops. George was tended by a New Zealand medic, was six days in a field hospital on Stirling Island, and was then evacuated to Guadalcanal and eventually to New Zealand. The late Sir Ossie James, topdressing pioneer, Hamilton businessman and friend was George's mechanic at Guadalcanal. He told Chris, (1965-69), George's son that his father's survival was the most remarkable among New Zealand forces in the Pacific.