



NOTEWORTHY TASMANIAN AVIATION FAMILIES -  
THE CUMMINGS BROTHERS

**Noteworthy Tasmanian Aviation Families – The Cummings Brothers**

*Author: W. Dearing, April 2022*

Raised in Franklin in south-eastern Tasmania, the three brothers Mervyn, Roy and Eric were the sons of Doctor Harold Cummings and Marcia Jowell. When the call to defend King and country rang out across the British Empire in 1914, the three brothers eagerly rushed to enlist in the newly-formed Australian Imperial Forces.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01432.002

**Left to right: Mervyn, Eric and Roy Cummings, 1917.**

**Mervyn Harold Cummings**, the eldest brother and affectionately known as “laddie.” With his mechanical expertise and experience, he was subsequently appointed as a driver carting supplies and transporting wounded troops. It was not until Australian troops were deployed to the battlefields of the Western Front that Mervyn found himself on the front line. In late September 1917, Mervyn, now a Sergeant, was organising the evacuation of injured troops from Hoge, Belgium when he received word that an ambulance had been hit. Without hesitation he raced back and recovered the wounded crew. A few days later Mervyn showed the same devotion to duty when retrieving survivors from an ammunition store that had exploded regardless of the shells that were continually bursting overhead. For his bravery in the field, he was awarded the Military Medal.

Mervyn thought constantly of his brothers and wrote to them often. They all had a love of adventure and were fascinated by the aerial combat in the skies over the trenches. Whether



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it was this love of adventure, or the fact that Eric had transferred to the air corps that drove Mervyn, but he and Roy also transferred to the Australian Flying Corps. In July 1918 he embarked for England and in August commenced his flying training with No 5 Training Squadron Australian Flying Corps at Oxford graduating in March 1919 and appointed as a Flying Officer (Pilot) and subsequently commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.

Returning to Australia in 1919, Mervyn retained his interest in aviation. He joined his brother Eric in promoting an Australian Government programme known as the Peace Loans that were designed to assist returned veterans to adjust to life following the conflict.

Eric was keen to become involved, and this will be expanded upon when we discuss Eric's career. Although there is little information on exactly what Mervyn's role was in this venture, it could be assumed that he was the mechanic for Eric's aircraft that flew to promote the Peace Loan programme. This may well be confirmed by an incident that occurred at Sheffield in northern Tasmania. En-route to Sheffield, Eric Cummings aircraft developed engine trouble and completed an emergency landing with the engine shut down. It was reported that one of the first to the aircraft after landing was Lt Mervyn Cummings who, after an examination of the engine, declared *"we are done, the valve push and pull rod is broken"*.

In 1920, Mervyn married Beatrice Roe. His marriage took place with Mervyn still bearing the evidence of an accident that occurred when his arm was struck by a propellor whilst starting an aircraft's engine.



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**Mervyn and Beatrice on their wedding day**



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Little more is known of Mervyn although he and Beatrice did move to Sydney in August 1921 and they were shown in the 1936 census as living in Northbridge NSW, with his occupation listed as Flying Officer. Following the outbreak of World War 2 he again enlisted in the Citizen's Military Forces serving from 1938 until 1948 with the rank of Warrant Officer Class 1. Mervyn died in NSW in August 1977.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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**On display at the Australian War Memorial is a restored Avro 504 training aircraft the type all three Cumming brothers would have flown.**

**Eric Douglas Cummings** was the second of the three brothers to enlist doing so in October 1914 and being posted to the Australian Army Service Corps. He was promoted to Sergeant before leaving for the Middle East in December, however, on arrival he was hospitalised with influenza and bronchitis before re-joining his unit and embarking for Gallipoli in August 1915.

Subsequently posted to France in June 1916 Eric transferred to the Australian Flying Corps in September 1917 and commenced his training at the flying school RAF Shawbury. He completed all phases of his flying training in three weeks and was posted to No 2 Squadron AFC. Although he had yet to score an aerial victory Eric rose quickly through the ranks being appointed a Flight Commander on 17th October 1918 and subsequently liaising with French ace Rene Fonk against Richthofen's Flying Circus.



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By May 1918, however, he was assigned to 2 Squadron AFC as a Royal Aircraft Factory S.E.5a pilot. On 3 May 1918, he scored his first aerial victory. His brother Roy mailed home a copy of orders describing the action; this was reprinted in *the (Hobart) Mercury* in the Eric's native Tasmania. This reprint gives a vivid description of early aerial warfare:

*"Lieutenant E. D. Cummings attacked a Triplane and fired a burst from both guns into it. The enemy aircraft immediately went down in a spin, followed by Lieutenant Cummings, still firing. The enemy aircraft then turned on its back, and finally crashed. At this point Lieutenant Cummings was attacked by four Triplanes, who shot away his elevator controls, instrument board, petrol and oil tanks; his machine went down almost out of control, but he managed to keep it out of a spin until it crashed. His safety-belt broke, and he was thrown clear of the machine into a shell-hole."*

Totally undaunted by this incident, Eric went on to score eight more confirmed aerial wins and rise to the rank of Captain. His bravery would win him a Distinguished Flying Cross, which was gazetted on the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1919:

*"This officer has proved himself an able and determined leader of offensive patrols. In carrying out these raids he has met with conspicuous success, heavy damage being inflicted on enemy material and personnel. This has been due in the main to his brilliant leadership and skilful navigation. Capt. Cummings possesses, in a marked degree, courage, combined with cool judgment."*



**S E 5a Aircraft type flown by Eric Cummings**

Eric Cummings returned to Australia and disembarked in Melbourne on 5th January 1919. His appointment was terminated in Hobart on 11th March 1919, but Eric's love of flying would not end on his discharge.





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Following the end of the war the Australian Government, together with the states and territories, launched a programme aimed at raising money to assist returned service personnel to readjust and recover from their injuries, the "Peace Loan". Eric was quick to offer his services in assisting this programme, aided by his brother Mervyn.

He flew a Sopwith Pup over downtown Hobart on the 28th August 1919, an aerobatic exhibition which including eight loops. The exhibition was a public relations stunt to draw a crowd to subscribe to a Peace Loan of £750,000. After his departure from Hobart, he flew to Launceston's Elphin showgrounds, then onto Longford and Westbury where leaflets were dropped, and despite engine trouble, conducted a forced landing at Sheffield.



**Copy of the leaflet dropped by Cummings during his Peace Loans flight**

On 11th February 1920 Eric was invested with the Distinguished Flying Cross by General William Birdwood in Cummings' home town of Franklin.

On 7th June 1923, Eric Cummings was granted a short service commission in the Royal Air Force as a Flying Officer. On 7th June 1928 he was transferred to Class A Reserve of the Royal



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Air Force; he would remain in the reserves in various capacities until World War II. While Eric was a reservist he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant on 4th February 1931.

Eric Cummings died in Sydney on the 27th October 1979, aged 83 years.

In issue Number 5 of the TAHS newsletter we presented an article on World War 1 ace Eric Cummings, which is on our website and available to download [here](#).

**Roy Lytton Cummings** was the third brother to enlist on the 19th November 1914. After training he was posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance, embarking overseas on the 9th September 1915. He saw a short period of service in the final month of the Gallipoli campaign and was then re-mustered as a driver. He saw service in France with Number 4 Ammunition Sub Park at Rouen until July 1917. Whilst there he applied for a transfer to the Flying Corps and was accepted on the 29th September 1917. Assigned to No 5 (Training) Squadron, Australian Flying Corps (based at Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire), in early 1918, Roy quickly displayed an impressive flair for flying. Major Brown, commanding 5 Squadron AFC, wrote to Cummings' father saying "he came to me as a pupil and did so well I had him made an instructor".

By May 1918, Eric had passed his instructor's course and was actively instructing at Minchinhampton. He wrote to his mother just eight days before his death that "it is certainly a great chance instructing over here as there are bound to be some pretty good jobs going after the war. Tomorrow is our fortnightly holiday and Alan Payne and I have arranged to fly down to Exeter, which ought to be a good trip."

The same Alan Payne described the crash at 7:25 on the morning of 28 August to Roy's father: "Roy and his pupil Lieutenant Scott were having a fly before breakfast around the aerodrome when a pupil from another Squadron flying by himself (Ernest Jefferys of No 6 (Training) Squadron, AFC, who had been ordered to practice turns), suddenly turned his machine upwards and crashed into Roy and Scott. The two machines were about 700 feet up when they collided and were partially locked together when they fell." All three men were killed instantly and are buried at Leighterton cemetery.

Mervyn was at his brother's graveside for the funeral and remained until the final salute was fired.



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**Roy's grave, on the left, in Leighterton cemetery, 1918. (AWM P04362.002)**