

War pilot later led in surgery and science

ARTHUR TUCKER

1920-2009

ARTHUR TUCKER was one of "Jackson's Few" – the 24 pilots who in 1942 hurriedly formed Australia's first fighter squadron and held back the experienced Japanese air force in New Guinea in the 44 days between the fall of Singapore and the Battle of the Coral Sea.

This was the most terrifying time for Australia, forced to fend for itself without great power support as the Japanese forces descended upon New Guinea and began to bomb our defenceless troops in Port Moresby.

The prime minister, John Curtin, denied Spitfires by Winston Churchill, who was wedded to the "Save Europe First" policy, had prevailed on Franklin Roosevelt to send Kittyhawks, which arrived in crates at the Sydney docks.

They were hastily assembled, and Tucker was one of the young pilots who flew them to Townsville, trained for a week and then, as 75 Squadron, flew to Moresby in March 1942 to do battle with the seasoned enemy air force, based across the Owen Stanley Ranges at Lae.

Under the inspired command of "Old John" Jackson, a veteran of the Western Desert, 75 Squadron inflicted serious and disproportionate losses, in surprise bombing raids and aerial dogfights, on the enemy pilots despite their lighter and more manoeuvrable Zeros. In one scrap, Tucker downed the Japanese air ace Gitaro Miyazaki.

Although Jackson was killed in combat, the courage of "Jackson's Few" gave heart to Port Moresby's defenders. The squadron's successful strafing operations and aerial victories ensured that the Japanese advanced no further before United States air and sea power came to Australia's rescue.

Tucker was back in action in August 1942, flying combat missions in the heat of the Battle of Milne Bay, Australia's first major victory in the Pacific. Later he joined the new 86 Squadron, flying Kittyhawks, that helped dislodge Japanese forces from occupied islands.

Arthur Douglas Tucker, who has died at 89, was born in Brisbane to Leslie Tucker, who worked in retailing and was a talented musician, and his wife, formerly Edith Heap. Leslie was



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killed in his early 20s in a pedestrian accident when Arthur was a toddler.

The boy became an outstanding student at Brisbane Grammar and, by the age of 16, had qualified as a teacher. He cut cane to make ends meet during the Depression, then taught at outback schools until joining the RAAF at 21. After the war he studied medicine and became orthopaedic registrar at the Mater Hospital in Brisbane.

He married Nancy Gibson, who worked for the ABC in Brisbane, and she raised three children while Tucker worked as a doctor on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. He often had to be lowered in a sling down mine shafts and dam walls to reach injured workers.

As a doctor and a scientist, Tucker made remarkable contributions to industrial safety and medical knowledge. In the Snowy, he developed treatment theories that are now accepted practice, for example, the need to stabilise the injured before they are transported to hospital. He became a pioneer of workplace rehabilitation services. He even came up with an improved treatment for snakebite,

using a restrictive bandage rather than a tourniquet.

For the last 20 years of his working life, Tucker was site medical officer at Lucas Heights and chief scientific officer of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission. He received international recognition for his research on the movement of fine particles in the vascular system and for his development of a method of accurately measuring lung capacity from a simple X-ray.

Humanitarianism inspired his research, through determination to make hazardous work safer for those who had to undertake it. His concern brought him into occasional conflict with the commission bosses. On his retirement in 1985 he publicly accused them of putting workers' health at risk in their obsession with promoting nuclear energy.

He worked on, through retirement, on the causes of lung disease and developed theories about the dangers to the respiratory system of air pollution in cities.

A modest man, with a laconic, self-deprecating sense of humour, he drew strength from 55 years of happy family life.

Like other sensitive war heroes, Arthur Tucker stayed silent about his experiences for many years. He had seen too many comrades die. Because he had not expected to survive, he greeted every day as an unexpected bonus. He could not abide what he considered the warmongering and racist RSL leadership of the 1950s and '60s and avoided Anzac Day parades.

It was not until 1992 that he began to open up to the Murdoch sound archives and he featured prominently in *44 Days*, the documentary about Jackson's Few. Thereafter he became a stalwart presence at 75 Squadron reunions. Air Commodore Mel Huckfield has credited him with inspiring a new generation of its pilots with his qualities of "passion, intellect and candour".

A true Australian hero, Arthur Tucker never sought or obtained awards, promotion or recognition. To the very end of his life he was studying ways to make life better for others. His squadron epitaph, "Always in Flight", sums up the spirit of the man.

Arthur Tucker is survived by his wife, Nancy; their children, John, Margot and Peter; and their families, including three grandchildren.

Geoffrey Robertson