

= Nigel Cullen =

Richard Nigel Cullen , DFC (5 June 1917 ? 4 March 1941) was an Australian fighter ace of World War II . Serving with the Royal Air Force (RAF) , he was credited with as many as sixteen aerial victories before being killed in action during the Battle of Greece . Born in Newcastle , New South Wales , Cullen was living in London and had already seen action in the Spanish Civil War when he joined the RAF in 1937 . Following the outbreak of World War II , he served initially as a transport pilot with No. 267 Squadron in the Middle East before seeking reassignment to fighters . He was then posted to No. 80 Squadron , flying Gloster Gladiator biplanes , and claimed six Axis aircraft before the unit converted to Hawker Hurricanes . Nicknamed " Ape " due to his physical bulk , Cullen was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for destroying five enemy aircraft in a single sortie on 28 February 1941 . He was credited with another four victories in the one engagement on 3 March ; the next day , he was shot down and killed while on escort duty over Albania , by a Regia Aeronautica Fiat G.50bis , at age twenty @-@ three .

= = Early career = =

Born in Newcastle , New South Wales on 5 June 1917 , Nigel Cullen was the son of Horace David Cullen (originally Horace David Cohen) and his wife Hero . The boy 's uncle was future Major General Paul Alfred Cullen . Nigel was taken to England at an early age by his parents and attended Sherborne School in Dorset , before studying at the College of Aero Engineering , Chelsea . Fired by a love of adventure , he competed in motorbike racing at Brooklands in 1934 , and later saw action as a member of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War , suffering a wound to the stomach that necessitated repatriation to England . When he caught up again with his friends from Brooklands , he was reluctant to talk about the conflict except to say that " the wars of the future would be fought in the air " .

Cullen was living in Putney when he joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1937 , and was granted a short @-@ service commission as an acting pilot officer on 9 August . Completing his probation the following May , he was promoted to flying officer on 31 December 1939 , shortly after the outbreak of World War II . Posted to the Middle East , his early wartime service was with No. 267 Squadron , a transport unit ferrying passengers and freight to and from Egypt . " Browned off " with transport duties , however , he sought reassignment to fighters and before long was able to effect a transfer to No. 80 Squadron , flying Gloster Gladiator biplanes , a type that was obsolescent well before the war began .

= = Fighter pilot = =

= = = Gladiators = = =

After joining No. 80 Squadron in the Western Desert Campaign , Cullen was schooled in fighter tactics by " Pat " Pattle , one of the leading British aces of the war . Nicknamed " Ape " by his colleagues due to his imposing physique , he was described by a fellow pilot as " a big , smiling , long @-@ armed giant from Putney , with an irresistible offensive spirit and quite fearless " .

Cullen was " blooded " on 9 October 1940 , after being detailed to search single @-@ handedly for a missing Allied truck . Failing to locate the vehicle , he spotted five Italian Breda Ba.65 ground @-@ attack aircraft south of Sidi Barrani and immediately engaged them , gaining credit for probably destroying one , although the Italians reported all aircraft as returning to base . No. 80 Squadron redeployed to Greece the following month , to assist in resisting the Italian invasion . There Cullen achieved his first confirmed victory , over a Savoia @-@ Marchetti SM.81 three @-@ engined bomber near the Kassandra Peninsula on 30 December . He was promoted to flight lieutenant the next day .

On 28 January 1941 , Cullen claimed his second " kill " . That day , while on an offensive patrol

between Kelcyre and Premet , over Albania , with fourteen Gladiators from No. 80 Squadron , he attacked four Fiat BR.20s and five CANT Z.1007bis bombers of the Regia Aeronautica . He reported destroying a Z.1007bis but may have been firing at an aircraft that was shot down by Pattle 's section . Cullen claimed a Fiat CR.42 fighter and a Savoia @-@ Marchetti SM.79 bomber on successive days , 9 and 10 February respectively . He then recorded two victories in one mission on 20 February , over Albania . After sending a Fiat G.50 down in flames while escorting Allied bombers , he discovered two formations of CR.42s nearby and shot down one of them . Cullen later remarked , " The others made off at once . Just as well ? I hadn 't any ammo left . " He had also been slightly wounded in the hand by a bullet .

Although the RAF claimed six Italian aircraft destroyed and two probables , including Cullen 's , on 20 February , Italian sources reported only the Fiat G.50 of Tenente Alfredo Fusco of the 361a Squadriglia as shot down , killing the pilot , and the G.50 of Tenente Livio Bassi of 395a Squadriglia as damaged in combat and later destroyed by fire in an attempted forced landing at Berat . On 23 February , Cullen attacked a CANT Z.506 three @-@ engined floatplane as it was taking off at Preveza in Greece , at first simply attempting to prevent it from getting airborne but then , when it refused to stop , destroying it on a second pass . The result did not add to his official score , however , as the Italian plane was not in full flight at the time of its destruction .

= = = Hurricanes = = =

By the time No. 80 Squadron began re @-@ equipping with Hawker Hurricanes in February 1941 , Cullen 's total of aerial victories stood at six enemy aircraft destroyed , plus one probable . He had earned a reputation for extreme aggression and doggedness in the air . His favourite tactic was to duel head @-@ on with his intended victim , two aircraft firing at each other with a closing speed of over 500 miles per hour (800 km / h) ; he was quoted as saying , " It 's always interesting to see who will pull away first " . His colleagues reportedly said of him , " He never came out of a fight while a single enemy aircraft was left in the sky to give battle . He came home only when his guns were empty . " Cullen opened his score in the Hurricane on 27 February , shooting down a Fiat CR.42 while escorting Bristol Blenheim light bombers to Valona , Albania . The day after , in what has been described as " the greatest air battle of this period " , he was officially credited with shooting down five Italian planes in the one engagement , a record for his unit . His combat report read :

The battle extended right across Albania . First , I found four Breda 20s . I got one , which went down in flames . There we found three formations of SM.79s . I took on one and aimed at the starboard engine . It caught fire and crashed in flames . I climbed and dived on the next . He too crashed in flames . Then we attacked ten CR.42s , climbing to get above them . I got behind one , and he caught fire and went down in flames . Up again immediately ? dived , fired into the cockpit and another one took fire , rolled over and crashed . I had to come home then ? no more ammo .

For his achievements on 28 February , the RAF 's most successful day of the campaign , Cullen was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) . Italian sources recorded that a Savoia @-@ Marchetti SM.79 was only damaged on 28 February , not shot down , and that the Breda 20s claimed by the RAF were in fact Fiat BR.20s . Cullen claimed another multiple kill on 3 March , when he and one of his comrades chased a group of CANT Z.1007bis that had just bombed Larissa , Greece . Catching the retreating bombers south @-@ west of Corfu , No. 80 Squadron claimed six destroyed and one probable . Cullen was credited with destroying four CANTs and probably destroying another , though the Italians reported that only two CANT bombers were lost .

The following day , 4 March , flying Hurricane V7288 , Cullen was escorting a group of Blenheims near Himarë in southern Albania . Once the Blenheims had bombed their target (five Italian warships) and were on their return flight , Flight Lieutenant Pattle ordered the Hurricanes to hunt in pairs over the warships , where a number of Italian fighters were seen . At once a lone G.50bis attacked Pattle and his wingman , on this occasion Cullen . Pattle reported shooting down the Fiat and watching it spiral into a mountainside , but at this moment a second Fiat jumped Cullen 's Hurricane and he was not seen again . His aircraft crashed near Himarë , and the Australian was killed ; he was twenty @-@ three years old . The citation for his DFC was promulgated in the

London Gazette on 14 March :

In February , 1941 , this officer was pilot of one of a formation of aircraft which attacked a large force of enemy bombers escorted by at least 30 fighters . Displaying remarkable skill , Flight Lieutenant Cullen shot down five of the enemy 's aircraft in the ensuing action . He has now destroyed 11 enemy aircraft and has consistently shown great resource and courage .

Although the official history of Australia in the war puts the number of Cullen 's victories at thirteen , his total score is more commonly estimated as sixteen , or sixteen @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half . He is buried in Tirana Park Memorial Cemetery , Tirana , Albania . His name appears on the Commemorative Roll at the Australian War Memorial , Canberra .