



A tale of two wars

Father's quest to remember victims

By MEGAN STAFFORD

DETAILS of World War II have circulated through every medium possible, on varying aspects of the war effort in varying countries.

And, for every story told, there are probably 10 that remain untold, either locked forever in the memory of a person, or yet to be unearthed in annals spread far and wide.

Two such stories unearthed in a meticulously minded library in North Queensland tell two very different tales of war – one of a priest determined to recognise the lives lost in a plane crash on Hinchinbrook Island; the other of a Charters Towers man recording the vagaries of life in war-torn Europe.

Father Pubius Cassar, parish priest of Halifax, and Andrew Costello would never have been associated together in real life, although there is

every possibility their paths could have once crossed. Yet, the war bound these two, like it did many others, however disparate the bond may have been.

Fr Cassar was a missionary man, determined and patient. He spent about six years tracking truth along its meandering path from Hinchinbrook Island to the United States.

Of greatest interest to him was a plane crash which had occurred in 1942 on Hinchinbrook Island, killing all its passengers and crew.

He wrote in a letter to the Coral Sea Association on May 6, 1976: "People believe (the plane) was carrying the payroll of the US forces in these areas, and was caught up in an electrical storm late in the evening and crashed against the Hinchinbrook Mountain.

"It was a four-engine plane which got disintegrated and its parts are still spread where it crashed.

"The wreckage was found by an Aboriginal man in 1942. The mortal remains of the crew were picked up and flown to the US and buried there.

"In November 1960, the local community erected a memorial cross on that mountain. That cross was blessed in my church and representatives of the US and RAAF were present for this occasion.

"The mountain on which this plane crashed is very high (3000ft) and very few people could see the memorial cross which the local community placed over the spot of the crash, so I am appealing for help to erect a memorial on the mainland, in fact in my church – a stained glass with religious symbols and the names of the victims.

"I have also asked the RAAF to help me to transport the remaining wing of the plane from that spot to erect as a memorial near my church, which is situated very close to the island.

"This memorial would also foster the already existing friendship between American and Australians to commemorate the American Revolution Bicentennial 1776-1976."

The same correspondence had been sent to many other war-related associations in both Australia and the US three years previously.

On August 20, 1973, the Embassy of the United States of America wrote with regard to Fr Cassar's concern of identifying the crew and passengers involved in the plane crash.

John D Walker wrote: "According to the Air Attaché, the Air Force Historical Research Centre has exhausted all possibilities of identifying the aircraft or any of the crew members."

However, almost three years to the day the embassy wrote, Fr Cassar received a letter from the Albert F Simpson Historical Research Centre in the US on August 24, 1976, stating the contrary.

A report of internment which the Office of Air Force History obtained from the Washington National Records Centre said the aircraft – a Liberator Bomber B24D Texas Terror Serial 41-23825 – departed from Garbutt Field at 0815 hours (presumably local time)



A local who had trekked the 3000ft Mount Stralock on Hinchinbrook Island to visit the wreckage remains of a Liberator Bomber, B24D Texas Terror, which crashed there in 1942.

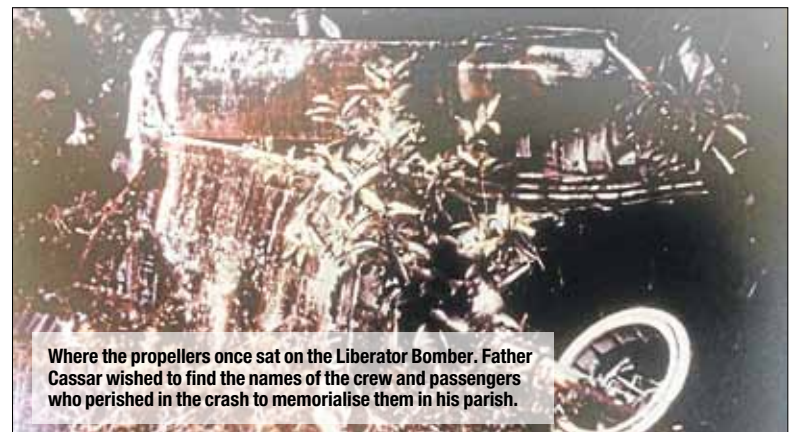
on December 18, 1942, and crashed on Mount Stralock, Hinchinbrook Island, on or about the same day at about 0905 hours, the time indicated by a damaged watch found in the wreckage.

More information streamed in to Fr Cassar, who wrote in a letter to Lee Ragan, Texas, US, on October 19, 1976: "Some local people answered my appeal (to find the names of the crew and passengers) by climbing the mountain, sleeping there overnight and cutting a blade from one of the propellers, which they brought to me with the names of the crew."

These local people were Lester MacDonald, Robert Mazlin and Howard Leviston.

It was discovered the crew were members of the 400th Bombardment Sq. of the 90th Bombardment Gp. Fifth Air Force and included the usual crew of pilot, co-pilot, navigator, engineer and radio operator, as well as a technician and six passengers.

While Fr Cassar had finally found the names of the crew and passengers, he still wished to go further to find the families of those who lost their lives on the plane.



Where the propellers once sat on the Liberator Bomber. Father Cassar wished to find the names of the crew and passengers who perished in the crash to memorialise them in his parish.

Whether the stained-glass memorial was ever erected is unknown, with his church, St Rita's in Lucinda, unable to be contacted.

Memorials to the past were something of a hobby to Fr Cassar it appears, as in January 1980, he wrote to the *Townsville Bulletin* suggesting a 6-metre diameter likeness of the bust of Townsville's founder, Robert Towns, be carved on the rugged granite face of Castle Hill. He said not only would it

improve the appearance of Castle Hill, but its uniqueness would make it a tourist attraction.

Andrew Costello was the complete opposite of the outspoken Fr Cassar, although the pair shared the same determination.

Andrew received notice of his consignment in 1940 and the next year, on June 7, wrote the letter below to his family in Charters Towers.

His words tell his story best.

Letters home to Towers from serving son

DEAR Mum, Dad and all, I wrote a letter to you two weeks ago, but after reading it over it was waste of money posting it. It was so uninteresting to read so I shall try to do better this time.

Writing is so very hard with the limited number of letters I receive from Australia; hence no questions and answers, no letters for weeks and some of the chaps here get quite a lot.

The last letter you mentioned to send a few presents to a few of the folk about Charters Towers, but presents are hard to buy. You have to have coupons to buy them but I shall do my best.

I hardly find time to write to anybody these days and the days are certainly long enough. It is dawn at 5am and dusk at 11pm – quite a day isn't it.

The new RAAF Spitfire squad has been quite well, though – you get really browned off sometimes.

Our squadron leader, a damn fine chap, is leaving us on the 15th and I can assure you we will miss him.

He has the DFC and bar. He is to be replaced by an Australian.

We are having a beer party on the 14th and the 'Charters Towers Wonder Kid', as I have been named, will have to represent Charters Towers at the bar.

One of our flight commanders, an Irish man, 'Finucane', may also be leaving shortly and also be replaced by an Australian – that will call for another beer party. I hope you hear of some good work done by 452 RAAF spitfire squad soon.

Last month was the anniversary of my joining. Little did I think that this time, 1941, I would have realised my ambition to fly a Spitfire.

I had a real good chase after a German bomber yesterday. I was leading the section of Spitfires at 12,000 feet with 11,000 feet of cloud below us and he got away in the cloud.

We followed him halfway across the North Sea and then had to return really disappointed. But there is still tomorrow.

I will really celebrate after my first victory.

Dick Gazzard (the Fit Man) is still with us. He really likes the beer and after a few is quite amusing, and

having been in the army always sings the 'army song'.

I was in London the night of a heavy blitz and was really amazed at the wonderful people who live there.

You never hear a word of gunfire and carried on with their work all throughout the night.

I happened to go along to a hospital about 2am. All the nurses were on duty and, no doubts, they are really brave girls.

Even though there is no war in Australia, I was proud to say my sister is a nurse. Some of the towns have had a terrific battering.

So have the German towns and will continue to.

I expect Winsome is home by now.

I have not received any letters other than the two I received about two months ago. I sent Jack Bell a cable about 10 days ago. Also received one from you. Also replied; your cable was a month old.

Today I received (this very minute) a parcel from Winsome for my birthday.

It was so nice of her to send me them, and they are really lovely and

will take well over here in England.

While I am on the subject, thank you both so much for the idea of the ring for my birthday, but I do not intend to get the ring at all now.

It is really a waste of money, and as this camp is a long way from a village, it was impossible to manage without transport.

So what did I do? I purchased a car for 5 pounds cash – 1929 Austin 7 horse six all jibs.

But to get back to the question, an 80-pound ring on my hand on the steering wheel of a 5-pound car would look a bit out of place.

I am going to write to the firm in Birmingham and tell them to admire Angus and Cootie to that nature.

I have changed a lot lately and I think a ring is a waste of cash, but thank you so much for your kind thoughts, Mum and Dad.

I saw a nice little boy wearing an Air Force suit a few weeks ago. Will try and get one for John.

I received a letter from Joe Graham – am replying by ordinary post also, and Betty Hollingsworth received his birthday cards from the

Cardy Bell girls; I am also writing to them.

How is Mary Reddie these days? Wrote to her some time ago. No reply yet – still coming, I hope.

When is Jack Bell to be married? I think Monica Murphy is pretty lucky. I know her pretty well. I sent John Lyons a cable of congrats. I hope he does well, consider it quite smooth on John's part. Maybe it will be a lesson to the Charters Towers country lads. How is Les Hollingsworth? I hope he is still himself as ever.

Well, Mum and Dad and all, I will not let it go over the two weeks again without a letter, so forgive me this time please.

Hope John is well and growing a big boy. Also wishing to win.

I will close now with all the news I can think of.

I am going on seven days leave on the 21st June. May go to Ireland if I can. Lots of love, from your loving son, Andrew.

● Andrew was later killed in action. Thanks to the JCU Special Collections for allowing access to the two archives – the Father Cassar Collection and the Costello Letters.