

Who was the Naked Gunner?



It is one of the most iconic photos of the Pacific War. But the identity of the ‘naked gunner’ remains a mystery to this day.

By Bev Cleary

He put his own life on the line to save fellow servicemen from the blazing waters of Papua New Guinea but, it seems, the identity of the 'Naked Gunner', may never be known.

A striking, black and white image depicts the 'Naked Gunner' back at his battle station aboard a PB4Y Catalina Blister US army aircraft within minutes of his daring rescue of a fellow serviceman.

The fearless airman, deployed as part of Operation Dumbo, had plucked a courageous colleague from the burning waters of Rabaul Bay harbour, which was being pelted with Japanese gunfire, in 1944 during the Pacific Campaign of World War Two.

Fighting for his life in the burning waters of the bay, injured and blinded by flames, the rescued airman was just one of scores of colleagues being shot at by Japanese forces who were using Rabaul as a fortress during fierce battles in the south west Pacific.

In order for him to perform his life-saving rescue as safely as possible, the man who would become known as the Naked Gunner, threw off his boots and clothing before diving into the dangerous waters.

He swam back to the aircraft, dragging his injured colleague to safety, but had no time to get dressed before his skills as an aircraft gunner were needed immediately to stave off Japanese attack.

It was at that instant, that his image was captured.

The iconic photograph was taken by American Horace Bristol, a founding photojournalist for the illustrious Life magazine.



Bristol was one of a group of photographers who had been drafted into the U.S. Naval Aviation Photographic Unit to document the events of WW2.

It is not known if the photographer ever asked the Naked Bomber for his name as he captured his image.

Whatever the truth may be, the photographer died in 1997, having kept a discreet silence on the bomber's identity if, indeed, he ever knew it.

According to an article in B&W magazine, December 2002, the photographer remembers:

"...we got a call to pick up an airman who was down in the Bay. The Japanese were shooting at him from the island, and when they saw us they started shooting at us. The man who was shot down was temporarily blinded, so one of our crew stripped off his clothes and jumped in to bring him aboard. He couldn't have swum very well wearing his boots and clothes. As soon as we could, we took off. We weren't waiting around for anybody to put on formal clothes. We were being shot at and wanted to get the hell out of there. The naked man got back into his position at his gun in the blister of the plane."

Traveling with the forces on the day the photograph was taken, Bristol was a first-hand witness to one of many instances of heroic rescues performed by the troops during Operation Dumbo.

The rescue campaign was so named because the air teams were deployed to swoop into dangerous waters to rescue fellow servicemen from almost certain death – just like the beloved Disney elephant swooped into animation action during circus scenes.

The campaign saved many Americans and their allies from a watery grave.

The PBY Catalina (Patrol Bomber) for which the naked man was a gunner, was an amphibious aircraft, recognised and celebrated by American aviators and flight crews for its vast range and endurance.

According to the PBY Naval Air Museum, Washington website, the ‘versatile’ aircraft was capable of dropping “torpedoes, depth charges and bombs” while providing defence for their crews from “multiple high-calibre machine guns”.

The airborne fleet, designed by Issac Machlin Laddon and manufactured by the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation founded in 1923, was used all over the world, but particularly in coastal areas, to “patrol for enemy fleets and perform rescues”.



The iconic image of the Naked Gunner can be found on the official website of the Brooklyn Museum.

The Other Naked Gunner

The Second World War saw countless heroic acts and produced immeasurable numbers of heroes.

Amongst them was another 'Naked Gunner' whose heroics in Australia during Japanese attacks over Darwin earned him the Military Medal.

Wilbert 'Darky' Hudson was the first man to be awarded the prestigious accolade for bravery against an enemy on Australian soil in 1942.

Hudson was showering when he reacted to sirens warning of a Japanese air raid over Darwin.



Wearing only his helmet and his boots and clutching a towel for modesty, the 20-year-old grabbed a Lewis machine gun and lost his towel as he fired at the bombers, using his mate's shoulder as a steadying rest.

Just months later Hudson became known as one of the 'Burns Boys' when he, and others, suffered horrific injuries as a result of Japanese aircraft attacks on oil tanks where he was stationed.

Despite his terrible burns, Hudson was nursed back to health and went on to marry and have a family. He died in 2002.

A memorial to him can be found at Greystanes Sportsground in New South Wales.

Title Photo Credit – Horace Bristol