



**Cricketers at War**  
Greg Growden  
Books, PB  
200p, \$32.99

## Poignant tales prove cricket is not like war

David Frith on a chilling book that takes in accounts from the trenches to Vietnam



Zealots who view cricket as a parallel form of warfare need to understand that it can only ever elicit the faintest of similarities. Heroism on the cricket field is one thing; facing a brutal, ruthless and often hidden enemy, losing your mates, knowing that life could end any moment, is another. Greg Growden has written some significant cricket books, but this crowns all. It is a series of hard-hitting stories about Australian cricketers who lost their lives in 20th century world wars, two of them from the Test ranks, and others who returned home damaged after captivity. The most poignant narratives concern those who were viciously ill-treated in the prison camps of Asia, notably Ern Toovey (Queensland left-hander, aboard HMAS



Toovey pictured in January 1973, Queensland manager

Sydney when she was torpedoed) and Ben Barnett (another genial Aussie, a wicketkeeper who had given Len Hutton a sharp early stumping let-off in his famous innings of 364). In later years these men were great company. They understood the priceless value of life and freedom.

The two Australian Test players killed were Tibby Cotter in 1917 and Ross Gregory in 1943. In Max Bonnell's 2012 biography, terror bowler Cotter's death was marked uniquely by a photo (not included here) of his corpse half-hidden under a ground-sheet. There remains uncertainty as to how he died. And detail of young Gregory's fatal mission is regrettably inaccurate (the Wellington bomber crew were, in fact, blown to pieces in an unexplained mid-air explosion over the village of Gaffargaon, in what is now Bangladesh). A diminutive hero in the thrilling 1936/37 Ashes series, Gregory was a product of Melbourne's Wesley College, whose academy had already given Australia a VC winner in Bob Grieve, a blood-soaked hero of the 1914-18 conflict during the ferocious fighting at Messines. Behind all these narratives lie imagined timeless images of these young men in their cream cricket flannels before they found themselves facing death daily in another type of uniform.

Predictably and understandably, the flamboyant Keith Miller bestrides the cover picture, with a vivid essay within on this most colourful and popular cricketer. His remark about pressure and Messerschmidts is now perhaps the most renowned in cricket's lexicon, for the compelling reason that it places cricket into proper perspective. It may even have overtaken the CLR James mantra 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?'

No story is more striking than that of Dr Claude Tozer, a deeply stressed battlefield hero who somehow saw the war through, only to be shot dead in Sydney in 1921 by an

unstable, infatuated, female patient. Almost as dramatic is the tale of Norman Callaway. Just before his 19th birthday he hit 207 against Queensland at the SCG. It remains his only first-class innings. He enlisted and soon afterwards, at Bullecourt, the top of his skull was blown away by German shell-fire; he was rapidly buried, now without trace. As the stories accumulate the message becomes louder: never mistake cricket (a sport, albeit now highly commercialised and terribly serious) for war.

The '14-18 war culminated in the formation of the Australian Imperial Force team, which nurtured some young and battle-hardened future Test cricketers who played in England and on a homecoming tour of Australia, with powerful allrounder Jack Gregory the greatest discovery. In contrast, RJA (Jack) Massie, another giant of a man, had his career shattered by extensive wounds at Gallipoli and in France. A generation later his son was killed in New Guinea in 1943. The cruelty of war knows no bounds. And by way of interest, the rights and wrongs of recent Australian teams visiting Gallipoli and donning slouch hats are debated here.

As for the book's most recent study, Hampshire-born Queensland and Australia left-arm fast man Tony Dell's Vietnam experiences and the aftermath chill the blood.

There are a few blips in this remarkable book, apart from the Ross Gregory oversight. Charlie Walker, who toured England twice in the 1930s without playing a Test, didn't "fly" a Lancaster bomber; he was a mid-turret gunner. His aircraft was shot down over the Black Forest and the wreckage has never been located. And the picture purporting to show Ben Barnett is of Merv Waite (with ace batsman Stan McCabe described as a wicketkeeper) – sad errors conceivably not to be laid at the feet of the author.