

# Aussies over Europe

## World War II's Bloodiest Air Campaign

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Winter 1943-1944: 463 Squadron



Debriefing of five members of 467 Sqn by intelligence officer (left) immediately after returning from ops over Germany

As the invading Japanese forces advanced ever closer to Australia in WWII, the gallant fighting by our servicemen in the jungles, the air and the sea was foremost in all minds. The honour given these men by our prime minister and government is well deserved.

On the other side of the world there was another more deadly war of repeated battles deep into Germany and across the territories conquered and occupied by the massive military power of Nazi Germany. It was an air war that was inevitable after Hitler's army and air force conquered the European nations and drove the British into the sea.

Only a heavy bomber force from England could take the war to Germany. As Britain built up bomber strength, requests went to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand for trained personnel to share in the crewing and Australian aircrew began to arrive in England in 1941.

By war's end, although only about 2 per cent of all Australian servicemen of WWII served in Bomber Command, they lost 3486 killed in action, 20 per

cent of all Australians killed in combat. Another 724 were killed in the bomber operational training units when war training continued in the worst weather and in worn-out aircraft due to the urgent demands for reinforcements from squadrons. This brought the total killed to 4210.

The total losses in the AIF divisions in the Middle East against Germany and Italy came to 3552 killed. Closer to Australia the fighting against Japan cost 1789 dead in Singapore and over 2000 in all parts of Papua New Guinea. In later conflicts, 339 were killed from all services in Korea and 519 in Vietnam. Despite these revealing comparisons the Australian government has shown little interest in the young Australians sacrificed over Europe. They were an elite, highly trained force fighting in a separate campaign, yet there is no Bomber Command memorial in Canberra. One has been promised provided remaining veterans find most of the money.

The heavy bomber operations saw a very different type of warfare, usually at night, deep into well defended enemy territory. The extra hours of darkness of the northern

winters permitted longer missions, when the temperatures at the high altitudes could go down to minus 45 degrees C.

It was high technology warfare requiring meticulously trained men to operate and fight with the complex equipment in the four engine bomber. The seven man crew, comprising bomb aimer, pilot/captain, flight engineer, navigator, radio operator and two gunners, were isolated in their stations, hooked onto the essential oxygen supply and intercommunication telephony system. The gunners were also plugged into power from their electrically heated clothing. The success of the mission and their safety depended on each man never relaxing his vigilance and determination to attack.

It was not glamorous. The bombers, not pressurised or insulated, has one thin sheet of aluminium alloy between the crew and the outside air.

The cabin heater was ineffective against the icy draught coming from the front turret apertures and frostbite was not uncommon. Very little help

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"Sniffer The Dog" bombing up for Berlin



Armament factory destroyed by heavy bombers

could be given to a wounded crew member until back over England.

On the long slow climber after take-off, fully loaded with fuel and bombs, the cabin stank even through the oxygen masks. Most operations meant 10 to 15 hours of concentrated effort from the time the crews reported to the briefing room, longer when the crew member survived being shot down. A sustaining meal before take-off was essential and as the aircraft climbed and the air pressure dropped, the gas in the digesting food was given off and swelled. Repeated farting was inevitable.

The Australians arrived in Bomber Command mainly in small groups from their specialist training schools in Australia, Canada or Rhodesia. As in North Africa with the AIE British government policy was to spread out the Australians under the command of British officers. This delayed the formation of Australian units for some time and the first batches of Australian to arrive were absorbed into RAF squadrons. Even after five RAAF heavy bomber squadrons were formed, many Australian

reinforcements continued to be diverted to British units. This left the RAAF squadrons short of Australians and many crew positions were filled with RAF. They were excellent on operations and in no way detracted from the effectiveness of the units, although adding some administrative work.

The writer served in two of the RAAF units, No 467 and 463 Lancaster Squadrons, and the remainder of this article will be about these two. Both commenced operations against Germany 60 years ago in 1943, 467 Sqn in January and 463 Sqn in November. On the formation of 463 Sqn both units were based at Waddington near the city of Lincoln.

The two squadrons formed with RAAF and RAF personnel from other units began operations against Germany almost immediately. As reinforcements arrived the Australian content increased but with the high loss rates it was a long process and it never reached 100 per cent.

With the output from factories in the conquered countries and masses of slave labour added to the already

efficient German defence industries, increased deliveries of tanks, guns, ammunition, aircraft and electronics built the strength of Germany's military forces to an all time high. By 1943 the new Australian squadrons encountered the world's most effective anti-aircraft defences and losses grew quickly. 467 Sqn lost the equivalent of 100 per cent of its complement of operational aircrew in its first seven months. 463 Sqn lost more than 50 per cent in the first four months. Only a more or less constant supply of new aircraft from factories and reinforcements from the training pipeline enabled them to continue. Yet those men were called "Jap Dodgers" and some received white feather from Australia.

From average strength of 140 aircrew, No 467, in 28 months of endless attacks on the enemy, lost an obscene 590 killed in action, including five commanding officers, 117 taken prisoner after being shot down and 84 shot down mainly over the conquered countries but not captured, thanks to assistance from gallant civilians.

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the Nazi War Minister informed Hitler:

“If these attacks continue, a rapid end of the war might be the consequence.”

In its 17 months attacking the enemy, No 463, with similar strength, lost 350 killed in action, 92 taken prisoner and 77 evading capture. Three commanding officers were shot down, two were killed and one escaped capture due to slow witted German troops and the bravery of a Belgian woman.

In 1943 and 1944 most aircrew knew there was a high probability they would be shot down by enemy flak and fighters. Had they survived and come down with only slight injuries it was their duty and very good sense to avoid capture and possible execution or the POW camp. In Germany capture was almost inevitable but if they landed in one of the countries under German military occupation there was a chance of avoiding capture and even returning to their unit.

The success of those who evaded capture was a joint effort of the men involved who had learned the procedures, the air force which issued all aircrew with “escape kits” and the underground resistance forces, particularly strong in France, Belgium and Holland. The “escape kit”, small and tightly packed, contained concentrated food, energy tablets, water purifying tablets, passport photos in civilian clothing for false identity papers and used bank notes of the appropriate currency.

Improved Lancasters flown by 467 and 463 became the most effective type used by the Allies. Highly manoeuvrable, they could carry the largest bomb load over the greatest distance, and as deliveries increased they were chosen for more difficult targets. The Australians fought their way deeper into Germany and over Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia and Italy. Losses increased.

The bombing objective was to destroy armament factories, oil refineries, transport systems, mainly railways, power generating systems, research establishments and the centre of government. Berlin was a priority target and the 15 attacks of “The Battle of Berlin” in the winter of 1943/1944 were a nightmare for the crews. The strengthened defences beginning with radar guided heavy gun batteries along the coastline followed by constant attacks from the radar controlled enemy fighter force meant a long gruelling battle before the Lancasters flew into the defence inferno surrounding and over the target.

Hitler promised his people that Berlin would never be attacked and he did his best. Over the city the massive anti-aircraft gun barrage, flares, fighters, searchlights, exploding Lancasters and bomb bursts on the ground made an experience the crews did not wish to repeat. But they did, time and time again.

Then there was the long return flight. The flak and fighters, which would have landed, refuelled and rearmed, would be waiting. Back over England the tired pilots and navigators had to find their airfield in a winter that was one of the worst on record. Low clouds and fog at times closed Waddington and the returning Lancasters would be diverted to a distant airfield where they would arrive, desperately short of fuel.

On 463 Squadron’s worst night four Lancasters out of 14 attacking Berlin were shot down and 28 crewmen killed. Bad weather held up flying for two weeks, then the survivors attacked again. Taking off well overladen with full bomb load in snowstorms, and finding freak winds at altitude and icing, the weather and

mechanical failure with the sluggish aircraft killed many more.

Was this costly bombing campaign successful? After an earlier attack on industries in Hamburg the Nazi War Minister informed Hitler: “If these attacks continue a rapid end of the war might be the consequence.”

By mid-1944 the bombing had significantly reduced Germany’s ability to wage war. Tank production had been cut by 35 per cent and aircraft by 31 per cent, and the European railway system on which the German Army relied so heavily was constantly severed. The destruction of oil refineries, oil storage centres and synthetic oil plants was increasing. To protect the homeland one million fit German troops, 74 per cent of all heavy artillery and 55 per cent of lighter weapons were engaged at the expense of their forces fighting the Russians on one front and the Allies on another.

The 6 June 1944 D Day invasion on the Normandy coast by the American, British and Canadian armies was, in the broad scene, the most significant happening in the war. The Lancaster squadrons’ involvement started well before June with attacks to destroy railway lines leading to the invasion area, German gun batteries, coastal radar and army tanks. Being over France the operations were not without loss. Bombing accuracy was essential. Harm to French lives and property was to be avoided regardless of cost, and the bombers attacked at minimum height and not until the target was clearly identified by the Pathfinder Force. This delayed some attacks long enough for the enemy defences to be strengthened. On one such attack on railway yards in Lille the two squadrons lost six aircraft with 40 killed, one taken prisoner and one evaded.

During the greater part of 1943 and 1944 the average life expectancy of the bomber crews was 13 missions and they were expected to complete 30 in their first tour of operations. After a period of non-operational flying duties they could be called (and many were) to completed a second of 20 missions.

Aircrew ignored these odds. Those detailed for operations were single-minded in their determination to reach and strike the target. Before take-off they meticulously checked their aircraft, its equipment, the weather *en route* and target details. They absorbed the mass of information at the briefing, took off on time and heady into enemy territory.

The successful attacks by the squadrons required leadership, skill and determination of the highest order and this was recognised by the British High Command. The Australians in No 467 and No 463 were awarded for their gallantry: 11 Distinguished Service Orders, 3 Conspicuous Gallantry Medals, 225 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 43 Distinguished Flying Medals. Unfortunately the records of the RAF members are not available to be included.

### **Bohlen Synthetic Oil Refinery**

Most crews who survived knew what it was like to be stuck by enemy fire. All experiences are different but the split second actions to save the aircraft and lives followed by the struggles to stay in the air are similar. This is a brief rendition of the gallant four and half hour battle by the crew of a 463 Squadron Lancaster JO-G, struck by heavy flak while attacking a synthetic oil refinery deep in Germany only a month before the war ended.

A direct hit shot away one aileron, almost severed the main wing spar, dislodged one of the fuel tanks, tore a hole in the fuselage, wrecked the main long range navigation electronics and damaged other flying controls. Losing height rapidly in the uncontrollable aircraft, the pilot, Flying Officer Belford, was about to order the crew to bail out when he learned the two gunners had been wounded and were unable to move.

By this time Allied land forces had recaptured France and Belford decided that by using brute force, limited flying controls and emergency navigation systems he could nurse JO-G to Juviencourt, a French airfield. It took four and half hours to cover the 600 miles (960 km) and remarkable navigation to find Juviencourt in heavy cloud and rain.

Two attempts were made to land and on the second the aircraft touched down on a wheel and a wing tip. The wheel collapsed, then another wheel was torn off in a shell hole. JO-G then finished on its belly and no lives were lost.