

Memories of my Dad, Frank Lawrence (by younger son Tony)

In my early years, I don't ever remember any specific time when Dad actually told us about his service with RAAF 460 Squadron during WW2. It was just not spoken about. The story of how Dad had served the Allied countries during the war slowly revealed itself over time.

Our family friends who we visited often ... the Waltons, the Neguses, the Lowes ... were also Maryborough 'war' families where the Dad had also served his country in RAAF Squadrons throughout England. Bob Walton, Mosquito pilot, Cec Negus, Stirling bomber pilot (in the famous Pathfinder Group) ... and Keith Lowe, navigator on Mosquitos.

Lots of war stories slowly revealed themselves during those family visits often via the catalyst of a cold drink or two. The men were immensely proud of the aircraft they flew, and I soon learnt why the Lancaster bomber was far superior to the Stirling bomber, in spite of Cec Negus's stoic defence of his aircraft, the Stirling.

So, the stories emerged over my childhood years and whilst I did learn about all that Dad had done during WW2, I did not fully appreciate the unimaginable risks to life taken and just how truly brave these men were. The way Dad portrayed it, he was just doing his job for King and country.

The appreciation came later when I started reading books about Bomber Command and the various battles over the skies of Germany. I learnt that with an attrition rate of 5% in the early part of Bomber Command raids over Germany, Dad defied the odds in living through two tours of duty.

Some sobering statistics that I came to understand ...

- A British bomber was one of the most dangerous places to be during WW2
- The average life of a new recruit to Bomber command was just a matter of weeks (if you got past that, your chances of survival improved)
- If you did not survive, you were probably burnt alive as your fuel tanks were shot out by flak or a German fighter ... if you were 'lucky' after being hit, you'd become a POW for the rest of the war.
- As a squadron of 20 Lancasters (about average size) went on a raid each night, averagely an entire crew would not return that night/morning. Seven of his squadron mates 'got the chop' ... and they just had to live with this.
- Statistically, a squadron would turn over its entire air crew in a matter of months.

Dad was very proud that his initial pilot training was in Bundaberg (not in Canada) and he learned to fly on Tiger Moths. Through a progression of more 'sophisticated' aircraft he commenced operational duty in England on the famous Lancasters in 460 Squadron (one of two all Aussie squadrons). He considered himself to be very lucky to go straight onto what is still considered the most effective and 'safest' bomber of WW2.

His first Tour of Duty involved raids of Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr valley, as well as trips to Berlin and Hamburg. As you could imagine, the Ruhr was very heavily defended ... known by aircrew as 'Happy Valley'. On the early raids to Berlin 'The Big City' the bombers were over enemy territory for about 7 hours and therefore extremely vulnerable to attack. The attrition rates on these early raids were extremely high and the early raids largely unsuccessful.

Dad finished his first tour of duty on the last of three raids on Hamburg, where he lost 3 of the 4 engines and still bombed the target on one engine from 14,000 feet. As the Lanc continued to descend, Dad ordered his crew to prepare to bail out. This was the only time that Dad thought he

and his crew were about to come to an end ... either a crash-landing or at best, end up as German POW's. They did progressively get the engines restarted and limped back home to England.

After this lucky escape, Dad was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) which was pinned on him by King George VI (he was immensely proud of this). His Squadron commander considered that Dad and his crew should not push their luck any further, so this was the end of his first tour, 4 sorties short of a normal tour of 30 sorties. (The English called them sorties ... the Americans called them missions).

In December 1943, after a couple of weeks of rest, Dad was posted to 27 OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Lichfield, as an instructor. Here he trained many pilots who themselves then went on to operational duties. Even more significantly for us, it was at Lichfield where Dad met a beautiful WAAF in the photographic unit, Audrey, who later became our Mother. They did fall in love ... but it was not the 'right' thing for aircrew to become engaged to be married, because of the high probability that they would not make it to the end of the war.

After a year of instructing in a very 'safe' environment, it was back to operational flying. Dad was posted to 467 Squadron (the other as Australian squadron) now with the rank of Flight Lieutenant. In his brief time at 467, he flew S Sugar (considered to be famous for finishing more than 100 sorties, when the average life of a Lancaster was 21 sorties) which today sits in the RAF War Museum in Hendon.

After 'disagreement' on a safety issue with his Station Commander, Dad requested a transfer back to his beloved 460 Squadron, where not only was he welcomed with open arms, but was promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader and asked to head up C Flight within the squadron. This was early in 1945 where the allies had the upper hand and commanded the skies over Germany. Dad's last offensive sortie with 460 was a raid on Hitler's Lair, Berchtesgaden, where they took great delight in dropping 1000-pound bombs right on top of the target (unfortunately Hitler wasn't home).

Towards the very end of the war in Europe, the bomber squadrons were put to good work, dropping supplies to the starving Dutch population (Operation Manna). Because of the German blockade on food supplies to Holland, 22,000 of the population had perished and literally thousands were dying by the week. The English planned to use their bombers to drop food supplies to the starving population and attempted to negotiate a truce with the Germans. The Germans did not agree, so the British (and Americans later) went ahead and just hoped that the Germans would not fire on their very vulnerable bombers, flying a few hundred feet above the ground and completely unarmed. Dad, his crew and many others took enormous risks on the early Manna drops ... and fortunately the Germans respected this unofficial truce. Many Dutch lives were saved and for a bomber crew accustomed to inflicting so many casualties, these were the most rewarding sorties of them all. Dad did tell us that he was immensely proud of the Manna sorties.

Just after VE day, the bomber crews were again put to good work repatriating POW's from German prison camps back to England (Operation Exodus).

So, the war in Europe was over, but the Japanese had not surrendered. Dad could have returned home to Australia after such a distinguished career... but no, he then volunteered to form part of Tiger Force, using modified Lancaster's (Lincoln Bombers) to take the war effort to the Japanese. After months of training, and after the Americans had dropped the two atom bombs on Japan, the war was over and Tiger Force was disbanded.

Dad returned to Australia in 1946, and decided to return to his humble job at Horsburghs in Maryborough. Qantas were looking for multi engine experienced pilots after the war, but I remember Dad telling us that he had had enough of flying and just wanted a return to 'normal'. Many letters must have passed between Audrey, waiting in England and Dad ... and finally a 'formal' proposal was accepted. Dad sent the money over and Audrey went shopping for the engagement ring with her father (Mum told us she got many strange looks when shopping with this much older man!)

Mum emigrated to Australia on the P&O Oriana in 1946 and was chaperoned in Maryborough by the Critall family up until the wedding day (it wasn't 'proper' in those days to actually live with the groom's family).

General Childhood Memories

Dad had a very happy disposition and could never chastise us, even when justified (Mum was the disciplinarian)

When he would try to chastise us, my brother Ken or I would smirk at Dad and say 'now don't you laugh' ... inevitably he would.

In spite of being able to fly a 4-engined bomber, the family never had a car until after Ken and I had left home. Of course, because Maryborough was so flat, everyone rode bicycles.

Dad encouraged me and was happy to see me join the Maryborough Air Training Corps when I was 14. I did receive a RAAF Flying Scholarship and gained my private pilot's license at 16, courtesy of the RAAF. Dad came out to the airport to watch when I went 'solo' ... a big moment in pilot training.

Dad took the 'Salute' on ANZAC day in Maryborough on two occasions.

War service Side Stories

Dad told me that well after the war, when he was a cab in Maryborough, driven by a German immigrant who asked Dad if he'd ever been to Berlin ... he replied 'not specifically, but I've flown over it a few times.

Crews were not able to keep a specific aeroplane ... they moved from aeroplane to aeroplane. This was because the aircraft were continually being repaired after the inevitable damage by flak or fighter aircraft. The ground crews would admonish the air crews (tongue in cheek) for getting their beautifully prepared planes damaged after a raid.

In spite of them being the 'enemy,' Dad had respect for the German fighter pilots ... after all they were just doing their job, just as he was. Some German fighter pilots actually attended 460 reunion dinners in Australia after the war and told their story, from the other side.

During operation Manna, the supply drop, some of his crew would create little handkerchief parachutes, with a personal *good-wishes* note and a packet of cigarettes, attached.

One of his crew members would take a brick on a sortie and drop it out at 20,000 feet... might hit some bugger, he reckoned.

