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THE ANGRY SKY

AUSTRALIA'S AIR WAR OVER EUROPE



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Graves Too Far Away, Australians in Bomber Command Europe - Interpreting the Landscape of RAAF History

Dr Kathryn Spurling,

I would like to commence this presentation with two contentious questions. “What is RAAF history? What is RAAF art?” Is it the clinical depiction of weapons of war (things!)? Is it campaigns, operations, logistics, must it always include tactics and strategy?

This amazing painting was Margaret Hadfield’s entry to the 2012 RAAF art history award. Her painting tells many stories of the service and sacrifice of Australians in Bomber Command. I do not wish to delve into art critique but this small painting of a drone over Afghanistan won the art prize and the Spitfire came second.

I am ex-Navy, I married Navy and gave birth to navy. My late father Max Norris, was a WOP/AG on Halifax bombers in WWII. I taught military history and strategic studies at Australian Defence Force Academy but I believe the traditional definition of academic military history, is wrong. On the other side of the spectrum is populist military history written by journalists, who can be at best liberal with the facts.

Too many from both sides have directly or indirectly tended to glorify events, even war; and have forgotten those who fight rather than command: those ordered to fly a bomber eight hours over a target, their gut constricted with fear as they feel and hear the anti-aircraft fire buffet their aircraft. Nor should we expunge the bulk of the population from a tradition which we are told is fundamental to nation-building. We can continue to discuss and analyse military contingencies as indeed I do in my books *Cruel Conflict* and *A Grave Too Far Away* but at some point we should include the person at the pointy end, AND, the effect his or her service and sacrifice has on their family, their community, their country, and internationally.

But with commemoration of the 11th of the 11th imminent this broad interpretation of RAAF history, and particularly Australians in Bomber Command, Europe, should be illustrated. RAAF enlistments accounted for around 2% of WWII enlistments yet they made up nearly 20% of Australian fatalities – these young men were the best of the best and they paid a terrible price.

Wallace Martin was a country boy. He grew up on the family property Splitter's Creek in the Upper Hunter Shire, of New South Wales. Wallace was a middle child of a family of six children but with a different personality than his sibling. His mother, Mary Martin, tried hard to hide her favouritism for him. Wallace was particularly close to older sister Heather. With just around a year between them they rode on the same horse until old enough to have their own. Wallace was a gentle man, with a sense of humour, and love of the adventure of life. He joined the RAAF in 1940 and set off overseas to slay dragons. In the letters to his father, there was an element of bravado, something missing from his letters to his mother. "Dad we will make Germany pay for all that they have given so far, and they shall pay damn dear". Wallace was an observer and he and his crew were shot up and crash landed more than once. Stays in hospital were becoming usual. Wallace was also becoming increasingly depressed as mates died: Wallace wrote: "Most of the old brigade have been bumped off ... I am the only Aussie on the squadron". Good mates like Sgt Roger Murphy, a fellow grazier from the Scone district. The first Roger's wife heard was a telegram giving her details of his funeral in England. Wallace took a photo of Roger's grave to send home to her. The tempo of bombing operations increased. Wallace knew his family would worry but he wrote: "my pal Sgt John Shannon was hit with flak while his bomber was carrying a land mine and they blew up". Wallace was by now drinking heavily and admitted "my nerves are a little shaken". Then he was invited to spend leave on a Scottish farm and met Jess. His spirit soared and he wrote home: "Jess is 18 years old, quite a tall girl, good looking, and has a wonderful personality".

He was approaching his 23rd birthday when awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. More importantly as far as Wallace was concerned, Jess had agreed to marry him. This Scottish lass had agreed to travel around the world, to come to a region, which Wallace enthusiastically described as the most beautiful in his nation. Again his aircraft returned from an operation, shot-up with wounded crew, again Wallace was badly wounded. His physical wounds healed faster than his spirit. "I have not been really 100 per cent since my last crack-up as I kind of have --- the jitters ... it will eventually wear off as time goes on". Wallace wanted to marry Jess, and craved a future for them both. He also wanted to go home. He kept referring to his mood as "melancholy". In 1942 the diagnosis Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was unheard of. Aircrew feared being stripped of their rank and mustering in front of their squadron for, "Lack of Moral Fibre". Wallace was sent to an RAF airfield to continue his rehabilitation. Wallace Martin was on "rest leave". A navigator was needed for an operation and pressure was put on Wallace to volunteer. Anxious to avoid the lack of moral fibre tag, he agreed. His

Ventura --- was shot down over the Netherlands. Flt Lieutenant Wallace Martin, DFC is buried in Eindhoven cemetery. Wallace's mother Mary would never be the same. Her health deteriorated rapidly. Following the end of the war Mary heard that overseas graves were being photographed and she wrote to the Dept of Air asking for a photo of Wallace's grave. London authorities replied saying that this service had been withdrawn. Wallace's grave, had not been photographed. Mary was advised that the British Legion, London, would organise a photo, as long as Mary completed an order form in triplicate, and ensured she enclosed the correct monetary amount in pounds sterling. The British Empire was responsible for the death of her favourite son but she needed to pay in British currency for a photograph of his grave. Mary Martin died within the decade and the running of the Martin home full of young people, and come shearing season, a great many more, fell to Heather the sister who would ride with Wallace on a horse far too big. Heather never did marry the young man she thought she would marry was also a casualty of Bomber Command. In 2010 she continued to live on the family property. It is sad but wonderful when you ask a 92 year-old-woman what she remembers most about her favourite brother. She thought for a minute and then said. "I must have been four or five and Wallace was a little tacker around three. Mum sent us down to collect the eggs from the chook house. I gathered a load of eggs and not paying a lot of attention I walked out and let the gate shut. Wallace couldn't say Heather, he called me Hattie. Wallace shouted: 'Hattie open gate'. He had his hands full of eggs and for some reason I didn't react straight away, so I received an egg in the back of the head". It is these moments which encourage me to write military history.

I believe we should write of Emily Borrett of WA. Her husband was weakened by WWI and died prematurely. They had three sons and a daughter. Arnold and Frederick both flew bombers in WWII, Fred was shot down and buried in Nigeria, Arnold is buried on an island off the Dutch coast. These places could scarcely be found on the atlas and their mother would never be able to visit either grave. The light disappeared from Emily's eyes.

John and Brian Winterbon both joined as aircrew. John was 21 when he was shot out of the skies over Europe and Brian was 18 when his aircraft exploded in the Pacific. Hilda and Ken Winterbon had lost both their children and the family just disappeared.

The Galligan family was another deeply affected by war. They were typical of those who travelled from County Cork, Ireland, gambling on a better life in a country they knew so little about and on the other side of the world. After a sea journey that must have felt like an

eternity for those who sailed in steerage, they alighted in Queensland for a life so entirely different. The lush and rich soils of the Darling Downs beckoned and they settled on a farm near Pittsworth. John Patrick Galligan joined the Queensland police force. He and his wife Emma revelled in a life which evolved around Roman Catholicism, family and hard work. A son Jack died in infancy but they became the very proud parents of four boys and a daughter. Son "Pat" proved an excellent student, a talented athlete, but it was his artistic abilities for which he was most accredited. He wrote poetry from an early age, played the piano and began to compose his own music, and his paintings were created with flare. He realised how fortunate he was to continue his education because the Depression meant his older brothers left school early to help support the Galligan family. His poems reflected the optimism of youth and his love of the Australian bush.

In 1942 he felt he should follow his brother Ted into the RAAF to fight a war his nation had not started and volunteer for the same Air Gunner mustering. On 28 June 1943 Lancaster ED307 of 44 (Rhodesia) Sqn, took off to attack Cologne. F/S Patrick James Galligan (425298) and his crew had been with the Squadron a mere four days, and this was their first operation. At 0254 on 29 June, Lancaster ED307 was shot out of the sky by a night fighter. Parts of the Lancaster were spread over a large area, three completely charred bodies were found in the cockpit another three lay in the immediate vicinity, whilst further away another body lay disintegrated amongst pine trees. The initial RAAF letter to Pat's parents said their 21-year-old son "had been lost while on an operational flight in the Middle East" not the Netherlands. His parents were spared the grisly details that there was little left of their son just "a small amount of charred remains and ashes. ... a piece of clothing ... a neck band of a shirt" and a pair of "flying boots size 8".

For the Galligan family the pain was not yet over. F/S Ted Galligan (425149) was part of an RAF 623 Stirling crew tasked to bomb Berlin on the night of 31 August/1 September 1943 but the Stirling was hit by flak on the outward journey and disintegrated. The Galligan family had paid dearly in this war. It was decided to publish Pat's poems in a book titled fittingly *To Those Who Survive*. Pat's final poem was very different from those he wrote prior to the war:

There's sadness on my soul,
For now I fear, the future near,
That death may be my goal.
The lights of earth have lost their mirth,

Dim for war's tragedy,
Whose spotlights rake the skies and make
Battlefields there for me.
The friendly moon is now no boon
New hail drops form the clouds
Hate-lightnings form in this new storm:
Our planes become our shrouds.
But melodies are memories;
You'll hear them should not I,
And peace again will come to men –
For this we stake to die.

The book was likely both comforting and disheartening for his mother Emma because of the ever present question was “just what could her gifted son have achieved, had he lived”. Emma Galligan had lost a son in infancy and two in a war. Emma Galligan suffered poor health and died in 1957. On her Australian tombstone were engraved the names of her two sons who had fought and died in a war in Europe.

As a military historian I write about campaigns, weapons of war, Air Marshals, but invariably that is the easiest part. Researching the personal part of RAAF history is difficult, poignant and disarming. I was interviewing Lionel Rattle. He had brought out a favourite photo of him standing by a Sydney swimming pool with his hero, his elder brother William. Lionel was 87 years old, and he began to cry and said to me: “You know you are the first person in all these years who has asked me how much I have missed my brother”. My lasting impression was of Lionel standing on the steps of his home clutching his brother's camera.

Elizabeth Webby does not remember her father at all. George Loder left Australia when his wife Betty was pregnant. He was based in England when his daughter was due to be born and wrote to Betty: “It will be a lovely baby and if it grows into as sweet and wonderful a woman as you my own darling, its father will be as happy as can be”. George and his crew died in the skies over Europe. The daughter and her mother were presented with his DFC by the Duchess of Gloucester. A piece of metal and ribbon, a poor replacement for a husband and a father.

Beverley Anderson has named her bed and breakfast in Wagin, Western Australia, after the place of her father's birth. The Devesons were a picture perfect family. Eddie volunteered for aircrew and never came home. Beverley is a very accomplished woman, she has raised a family, had a full career as a master chef and function venue manager, and she apologises for the tears that still come when she speaks of her father, because he was only ever a grainy photo.

Jim Chigwidden of Broken Hill couldn't bring himself to look at the camera when he was holding his brother Jack's photo. Jack hated the pits of Broken Hill and for him the war was his only chance of escape. And it was, in the beginning exciting as he travelled the world when overseas travel was only for the very rich. Jack Chigwidden met the Queen and Princess Elizabeth, but he was shot down and killed over the Dutch city of Tilburg.

And this is not where the history ends. Anne Marie Vossen was a member of the Dutch underground. When the war ended she decided to care for the graves of Allied servicemen, including that of Jack Chigwidden of Broken Hill. At 86 she even visited the Chigwidden family around the world and spoke at the Broken Hill RSL. Today Tilburg archivist Gerrit Kobes ensures that Jack Chigwidden and other Australian aircrew are not forgotten.

I have written of Harry Chinn. His brother Richard told me that once Harry was piloting bombers he wrote home to Richard saying: "You don't want to do this, I don't wish my little brother to do this". Harry was shot down in June 1942. Richard Chinn suggested I visit Andries Meijer in the Dutch town of Noordwolde. Andries was a boy when the Germans occupied his town. He has forever looked after the graves of Harry Chinn and his crew. When I left the gravesite I said to Andries: "Thank you for taking care of our boys". Andries smiled and answered: "They were your boys, now they are ours and we shall take care of them".

This international link is military history.

I should like now to focus again on this Margaret Hadfield painting because it IS truly RAAF art and speaks volumes. In the left hand corner is a lad named Lionel Gibbs from Griffiths, New South Wales. Lionel was fascinated by flight and built a glider which actually made it into the air off the family property before crashing below. Lionel's bomber was blown up. The glider now hangs in the Griffith Pioneer Village, a fitting tribute to the man who built it and the family he left behind. Some years ago the Gibbs family were traced by the family of a Dutch farmer. The farmer had found Lionel's body, and carefully removed the Australian's

head gear, placed it in a tin and buried it. He just believed the aviator's family might like it one day and that it should not fall into the hands of others.

On the early evening of the day before Christmas 1944 six Australians, aged between 20 and 25 should have been standing in an Aussie backyard drinking a cold beer and burning sausages on the barbie. Their conversation should have been about the Boxing Day test and how the Aussies would pummel the Poms into early submission. Instead these young men with bright futures were at RAF Binbrook being briefed for an operation to bomb rail yards at Cologne. Their Lancaster exploded near the Dutch town of Oostelbeers. Margaret and I found their graves in the small Roman Catholic Churchyard. The white tombstones were stark, but there was also so much colour, in the flowers, foliage, and small trinkets that adorned the freshly raked soil. This is the work of the grade seven class of St Joseph School, Oostelbeers. Joke van Ham is the teacher who ensures each year her St Joseph School students learn everything about these young men; that they care for the graves and commemorate birthdays. Ninety-year old John Skarratt in the nation on the other side of the world speaks tenderly of Michael, the Lancaster pilot: "You know our mother never recovered from losing Michael, Michael was the very best of us". But John has been greatly consoled by the reverence shown by young Dutch students and the small sign they placed in front reading "Bedankt" (Thank you).

We continue to share the history of our RAAF Bomber aircrew with those overseas because it is their history also. It was Tilburg Archivist Gerrit Kobes who taught me about FO Jack Stewart Nott from Armidale, New South Wales, seen on the front right side of Margaret's painting. Jack has no tombstone. He was the only Australian and only survivor in an RAF Halifax crew which took off on the night of 16/17 June 1944 to bomb Sterkrade. Jack was taken in by the Dutch Underground and moved eventually with a Canadian and an English airmen to the safe house of 60-year-old Tilburg resident "Coba" Pulskens. The German police were tipped off and raided the house. The three airmen were shoved into the backyard and machine gunned. To hide the crime the bodies were cremated. Coba was sent to a concentration camp and she was gassed. After the war the Dutch turned in those guilty of the murder of the three airmen and they were hanged. A memorial was erected to Coba near her home and later another opposite bearing the names of the three airmen. Jack's son Tony was a special guest at the unveiling.

RAAF history is also the story of the human spirit, and I have sat in the company of giants, men who survived Prisoner of War camps. Aircrew like Albert Stopard who was determined not to submit and that he would return to a better life. Albert kept a book which he titled "My trip overseas". He pestered POWs of many nationalities until he found an artist who agreed to paint his eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Noel. This was his most treasured possession and he clutched it close on his return home. He married Noel. When I spoke to them they had been married 65 years and the painting is still the most treasured possession.

RAAF history endures, indeed flourishes, within younger generations. They research and respect the service and sacrifice of their relatives. Ina Emrose had two boys, Bob the eldest joined the air force and was killed. Phil served in the RAN. Phil's son Mick has visited Bob's grave in Holland on his father's behalf.

The Delacour family could well be called a tribe. There were twelve children and I have no idea how many grandchildren but they proudly huddled around the table strewn with everything they had traced and found about Bertie the brother, uncle and great uncle. It was a nephew who gave me his uncle's last letter and this working class Aussie bloke, said quietly "I have read this letter many times and it still moves me to tears".

I should like to end with this letter, the one written by Bertie Delacour because this is what I believe is RAAF history just as much as the aircraft, the tactics, the strategy, the operations, and the commanders, and it is the sort of material which drives me on to write more and Margaret Hadfield to paint.

Dear Mum and Dad,

I hope you never get this, for if you do, it means I did not return from the operation I am about to set out on.

I have no feeling of premonition – nothing at all, but the reason I'm writing this is an expression of gratitude to you, which I want you to know I feel very much.

I've often wondered how I was so lucky to be born to such parents as you and Dad. No other mother in the entire world could have been so good, kind or understanding, or, to sum it up in one word GRAND as you have been to all of us ... And the same to Dad. Together such parents in this whole, wide, wicked world of ours could never be found.

Do not grieve over me too much Dad and Mum. Oh I know you will grieve and the pain in your heart will burn badly for a while, but please Mum and Dad, remember I've died the way so countless numbers of other fellows are dying every day on this earth. I am just merely your contribution to a better, cleaner, freer world. May you obtain that world Mum. And again remember it is you who are left behind who are the real heroes not us who die. It is you who bear the sacrifice, so grin and bear it and remember that famous motto "time heals all wounds". Yes time will erase that burn from your heart Mum and then, you and Dad and the family shall know that what you suffered was after all just a minor affair, an everyday happening in this world.

I will not say goodbye Mum for it is not goodbye for one day we shall all be again united in a much better land than this.

So I'll Only Say

For the Present

Lots of Love to you all,

From Your loving son,

Bert.