



MILITARY HISTORY AND
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THE ANGRY SKY

AUSTRALIA'S AIR WAR OVER EUROPE



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THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE
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The Angry Sky Conference Opening Address

Professor Weston Arthur Bate, OAM

We are here because the sky during the Second World War was the angriest it will ever be. There will be no more thousand bomber raids, which came at a rare moment in the history of warfare. Nothing like them could have happened before, yet they were soon superseded. We can think of the Lancaster as “the last of the many”.

And I am here because the Empire Air Training Scheme was so successful that I was kept waiting for a year in England, flying training aircraft again, before going to Operational training. I acclimatised by flying Tiger Moths in the Thames Valley and Airspeed Oxfords over the beautiful Cotswolds.

By the time our crew converted to Lancasters, the European war was over. Lucky me! In those perilous times, I had three RAAF gap years in which to find out that I wanted to teach and to write.

Bomber crews were formed accidentally, democratically, when a hundred or so of the warriors’ musterings were gathered together to sort out who would “dice with death” with whom. I see them as unique. What other service had such a small, independent fighting unit? We were an individualistic collective, close knit, with complementary tasks, depending on each other. When on a squadron, crews were suspended between two worlds, the local, the civil and relaxed, and the tension of operations.

Was survival chance or skill? And was the skill more that of men, or machines, or systems? The war produced extraordinary efforts to improve the hardware, leading to jets, rockets, the atom bomb and now drones. I thought it marvellous that Ralph, our navigator, could use the “G Box” to tell me I was over the runway.

Chance or skill? Don Charlwood observed that his pilot, Geoff Maddern, kept to the middle of the bomber stream. It is on record that the heaviest losses were suffered by inexperienced crews. Could the administration have done anything about that?

I am looking forward to answers to my questions today. How, Peter Stanley, do we measure Australia's part? Most of us were given away to the RAF, as the senior partner in charge of the Empire force. Was that the best thing for us and for the war effort?

What a moving topic Kathryn Spurling has chosen. My mind moves to the fate of men from the streets around me in Mont Albert. Where, I wonder, do George Jones, Jack Bird and Frank Cracknell lie? Older than me, they went; and grew not old.

I revere Peter Isaacson, who flew Queenie low over the base at Mallala, where we were learning to fly the Lancaster's gentle ancestor, the Avro Anson. How does one measure aircrew resolve? Was it fatalism or patriotism? Consider the raw deal of the war, that meant that allied crews had to spend many hours over enemy territory. How did they cope? To what extent was survival luck or skill? And how troubled were they by the terrible effects of bombing cities? I was struck by Don Charlwood's nagging concern about the ethics of attacking civilians. But how else could the war be won and civilisation preserved?

I am very interested in Suzanne Evans' discussion of EATS. I believe that it was vital, and remember the quality of our training, in the hands of men like future test captain, Ian Johnson, and all-round sportsman, Mac Holten. How on earth were there so many qualified pilots, despite immense casualties, that I was sent back onto Tigers and Oxfords in 1944? A measure of our sophistication was offered by an American Flying Fortress crew, who landed at our Cotswold base and approached the control tower with, "Say, where are we?"

As a result of the Scheme, without losing Australian identity, we were crewed with men from Britain and the other dominions as what could have been called an "Empire Flying Force". Each mixed crew was a symbol of the united effort. I counted myself lucky, though, that in the scramble of crewing a familiar face from my school days appeared in the key role of the wireless operator.

I don't suppose that Xavier Fowler's treatment of commemoration, which at last has found room for tributes to the men of Bomber Command, will focus on the lack of appreciation of The Odd Bods (those of us not in RAAF squadrons) who were the majority of Australians in those dangerous operations. They were victims of the Australian government's decision to put them under RAF command.

It will be interesting to hear about Coastal Command and its iconic Short Sunderlands, longer hours in the air than anyone, and vulnerable. All aircrew, of course, aspired to be warrior-types like those Cyril Ayris is to talk about.

Never before or after have so many of them taken to a never so angry sky.