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## AUSTRALIA'S AIR WAR OVER EUROPE



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# **The Emerging Commemoration of Bomber Command in Australia**

## **Mr Xavier Fowler**

In the decades after the Second World War the Australians who served in Bomber Command experienced a complex relationship with Australia’s popular memory of World War Two. Thanks largely to the dispersing effects of the Empire Air Training Scheme and prominence of the Pacific War in post-war remembrance, adequate public understanding and recognition never truly occurred. This complicated commemoration was augmented by the overall decline of the standing of Anzac during the 1960s and sadly, the 4,000 Australians lost in the skies over Europe remained unknown to the country they so valiantly served. By the 1980s, however, an awareness and appreciation of these men commenced to grow; and soon after the turn of the millennium they were being recognised in new memorials both in Australia and the United Kingdom. Undoubtedly, Bomber Command awareness has begun to resurface and finally become a significant part of Australia’s rich military history, almost 70 years after the final bombs were dropped.

The re-remembering of Bomber Command, however, is not an isolated phenomenon. In 2002, Hank Nelson likened the forgetting of Bomber Command to that of the Australian prisoners of the Japanese during the 1960s and 1970s. But despite a renewal in interests in prisoners of war in the 1980s, Nelson observed that, ‘there was no parallel revival in interest in the Australians who had fought in Bomber Command.’ Nelson continued to address Australians ‘forgetting’ Bomber Command as a problem of particular weight:

Most Australians do not know that the names of 1,400 men commemorated at the Air Force Memorial in Runnymede, or those honoured at Lincoln Cathedral in England. No Australian Prime Minister visits those sites, locates the deaths of the men of Bomber Command in Australian history and says that it is from them, that ‘we have chosen to draw our inspiration’.

Nelson’s assertion that the men of Bomber Command had been publically forgotten from the 1960s, until his own *Chased by the Sun* in 2002, appears quite valid. No national memorial for Australian Bomber Command veterans would be constructed until 2005. Historical analysis was limited to the Official Histories. While In 2001, the Australian government approved a \$25,000 compensation grant to ex-prisoners of war of the Japanese and their

widows, yet the ex POWs of the Germans, many of whom were Bomber Command veterans, were neither compensated or even mentioned.

Indeed, this belief that Bomber Command had been forgotten or snubbed within the context of Australia’s military history had already been observed by others. Speaking at a conference marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 1995, Dr John Mordike of the RAAF Air Power Studies Centre reverberated Chief of the Air Staff David Evans, when he quoted: ‘Australians are really not aware of the contribution of the Australian Air Force during World War II. It irks me to find that everyone that sets foot in this country knows about Gallipoli and Tobruk and we have a prime minister who makes sure we know about Kokoda. But very few people know about the Air Force’s contribution.’ Mordike claimed that these comments in particular were directed specifically at the Australian Air Force’s participation in the war against Germany and Italy.

This academic awareness of such continuing public ignorance only reflected what Bomber Command veterans were already feeling. In 1997, Arnold Easton of 467 squadron wrote bitterly of Australia’s failure to remember Bomber Command, expressing his frustration at not being recognised appropriately for the pain and suffering endured during service. In response to Mordike’s question, ‘Why is the memory so dim?’ Easton sternly replied:

My memory is not dim – far from it. I recall vividly my days in Bomber Command...the horror of seeing other Lancaster bombers spiralling downwards, on fire. Yes I remember it well. I remember the bonds that were forged. What a responsibility for ones so young! But they didn’t shirk their duty. And when one of your mates doesn’t return to base, and you wait... that’s like losing part of yourself that night, never to be regained. Lest we forget...how could we forget? AUSTRALIA REMEMBERS

As Easton’s comments reflect, it was left largely to the Australian Bomber Command veterans to achieve some level of recognition during what Mordike described as an era of ‘national amnesia’.

Since the war itself, and with little assistance from other entities, Bomber Command veterans had sought ways to sustain and build recognition of their significant contributions to winning the war. Reunion organisations such as the ‘Odd-bods’ went a long way to preserving yearly connections amongst the men. Other private gatherings did much of the same, such as in

1973 when a band of 83 Australian ex-460 squadron members ventured to Binbrook, England, to unveil a memorial to the 1,000 men fellow squadron member killed in action. Individual veterans also published their own memoirs: such as Paul Brickhill's *The Dam Busters* (1951), Don Charlwood's *No Moon Tonight* (1956), and John Beede-Cusacks *They Hosed Them Out* (1965), and while these were released rather sporadically in the immediate post-war decades, the influx of memoirs during the 1990's suggested some gathering of momentum as veterans entered their own retirement.

Indeed, the publication of several books and documentaries in the 1980s represented this growing willingness and determination of veterans to have their stories told. The 1986 ABC documentary *Wings of the Storm*, written by Howard Griffiths and narrated by RAAF veteran Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, compiled hours of interviews with war veterans for public viewing. This two-part documentary was one of the first major mediums to focus solely on Australia's contribution to Bomber Command. Broader historical coverage of Australia's involvement in the strategic-air offensive also began to emerge. John Robertson's *Australia at War 1939-1945* (1981) and John McCarthy's *A Last Call of Empire* (1988) were important; though the most significant of these publications was Peter Stanley's *Air Battle: Europe, 1939-1945* (1987). Not only did it achieve wider circulation as it featured bicentennial Time-Life series *Australians at War*, but it gave readers a lengthy analysis and critique of Australia's involvement in Bomber Command's war for the first time since John Herington's *Official Histories* in 1963.

Unfortunately, however, according to Nelson, only Charlwood's and Beede's original works had reached a wider audience by the beginning 21<sup>st</sup>. While not fully yet entering the consciousness of the Australian public, we can discern from this evidence a renewed and more insistent determination amongst Bomber Command veterans to be recognised, and the historical mindfulness to inform the general public of their stories. Yet veterans and historians still lacked the capacity to have those stories embraced more widely. It was largely the efforts of successive Australian governments to reassert Anzac, the once mighty pillar of Australian cultural identity, to the forefront of the public's consciousness that brought recognition of Bomber Command in its train.

Ken Inglis observed the rising attendances of Anzac day ceremonies during the 1980s and 1990s as the beginning of a resurgent Anzac commemoration within Australian society. This return was born equally from both organic developments and orchestrated interventions.

Thus, we need to seek the intersections between private effort and the government initiatives that fuelled the Anzac resurgence. Inglis nominated a variety of organic factors, including the 'surge' of Australians to recover their family histories, the steady decline of ex-serviceman and women allowing current day generations to sculpt the legend in their own image, and the need for a 'civil religion' in a 'post-Christian society'.

These occurrences coincided with Mark McKenna's contention that since the 1980s successive Australian governments, in response to the growing controversy over Australia Day and its relations with Indigenous issues, have led a campaign to situate Anzac day over Australia Day as its national holiday, effectively facilitating an Anzac Day resurrection from its once impending death. Films such as Peter Weirs *Gallipoli* (1981) and Simon Wincer's *The Lighthorsemen* (1987) encouraged Australians to take pride in their Anzac heritage once again. Books published on Australia at war increased from less than 60 in the 1970s, to over 250 in the 1980s, and 360 in the 1990s, as governments invested heavily in enhancing student awareness of Anzac through voluminous and sophisticated curriculum materials, websites and virtual tours of battlefields. The Australia Remembers Campaign in 1995, despite its inclination towards Pacific War memory and lacking recognition of Bomber Command in general, undoubtedly 'struck a chord within the community'. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century Anzac had once again become significant within Australian society, and for the men of Bomber Command, this proved to be their ticket back into the hearts and minds of the Australian nation.

Despite the activities noted above, a flourish of popular and academic works during the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the first real sign of the rapid emergence of Bomber Command commemoration within Australia. The first of these new examinations was *G for George* (2000) by Michael V. Nelmes and Ian Jenkins. Although primarily focused on the G for George Lancaster bomber, the book drew attention to the Australians of Bomber Command generally, offering significant detail on the strategic bombing war over Germany and Australia's contribution to it, even being dedicated itself as 'a memorial to RAAF Bomber Crews', suggesting the absence of a physical one.

But it was two years later where the Australians of Bomber Command finally received their long awaited recognition in the literary world. Hank Nelson's *Chased by the Sun: Courageous Australians in Bomber Command in World War II* (2002) finally delivered a broad yet uniquely personal insight into the 11,000 Australians who served within Bomber

Command. It does not follow the progression of the war chronologically, but rather through individuals' experiences of enlistment and early training, travels to England, organisation of aircrews and deployment to squadrons and finally experiences on operations. Nelson eschewed the attempt at any kind of complete history, perhaps noting the struggles of Official historian John Herington, but he achieved in describing an Australian contribution to the bombing war outside of just the RAAF squadrons.

The great void of historiographical attention afforded to Bomber Command, which was left in the wake of the *Official Histories*' release in the early 1960s, is more than being made up for today. Michael Enright's *Flyers Far Away: Australian Aircrew in Europe During World War II* (2009), Kathryn Spurlings *A Grave Too Far Away: A Tribute to Australians in Bomber Command Europe* (2012), the Richard Reid authored and Department of Veteran Affairs published *Bomber Command: Australians in World War II* (2012) and Peter Rees' *Lancaster Men: The Aussie heroes of Bomber Command* (2013) have all been produced in the last four years.

Not only did these works bring to light the extraordinary story of the Australians in Bomber Command, but many of them also detailed briefly the commemorative history within Australia, in particular Nelson, Rees and Reid's works. What they could barely see, however, was the almost frenzied pace of their collective work in thrusting the bombing war back into the popular consciousness.

Awareness of Australian participation in Bomber Command was further enhanced at the AWM's 2003 Air War Europe Conference. A series of speakers detailed many aspects of the European air-war, including famed Bomber Command veteran Don Charlwood and historians Hank Nelson and Peter Stanley. *More significantly, the day's festivities included the return to display of the famous and fully restored Lancaster, 'G for George', and its usage in the the Striking by Night exhibition. AWM historian Peter Burness commented that the exhibition, and the aircraft at its centre, 'enables the stories of these men to be retold. In particular, new younger audiences will be able to understand something of the bomber crewman's experience through the use of modern exhibition techniques.'*

As historians finally began to recognise the men's contribution, so too did the Australian government. The Department of Veterans Affairs in particular has been vital to assisting direct renewed public awareness of Bomber Command. In 2007, Veteran Affairs Minister Bruce Billson, in response to the demands of ex German POWs, extended the \$25,000

compensation grant to ex-prisoners of the Germans and Italians. The DVA has also sponsored the Australians at War Film Archive, which contains hundreds of interviews with former Bomber Command veterans. Most importantly, however, the DVA has sought to educate younger generations on the unique nature of Bomber Command. Along with its 2012 publication, *Bomber Command: Australians in World War II*, came an 'educational resource' seeking to 'encourage student exploration of Bomber Command during World War II.' According to the activity booklet it aims at teaching Year 10 level students about Australia's Bomber Command involvement.

Indeed, recognition of Australia's participation in Bomber Command's war over Europe has extended quite broadly, typified in *the Australian* newspapers sponsoring of the 2013 Bomber Command and RAAF in the UK squadron tour.

Renewed official attention, however, should not suggest to us that growing public awareness is entirely manufactured. Burgeoning commemoration, centring on new memorials in 2005 and 2012, suggests significant involvement from veterans and their families in having their experiences recognised.

The 2005 Australian Bomber Command memorial, located in the Australian War Memorials Sculpture Garden, was developed following the allocation of \$100,000 by the Federal Government in funding, but undoubtedly would not have come about if not for the efforts of veterans from the Royal Australian Air Force Association, who had been working for several years to develop and design the sculpture. It is dedicated to all Australians who flew in Bomber Command and attracted a crowd of over 2,000 at its unveiling including many former veterans. Speaking at the unveiling ceremony, President of the RAAF Association and Bomber Command veteran, retired Air Commodore Geoff Michael, said the memorial was a 'fitting tribute' to those who served with the UK-based command during the war. Its final dedication, which some veterans believe had been a 'long time coming', cannot be underestimated within the context of Bomber Command memory and its emergence within current Australian society.

The importance of the memorial is attested to by the annual ceremony initiated around it, the Bomber Command Commemorative Day Foundations Annual Ceremonial Day. Inaugurated in June 2008, and occurring across all states in Australia and various countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Canada, it now ranks as the third most attended ceremony at the Australian War Memorial, behind Anzac day and Remembrance Day. At the initial ceremony

in 2008, the then Governor General of Australia, Major General Michael Jeffery, addressed the crowd, describing the immense contribution of Bomber Command to the war effort, stating, ‘the courage and self-sacrifice demonstrated by the Australians and all members of Bomber Command during World War II was of the highest order,’ going on to say the ceremony, ‘will ensure that successive generations of Australians continue to understand and appreciate their dedicated and distinguished service, and their sacrifice.’ Veteran Rollo Kingsford-Smith commented at the ceremony that it was ‘very gratifying’ to see Bomber Command was ‘finally being recognised.’

While the 2005 memorial solidifies the growing awareness of Bomber Command within this country, the 2012 RAF Bomber Command Memorial in London’s Green Park reminds us that the phenomenon charted above is a part of a much broader experience of remembering Bomber Command internationally. The 3.5 million pound memorial, funded by members of the public among others, was officially unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II on 28<sup>th</sup> June before more than 6,000 attendees and is dedicated to the sacrifices of all Bomber Command airmen who gave their lives in defeating Germany, as well as to the civilians of all nations who were killed underneath the raiders.

The Australian Government’s Department of Defence sent an official party of some 31 Australian Bomber Command veterans, who were assisted each with a \$3,000 grant to help with costs for the long trip. However, more than 100 former Australian Bomber Command veterans witnessed the unveiling in separate parties.

The moving ceremony was reported widely back home in Australia, especially in terms of veterans’ responses. 89 year old Canberra veteran Frank Ward, commented, ‘seeing the memorial and being surrounded by all these old codgers, it made me feel nostalgic.’ While Steve Flood believed the memorial was a ‘fitting tribute’ to those who fought with Bomber Command. Apart from veterans’ satisfaction that their experiences had been acknowledged, the event also prompted declarations that Australians would not forget. Australian Air Marshal, Geoff Browns, insisted that the memorial itself was, ‘further evidence that Bomber Command will not fade from our collective memory.’

Despite its popularity amongst many veterans, however, much in the same way the 1992 Arthur Harris statue was met with mixed reception, this memorial too has faced controversies. A lack of forthcoming funds threatened its existence to such an extent that the veterans themselves had to commit some £700,000 to the project. The memorial also aroused



objections among Germans, in particular the citizens of Dresden, who found the idea of a Bomber Command memorial offensive to the victims of Allied bombing raids. Dresden Mayor Helma Orosz went so far as to suggest the memorial would 'not be a part of the culture of reconciliation' between England and Germany. While the memorial's dedication to victims of the bombers, as well as to the crews, somewhat eased tensions, many in Europe still remain uncomfortable with the idea of honouring Bomber Command's contribution to the war.

The 2005 and 2012 memorials are truly indicative of the continuing growth in Bomber Command memory, especially in Australia, but what they also highlight is the continuing complexity inherent with honouring such contentious figures of the Allied war effort. This complication is inherent, not only in the controversy surrounding the morality of Bomber Command's campaign, but also in fact that both the 2005 and 2012 memorials consciously aim to commemorate a transnational force, when traditionally, war memorials are dedicated to national contingents. Perhaps the sheer time it took to produce these memorials can be put down to this problem, and not just the widely accepted belief that the immorality of the bombing campaign was solely responsible. What they also remind us is that despite renewed interest; the complicated public and private memory experienced by Bomber Command veterans in the immediate post-war decades has not altogether vanished because of a sudden surge in awareness.

Whatever controversies it stirred, recognition of Australia's Bomber Command contribution followed the 2012 dedication quickly. When discussing the relative forgetting of the Australians of Bomber Command, Hank Nelson once wrote that no Australian Prime Minister had looked to these men and declared, it is from them that 'we have chosen to draw our inspiration.' In response to the 2012 Memorials dedication, however, Prime Minister Julia Gillard made an impassioned address to Parliament, finally acknowledging the Australians of Bomber Command:

So often when we reflect on the history of the Second World War, we think of the remarkable men of Fighter Command. But we should also remember their brother pilots of Bomber Command. These men were the bravest of the brave and for decades controversy over the nature of the strategic bombing campaign has obscured the commemoration of the courage of these bomber crews, that is until today. This recognition is long overdue...yet now, 67 years after their final wartime mission, a

wrong is corrected and honour is restored, the final settling of a long overdue debt. The nation says thank you for your service and sacrifice. You gave your best years and all too often you gave your lives. Your valour will never be forgotten.

As for Nelsons contention that unlike the revival in awareness of prisoners of the Japanese in the 1980s, sadly, 'there was no parallel revival in interest in the Australians who had fought in Bomber Command,' it has become all too apparent that, heading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the revival of remembrance so to speak, is clearly underway. The governments push to re-establish Anzac as one of the fundamental pillars of Australian society in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped to pave way for Bomber Command to enter the consciousness of a more receptive Australian public. It could be fair to say that, without government intervention, Bomber Command veterans would certainly still be struggling to have their existence widely remembered today. In 2013 activity continues apace, represented best by the Bomber Command exhibition at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance, currently open now, and even at conferences such as the one we are currently attending today.

The emergence of Bomber Command as a popular subject in Anzac history, however, is not all together surprising, given the common trait among military and popular historians to attach themselves to lesser known campaigns. The prominence of Anzac in Australian society, and the general public's mounting appetite to devour anything warlike, is increasing by the year, and historians have been quick to jump on the bandwagon, and chastise Australians for their neglect. Gallipoli, Kokoda and Tobruk were well known even as the war continued.

After their celebration, as Hank Nelson was to point out, came the popular consumption of Australian experiences as POWs under the Japanese, re-surfacing during the 1980s after their own period of forgetting. Indeed, 'forgotten Anzacs' appear more popular now than ever, inherent in publications such and Robin Corfield's *Don't Forget Me Cobber: The Battle of Fromelles* (2000) and Peter Ewers *Forgotten Anzacs: The Campaign in Greece* (2008). Now it seems, the emergence of Bomber Command today could be understood as simply being just 'the next cab off the rank', in regard to the 'forgotten Anzac' trend.

Indeed, this governmental and at times historiographical capitalisation on everything and anything Anzac can be detrimental to the appropriate remembrance of war veterans. Michael Enright once noted that the lack of commemoration of Australia's involvement in the European air war might be, 'as much a pity as it might prove to be a blessing. Given the

current carnival state imposed on the remembering of Gallipoli and the gratuitous attention grabbing it is subjected to by the media, politicians and civic dignitaries, the remaining aircrew might breathe easier without the attention.' Still, if you were to ask the men themselves, it is hard to assume that they would hold any resentment toward such attention. One veteran, when asked what is it they truly wanted their legacy to be? Replied simply, 'to be remembered...That's it. Just sometimes to be remembered.'

But there is merit to Enright's concerns. The men of Bomber Command represent all that is contradictory in war. They displayed incredible courage and determination to achieve success on operations, whilst showing that unique devotion to one another experienced only in combat. Yet they also showcased our capacity as human beings to commit wanton death and destruction on one another, and our indeed willingness to do so. They break down the concept of war as a struggle between good and evil and epitomize the capacity for both the exceptional and unpleasant qualities in ourselves. American Nobel Prize laureate William Faulkner once declared, 'the human heart in conflict with itself ... only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.' The Australians of Bomber Command reflect this moral conflict in all of us and not the stereotypical and manufactured ideal of the faultless Anzac 'digger'. And for that reason alone, it is important to continue the study and memory of such unique figures in Australian history, not as glorified warriors, but as complex human beings in a complex war. The end of the generation of aircrew who served in and survived World War II is now approaching', and the responsibility of remembrance is now placed upon our shoulders. But after all that these men sacrificed, their youth, their security, their family, the lives of their friends and for over 4,000 their own life itself, surely it couldn't be asking too much of us to simply remember them, lest we forget again.

Thank you.