

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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BATTLE OF BRITAIN AIR CAMPAIGN - THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

The Battle of Britain, fought between July and October 1940, is one of the most famous air campaigns ever conducted—so famous, in fact, that it is still commemorated annually in parts of Australia, not least because of the involvement of Australians in what is widely seen as a defining moment in British history. According to accounts published in Britain, there were 21 Australian fighter pilots who took part, and of these 14 were killed in action. There has long been a problem with this statistic, however, because the Roll of Honour at Westminster Abbey records the names of 24 Australians who were killed during the period of the battle. The discrepancy stems from a misunderstanding of what the Battle of Britain was, and what the air campaign that it represented actually entailed.

Although the battle is often perceived as a simple, classic struggle for air superiority, in fact the Royal Air Force (RAF) at the time was engaged in a much broader campaign aimed at disrupting German preparations for an invasion of the British homeland. Accordingly, it was the whole of the RAF—including Bomber and Coastal Command, not just Fighter Command—that contributed to the ultimate victory in what was, quite literally, a battle for Britain's survival. Because of this, when calculating the number of deaths suffered in the conflict it is necessary to include aircrew who perished in circumstances involving other than fighter combat alone.

The number of Australians serving across the RAF at the start of the battle is believed to be probably no more than about 450. Within this group, the number who wore RAAF uniform would have been very small indeed at that stage of World War II, as Australia had only a single squadron based in England. This was the RAAF's No 10 Squadron, which in July 1939 had sent personnel to take delivery of new Sunderland flying boats and was subsequently ordered to stay and serve alongside the RAF after war was declared. It remained the only truly RAAF unit to operate from Britain until the war in Europe ended.

Many of the Australians serving with the RAF, including some who wore RAAF uniform, did so courtesy of a pre-war scheme by which a regular number of pilots for

the RAF were trained by the RAAF at its flying school at Point Cook, Victoria. Under this arrangement, initially up to ten graduates from Point Cook courses (and later more) were sent to England on Short Service Commissions from November 1926, until July 1938 when the RAAF decided that it needed all the pilots it trained to meet its own expansion goals under rearmament plans. Although the intent behind the scheme was to create a reserve pool for the RAAF of trained pilots who would return to Australia after four or five years with the RAF, within a short period the question arose of allowing Australian pilots to pursue permanent careers in the RAF. As a result, no fewer than 149 RAAF-trained pilots had made the transfer by the time the scheme was suspended.



Handley Page Hampden flown by 455 Squadron

At the same time that this scheme operated, the RAF also recruited directly for trainee pilots from Australia. Although the RAAF assisted in running selection boards for applicants, the men accepted had mostly not received prior flying training—either at Point Cook or, in some cases, at all. Nonetheless, it was the products of these two schemes who represented the core of the group of pilots still described as “Australian” during the Battle of Britain. The rest were Australians who directly joined the RAF while working or studying in Britain. In consequence, it also appears that there may have been as many as 29 Australians among the 1495 Fighter Command pilots who defended Britain during the period of the battle.

The employment of the Australian pilots and the nature of the RAF's air campaign is typified by the operations undertaken on 13 August. On this day the Luftwaffe launched 'Adler Tag' (Eagle Day), involving massive and continuous raids intended to destroy Fighter Command

on the ground and in the air. Approximately 15 Australian pilots flying in Fighter Command scrambled with their squadrons across Britain in response to these raids, aimed mainly at the RAF's fighter stations. Throughout the day the Spitfire and Hurricane pilots, guided by radar-directed ground controllers, intercepted raids emanating from Norway, Denmark, Belgium and France. Overall, the day was a disaster for the Luftwaffe, which lost 46 aircraft while destroying only 13 of the RAF's precious fighters. Among the RAF's casualties for the day was an Australian, Flying Officer Richard Glyde of No 87 Squadron, who was lost after intercepting a Junkers Ju 88 bomber.

While Fighter Command was fighting off the German onslaught, Bomber Command was taking the fight to the enemy, striking targets in Germany and, for the first time, in Italy. Also flying missions on 13 August were two Australian pilots, Flight Lieutenant Allen Mulligan and Flying Officer Ellis Ross, operating Handley Page Hampden bombers of No 83 Squadron. These two officers were part of a highly successful attack on the Dortmund-Ems Canal that severed a vital transport route between the Ruhr industrial hub and the North Sea. Both Australians were shot down, with Ross killed and Mulligan being captured. Ross was one of five Australians killed with Bomber Command during the battle, while Mulligan was one of 6 who became prisoners in the same period, out of 47 Australians reportedly serving on RAF bombers.

Bomber Command also conducted attacks on the German invasion fleet that was being assembled in ports along the Channel. By late September 1940, combined attacks had resulted in the destruction of 241 troop transports, barges and tugs. These attacks were not without cost in aircrew and machines. One such casualty was Australian pilot Flight Lieutenant Frederick Flood of No 235 Squadron, killed while escorting an attack on Calais Harbour. The effect of the attacks on the invasion fleet was to reinforce the German belief that no invasion could be mounted while the RAF and the Royal Navy were still operational.

No 10 Squadron, RAAF, flew a considerable number of missions in support of Coastal Command's war effort even before the Battle of Britain was fought. Its main task was securing the western approaches to Britain in order to protect shipping. On 1 July 1940 the

crew of Sunderland P9603 was credited with the unit's first confirmed U-boat "kill", and throughout the Battle of Britain the squadron continued to fly long, arduous sorties, conducting search and rescue missions, convoy escorts and anti-submarine patrols. Apart from No 10 Squadron, another 26 Australians flew with Coastal Command, and of these eight were killed.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the RAF's air campaign proved greater than Germany's ability to mount an invasion of Britain. By 12 October 1940 the German High Command decided that

further preparations for the invasion of Britain were futile. The RAF was still intact, large convoys of ships were still reaching English harbours and the Royal Navy, safe behind a screen of air power, was poised and ready to destroy any invasion fleet that attempted to cross the English Channel. By the time that Germany's Nazi dictator, Adolf Hitler, announced five days later that the invasion was definitely postponed, indefinitely, it was clear that the Battle of Britain had been won.



- *An air campaign is the controlled conduct of a series of interrelated air operations to achieve specified objectives.*
- *The potential scale of an air campaign often makes it the most pervasive in a theatre of operations.*

'Not to have an adequate air force in the present state of the world is to compromise the foundations of national freedom and independence.'

Winston Churchill
House of Commons, 14 March 1933



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