



AUSTRALIAN AIR POWER IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRE, 1942-45

The Navy can lose us the war, but only the RAF can win it. Therefore our supreme effort must be to gain overwhelming mastery of the air. The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of victory. We must therefore develop the power to carry an ever-increasing volume of explosives to Germany, so as to pulverise their entire industry and scientific structure on which the war effort and economic life of the enemy depends, whilst holding him at arm's length from our island.

*– Prime Minister Winston Churchill,
memorandum for the War Cabinet, 3 September 1940.*

From April 1940, Australia was partner in a vast and ambitious scheme to provide trained aircrew to help Britain meet the challenge of defeating German and Italian forces in Europe. By the time the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) was wound up in March 1945, more than 37 000 young Australians had been dispatched to England and taken their place in units across the Royal Air Force (RAF). Under the terms of the EATS Agreement, 17 squadrons were designated as “Royal Australian Air Force” (RAAF) once the number of Australians in them became a majority, although large numbers of Australians continued to serve outside these units, in more than 200 RAF squadrons.

About 10 000 Australian airmen took part in the bombing offensive against Germany, which was perhaps the greatest contribution made by Australia to the Allied war effort. Until the D-Day landings in France in June 1944, RAF Bomber Command was the only means available to Britain to strike deep into the German homeland, suppressing the enemy's war effort and tying up forces in air defence duties that would otherwise have been able to fight against the Russians. The losses from the bomber offensive were heavy and disproportionate. Although the 6500 RAAF airmen who lost their lives in combat during World War II represented about one-fifth of the deaths suffered by all three Australian Services in that conflict, fully 83 per cent of these men (5400) were killed in the European theatre alone. And of those who died in Europe, two-thirds (3486) died while serving with Bomber Command.



Prime Minister John Curtin leaving the Lancaster 'G for George' during his visit to 460 Squadron RAAF in the UK, April 1944, (AWM UK1300).

A total of eight of the squadrons that were nominally-RAAF under the terms of the EATS Agreement ended up serving with Bomber Command—these being Nos 455, 458, 460, 462, 463, 464, 466 and 467. Three of these (455, 458 and 464) spent only a relatively short time with Bomber Command, but 460 and 462 stayed there for their entire existence. As the RAAF's most distinguished heavy bomber unit, 460 Squadron alone lost 1018 aircrew, which effectively meant that the entire unit had been wiped out five times over in the space of three years of combat.

The attacking bombers faced multiple threats, not only from Germany's highly sophisticated night fighter and anti-aircraft defence systems, but from the dangers of flying at night. Mid-air collisions, technical problems, and crew fatigue all contributed to the very high loss rate suffered by Bomber Command. During World War II an average of 2.3 per cent of aircraft were lost on each Bomber Command mission. On one occasion, 95 of 608 aircraft (or 14 per cent) were lost. Whether the results of the bombing campaign justified the appalling loss of life on both sides has been debated ever since.

From March to July 1943, Bomber Command launched an all-out night-time campaign against German industries in the Ruhr Valley. Three RAAF squadrons, Nos 460 and 467 with Lancasters, and No 466 with Halifaxes, took part in these raids. Beginning on 5 March, the offensive virtually eliminated the industrial centres of Dortmund, Dusseldorf and Cologne, and severely damaged Essen and Duisburg. Increasing numbers of

available aircraft and the effectiveness of the Pathfinder Force (PFF) contributed to the success of the campaign. The most famous operation of the “Battle of the Ruhr” was the low-level precision attack conducted by No 617 Squadron of the RAF on the night of 16–17 May, against the Mohne and Eder dams that supplied water and hydro-electric power across the Ruhr and helped control winter flood waters. Thirteen Australians took part in this celebrated ‘Dambuster’ raid. A total of 27 operations were mounted during the Ruhr Valley campaign, during which RAAF squadrons lost 45 aircraft.

In late 1943 Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur (‘Bomber’) Harris, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, planned the Battle of Berlin, involving air operations designed to cripple the German capital and force Germany to capitulate. On 18 November 1943, in cooperation with the daylight bombers of the US Eighth Air Force, Bomber Command launched a campaign of night-time area bombing. The campaign was conducted in winter, when the long nights gave more hours of darkness to cover the bombers on their long trip to Berlin. Four RAAF squadrons—Nos 460, 463, 466 and 467—flew 785 sorties during the 17 operations mounted by Bomber Command.

The bombers battled adverse winter weather and Berlin’s formidable air defences that included anti-aircraft artillery and Luftwaffe night fighters, working in unison with radar and searchlights. The Australian squadrons lost 41 aircraft through enemy action. The high Bomber Command losses lowered the morale of the surviving crews. This, in combination with the increased number of new, inexperienced crews being inducted to cover the losses, led to deteriorating effectiveness of the campaign at an ever-increasing cost in aircrew and aircraft. Berlin did not fall and the campaign concluded indecisively on 24 March 1944.

British doctrine at the beginning of the bomber offensive was overwhelmingly based on area attack, in which entire cities were devastated by high explosives and incendiaries. This policy was necessitated by the lack of target visibility, and poor and inconsistent bomb aiming accuracy. Numerous innovations, technical and tactical, led to a gradual improvement in the accuracy of bombing. The technical innovations included inventions such as the Norden bombsight, H2S radar and Oboe radio guidance. One of the tactical innovations was the formation of PFF, developed and led by Group Captain (later Air Vice-Marshal) Don Bennett, an ex-RAAF Australian, which performed the vital task of marking targets for the attacking bombers. With PFF guidance, the bomber crews were able to increase the percentage



A RAF Bomber Command Lancaster departs for another night mission.

of strikes within five kilometres of the aiming point, from just over 20 per cent in early 1942 to 90 per cent by war’s end.

Rarely have Australian airmen conducted strategic attack operations like those routinely performed by Bomber Command in 1942–45. Undertaking direct attack missions against German targets these aircrews were able to achieve strategic effects far in excess of similarly sized military forces, yet they paid a high price. However, since Australian personnel were widely dispersed within a huge allied structure, they rarely had the opportunity to develop a mature and cohesive doctrinal grasp of air power.

Each year, in early June, a commemoration ceremony is held at the Bomber Command Memorial in the sculpture garden at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, to pay tribute to the steadfast resolve, camaraderie and courage of those who served. This year, the Chief of Air Force will also be attending the dedication of the new Bomber Command Memorial in London’s Green Park on Thursday, 28 June 2012.

Key Points

- *Australia’s initial contribution to the war in Europe was primarily as a training organisation within the EATS.*
- *Australian airmen in Bomber Command made Australia’s greatest contribution to the Allied war effort in the European theatre.*
- *The dispersal of RAAF personnel throughout the RAF severely restricted the development of an Australian air power doctrinal foundation, and limited the sense of national identity.*



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