

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

WING COMMANDER (Retired) FRANCIS “JOHN” LEONARD DOWNING DFC, DFC (US)

***First and to Date, the Only RAAF Pilot to Have his Aircraft Destroyed by a Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM)
Member of the First Crew to Safely Eject from a Canberra Bomber.
First Crew to Photograph the Eye of A Cyclone in the Southern Hemisphere.***



John Downing while an Air Cadet at the Royal Australian Air Force College circa 1954. Image from John Downing.

At RAAF College, training on DH-82 Tiger Moths, John’s first solo was on 21 July 1953. After a final test on the DH-82 on 13 October 1953, John commenced training on Wirraways on 20 October 1953, with his first solo in that aircraft type on 18 March 1954.

Graduating from the RAAF College as a Pilot Officer (General Duties pilot) on 8 December 1954, an entry in John’s flying logbook, made by the then Commandant of the RAAF College, was:

**‘Awarded Wings – Below Average Pilot.
Awarded White Card Rating.’**

Regardless of this assessment, according to John, ‘like everyone else, he wanted to be a fighter pilot’. He got his wish and between February and late June 1955, John was posted to No.2 (Fighter) Operational Training Unit at Williamstown, NSW, where he was trained on the de Havilland Vampire jet fighter, with his first solo in Vampire FB 31 A79-440 on 21 March 1955. John’s summing-up of his fighter pilot training was, ‘*I distinguished myself to a degree that I was then posted on to Dakotas and Lincolns, but at least I had the opportunity.*’

Francis “John” Leonard Downing DFC, DFC (US) was born at Nedlands, W.A. on 19 April 1934. He was the middle of three brothers. His parents were Talbot Albert Walls Downing and Mary Francis Leonard (family name). John’s father was a schoolteacher and served in World War II as an Education Officer on Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) courses.

Most of John’s schooling was received at Bunbury and Albany, WA, including five years at Albany High School. In his words, he received ‘no academic accolades,’ but was a prefect at Albany High and ‘mad on sport’, football and cricket in particular.

Growing up during WWII, John was always interested in the Air Force and joined the Air Training Corps at the age of thirteen, the youngest possible age to join. When John was sixteen, his father, who was by then an ATC instructor, brought home application paperwork for the RAAF College at Point Cook, Victoria. John was successful and began the four-year RAAF College course (No. 4 Course) in 1951.



John at the RAAF Recruiting Office, Perth, receiving his tickets to go to Point Cook RAAF College. (From left to right) John Batchelor, John Downing, Norm Ashworth and Peter Larrard. Recruiting Officer unknown. Image from John Downing.



DH-Vampire A79-440, in which John flew his first jet fighter solo. Pictured mounted on a pole at RAAF Amberley circa 1974. Image from ADF Serials.

John's next posting was as a staff pilot at the School of Air Navigation, RAAF East Sale, for 18 months, commencing July 1955 and flying Dakotas and Lincolns. Trainee Navigators in the rear of the aircraft would be performing navigation exercises, including night Astro-navigation exercises. Some of these flights included navigation between East Sale, Victoria, and Oodnadatta in the far north of South Australia at night and flying low level between East Sale and Pearce, WA.

Between January and July 1957, John attended No.17 Flight Instructor Course at Central Flying School at RAAF Base East Sale, where he trained on the CAC Winjeel and refreshed on the Wirraway, Vampire 33 and Lincoln. He graduated as a Qualified Flying Instructor on 28 June 1957.

John was posted to the RAAF College at Point Cook as a flying instructor between July 1957 and 19 January 1959, instructing on Winjeel and Wirraway aircraft. On his half yearly return of flying hours, completed on 24 January 1958, the Commanding Officer commented that John was 'a capable instructor on basic piston engine training aircraft.'

John still wanted to fly jets and a posting to No.1 (B) Operational Conversion Unit in January 1959, where he undertook No.1 Course 1959, saw him qualify to fly Canberra T4, B20 and Mk 21 aircraft. This was the start of his long association with Canberras which was to span approximately 12 years.

Right: *John's conversion course at No.1 (B) OCU, commencing January 1959. Pictured, from left to right, back row: Peter Kennedy, Barry Prince, John Downing, Tom Thorpe and Frank Murphy. Front row: Allan Pinches, Leo Britt and Norm Herford. Image from John Downing.*



After completing his conversion course, John was posted to No.82 Wing, comprising of No.1 and No. 6 Squadrons and No.1 Bomber OCU at RAAF Base Amberley on 11 May 1959 and he remained there until early December 1962, flying Canberras and as an instructor.

An interesting task John conducted while at No.6 (B) Squadron was to photograph the eye of a Queensland cyclone. On 2 March 1960, Flight Lieutenant John Downing and his navigator, Pilot Officer Greg Sweeting, in Mk 20 Canberra A84-210, took off from Amberley to photograph the eye of a cyclone off the Queensland coast.

Right: *Canberra A84-210. The aircraft used by John Downing and Greg Sweeting to photograph the eye of the cyclone on 2 March 1960. Image via Martin Edwards, ADF Serials Image Gallery.*



They located the cyclone approximately 250 miles east-northeast of Brisbane and about 120 miles south of its plotted position. As they neared the anticipated centre of the cyclone, they saw the huge concentric circles of cloud more than 100 miles away on the starboard wing. They flew over the 20 mile long 'eye' of the cyclone

but flying into the cyclone at 30,000 feet failed to give a good photographic impression of its huge saucer-shape banks of clockwise-swirling cloud, so John banked the Canberra to allow the photograph to be taken. He said, 'We were pretty lucky to get the picture', said John, explaining that the 180lb camera which took the oblique image was normally used for vertical photography.

In the Queensland Times of 3 March 1960, John was reported as saying, 'We were too interested to find the sight frightening.... At 30,000 feet altitude from which the Canberra viewed the awesome sight the air was perfectly smooth.'

Approximately three months later, on the night of Friday, 10 June 1960, Greg Sweeting was a passenger on TAA flight 538, a Fokker Friendship VH-TFB, that crashed into the sea off Mackay, Queensland, during a night landing approach, killing all 29 on board. This was one of the worst civil aviation crashes in Australian history.

Post World War II, No.2 SQN was the first Australian operational unit to be equipped with the Canberra bomber. On 1 April 1955 the British Government announced the formation of a Commonwealth Strategic Reserve Force, to be based in Malaya. The RAAF contribution was to be two fighter squadrons and a bomber squadron. For the bomber component, nine No.2 SQN Canberras were deployed to Butterworth, Malaya, with the first aircraft arriving on 28 June 1955 and the remainder in early to mid-July. No.2 SQN Canberras primary role was to provide a bombing capability in Southeast Asia, as part of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, and a secondary role of supporting ground forces engaging communist terrorists in the Malayan jungle. Bombing in Malaya used the Target Direction Post (TDP) technique where a ground-based radar provided a narrow beam passing over the target. Bombers flew down the beam and a signal was received when it was time to drop the bombs. The signal was calculated based on air speed, bomb ballistics, flight altitude, stick length and slant ranges. Aircraft could fly in cloud or at night, there was no need to visually sight the target which was often obscured by jungle, and it provided a complete surprise to enemy ground forces. The Canberra's level bombing and low-level visual attacking capabilities soon proved to be 'deadly accurate' and an advantage over dive bombing fighters which demanded a higher cloud base.

Right: Nine No.2 Squadron Canberras at Butterworth. Image ADF Serials Image Gallery.

Back in Australia, following the deployment of No.2 SQN to Butterworth, No.82 Wing was restructured to include a dedicated training unit. No.1 Operational Conversion Unit (No.1 (B) OCU) was an operational training unit of the RAAF, formed in January 1959 at RAAF Base Amberley, Queensland. Its role was to convert pilots and navigators to the English Electric Canberra bombers flown by Nos. 1, 2 and 6 Squadrons. The unit's

Below: Article from a Sydney newspaper, published on 4 March 1960.



ABOVE: The first picture ever taken of the "eye" of a cyclone off the Queensland coast. It was taken by an R.A.A.F. Canberra bomber at 30,000ft, 300 miles north-east of Brisbane on Wednesday. In the centre is the "hub" cloud, surrounded by swirling clouds rising to 35,000ft. RIGHT: Crew of the bomber, Pilot Officer G. Sweetman (left) of Brisbane, navigator, and Flight-Lieutenant J. Downing, of Western Australia, pilot, draw a diagram of the cyclonic "eye" and "hub" when they returned to the R.A.A.F. Station at Amberley after following the cyclone down the Queensland coast. The "eye" was 20 miles in diameter.



Right: Greg Sweeting (left) and John Downing (right) drawing a diagram of the cyclonic 'eye' and 'hub' after returning to Amberley.



complement of Canberras included T.4 and Mk 21 dual-control trainers and Mk 20 bombers. Originally a component of No. 82 Wing, No.1 (B) OCU later became an independent unit at Amberley in April 1968, its focus then was the provision of operationally ready pilots for service with No.2 SQN in the Vietnam War.

After a spell as ADC to Air Officer Commanding Support Command (Air Vice Marshall C.D. Candy), between 1963 and 1964, John, by now a Squadron Leader, was posted as Flight Commander No.1 (B) OCU, RAAF Amberley between February 1965 and November 1966. During this time John was a flying instructor.

On 22 December 1966, Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt announced No.2 SQN would be moving from Butterworth, Malaysia to South Vietnam, to join the RAAF Caribou transport aircraft and Iroquois helicopters already based at Vung Tau. Following deployment of advance parties and maintenance equipment, Eight No.2 SQN Mk 20 Canberras, under the command of Wing Commander Rolf Aronsen, left Butterworth, bound for US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, South Vietnam, on 19 April 1967.



No.2 SQN Canberra aircrews arriving at US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, in April 1967. Image RAAF.



US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, where No.2 SQN were based 1967 – 1971. Image Lance Halvorson

US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang was on the coast, 260 km north-east of Saigon and was the capital of the Ninh Thuan province. The Base was situated about 13 km from the city and covered more than twenty-seven square kilometres. It was home to the US Air Force 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.



Within four days of leaving Butterworth and flying their first mission on 23 April 1967, No. 2 SQN's eight Canberra bombers and eight crews, known as 'Magpies' from their Squadron crest and radio call signs, began flying an average of eight missions a day, seven days a week, for the next four years. They hit targets from the 'Demilitarized Zone' (the border between North and South Vietnam) to the north, and the Mekong River Delta to the south. Targets included enemy concentrations around Hue, the siege of Khe Sanh in 1968, and the South Vietnamese attack into Laos in 1971. In total, the Squadron flew over 11,900 combat missions and dropped 76,389 bombs, totalling 27,158 tonnes.

No.2 SQN's initial role was 'Combat Skyspot' missions. Flown at night and usually flown at medium altitude (15,000 to 25,000 feet), the missions were generally between 1.5- and 3-hours duration, with the first flight taking off around 8pm. The remainder were spread throughout the night, with the last sortie sometimes not arriving back to base until dawn.

Fitted with transponders, called a 'music box', the bombers were guided to the targets by ground radar while flying at pre-set headings, altitudes and airspeeds. They were given bomb release points calculated from these figures and were generally "releasing blind." John described these missions, which were still being flown when he joined No.2 SQN in late 1970, as "bus driver operations" and "boring."

In September 1967, the Squadron had begun low-level daylight bombing. An initial drop height of 3,000 feet was chosen to avoid ground fire and not for bombing accuracy. The headquarters of the US Seventh Air Force in Saigon liked the low-level results and by November 1967, No.2 SQN was doing four low-level sorties a day, mostly in support of ground troops. They were achieving a circular error of probability of 45 metres, i.e., half their bombs consistently fell within 45 metres of the target. To get better accuracy the then CO of the squadron, Wing Commander David Evans, analysed bombing results to determine the cause of errors and the aircraft were calibrated and bombsite tolerances checked to determine systems errors and allow for compensation. A combination of these changes and flying at 1,000 feet reduced the circular error probability down to 20 metres and resulted in Canberras transitioning from high level bombers with poor accuracy to very accurate low-level tactical bombers in support of ground troops.

Low cloud forced crews to occasionally bomb at even lower altitudes when it was necessary to get below the cloud to provide urgent support to ground troops. Bombs were released from as low as 800 feet, followed by a rapid pull up to a safe height (around 1,900 feet) by the time the bomb exploded, to avoid damage to their own aircraft. The Squadron had conducted similar bombing missions in Malaysia but refined its accuracy in Vietnam to such an extent it consistently outperformed all other units of the 35th Tactical Air Wing.

David Evans later wrote:

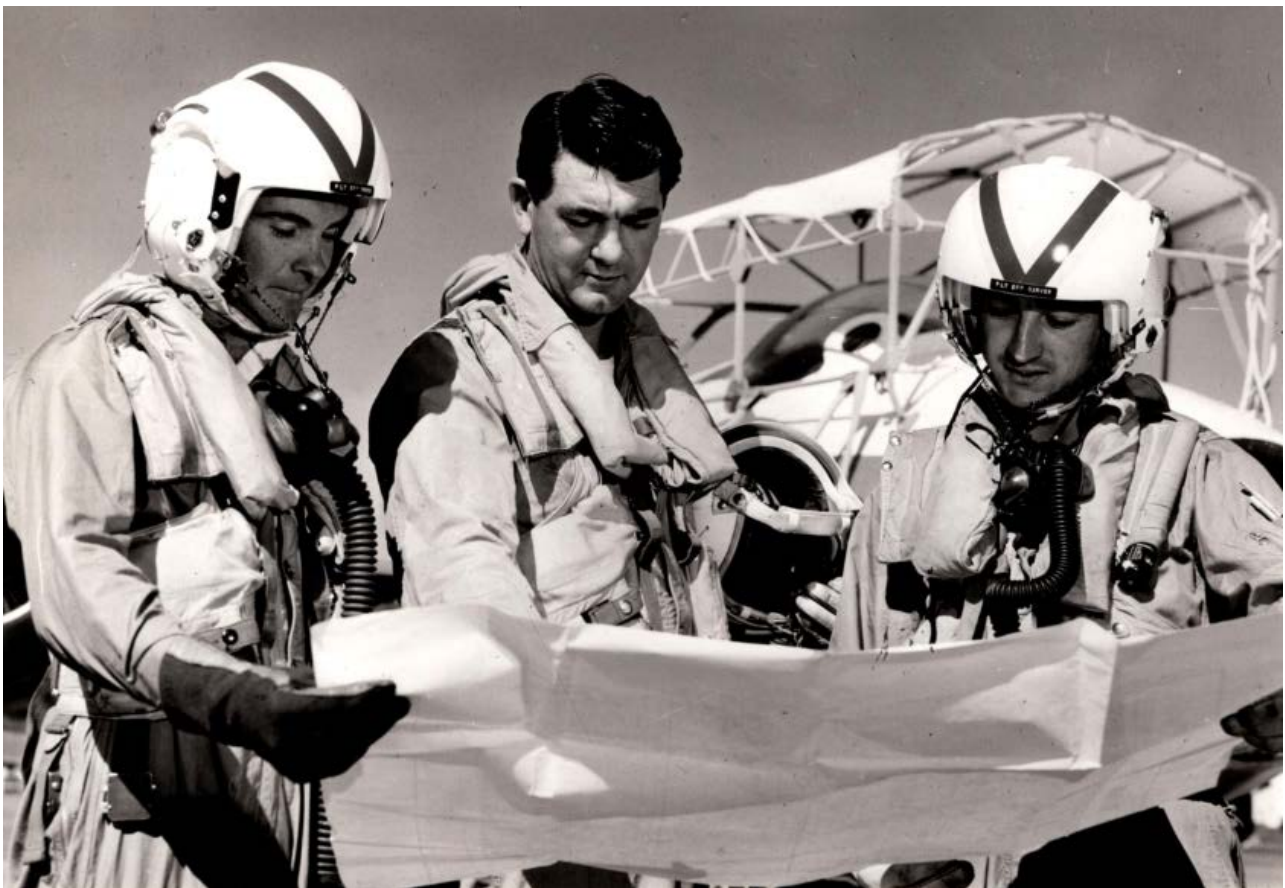
"It was also noteworthy that while No.2 squadron flew only 4% of the missions flown out of Phan Rang, we were credited with 16% of the bomb damage inflicted on the enemy, including the number of soldiers killed by air (KBA). Perhaps not a thing to boast about 40 years later on but I felt very strongly at the time that successful missions by No.2 Squadron contributed directly to saving lives of the Allied soldiers down there fighting in a far more threatening environment than we were."

Back in Australia, following a 12-month course at the RAAF Staff College, Fairbairn, Canberra in 1967 and a posting as Staff Officer Project Coordination Air Force Office, Canberra (1968-69), John returned to No.1 (B) OCU in January 1970, as Commanding Officer and with the rank of Wing Commander.

The process at the time was that John, as the CO of No.1 (B) OCU, not only had overall responsibility for the conversion training of aircrews to Canberras and training of ground crews before they were posted to No.2 SQN in South Vietnam, he was also preparing himself to take over as CO of No.2 Squadron later in 1970.



No.1 Bomber OCU Staff 20 August 1970. The substantial number of personnel was required because they trained staff going to No.2 Squadron in Vietnam, as well as training the aircrew for No.2 Squadron. When John took over in January 1970, the unit could only muster about 6 or 7 serviceable aircraft each day. By June 1970, John was able to provide 12 aircraft airborne for the Freedom of the City of Ipswich fly past, with one airborne spare and a serviceable spare on the ground. Image John Downing.



Wing Commander John Downing (centre) studying a flight plan with Pilot Officers John Wood (left) and Bob Carver (right). Bob Carver and South Australian Mike Herbert disappeared on 3 November 1970 after conducting a night bombing mission in South Vietnam. Image John Downing.

John officially took over No. 2 SQN at US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang from the outgoing CO, Wing Commander Jack Boast, on 1 November 1970. On the occasion of the last flight for Jack Boast and his navigator, Frank Lonie, the tradition was they were physically hooked up to the wingtip bomb carriers. After the aircraft taxied into the squadron lines, they were ceremonially “dropped” a short distance to the ground.



Above: Wing Commander Jack Boast and his navigator Frank Lonie attached to the wingtip bomb carriers while the Canberra is taxiing. **Right:** Wing Commander Jack Boast hooked up to the starboard wingtip bomb carrier. Images John Downing.



Left: John Downing shortly after taking over as CO of 2 Squadron. Following the loss of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver in A84-231, two days after him taking over, John arranged similar images for all aircrew, to be used in the event of losses. Image John Downing.

John remembered his first address to the whole unit after taking over the command of No.2 Squadron included the statement *“I am not there to ride on the reputation of the squadron and to establish a career for myself. It is a privilege to serve you. You have an outstanding reputation, and I shall be here to assist in maintaining the status quo.”*

As well as performing the duties and responsibilities of commanding the squadron, John was also required to be in one of the eight crews and fly an equal number of sorties. On arrival he was teamed with an experienced navigator for a week and experienced all the types of operations, from Combat Skyspot to medium level bombing and low-level ground support, while familiarizing himself with the topography and operational environment.

From the outset and throughout his time as CO, he found the people of No.2 SQN to be highly motivated and to cause no major problems. Morale, efficiency, and performance were outstanding.

The squadron performed 24/7 operations, with approximately 300 personnel working 3 x 8-hour shifts. Serviceability of aircraft was around 96-98%. If an aircraft developed a fault immediately prior to take off the aircraft could be worked on and then moved to the back of the line of waiting aircraft. Ground crews were so highly motivated they would often come in and service equipment on their days off.

For the day-to-day operations and command and control of the Squadron, John was very ably assisted by an Operational Flight Commander (Squadron Leader Arthur Barnes) an Administrative Flight Commander (Squadron Leader Lyn Wynn) and a Senior Engineer (Squadron Leader Grahame Bickle). John said, *“The boys were outstanding at their jobs, and it was really a case of if it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”*

By the middle of June 1970, the Squadron was flying nine missions a day and South Australian pilot Mike Herbert and his navigator, Ron Aitken had dropped bomb number 60,000. This rate of effort had been maintained throughout 1970.

Right: Mike Herbert (right) and Ron Aitken, wearing flying suits and squatting front centre, pose in front of the 60,000th bomb dropped by No. 2 SQN and the armament team who loaded it. Image from *Magpies in Vietnam* (Alex Alexander)



Two days after John took over as Commanding Officer, Magpie 91, crewed by Mike Herbert and Bob Carver, failed to return from a routine Skyspot mission near the Laotian border. The target had been a North Vietnamese military command unit in the mountains near the Ho Chi Minh trail, south-west of Da Nang. A radio transmission by the Vietnamese had been intercepted by the Americans, revealing the command unit position.

Operating under the control of MILKY, a Skyspot ground radar site. Magpie 91 had a successful bomb release at 22,500 feet. The MILKY controller thanked Magpie 91 for a successful sortie.

The call was acknowledged by Magpie 91, along with the intention of changing radio frequency to call PANAMA Control and Reporting Centre, for flight following information on return to Phan Rang. No further radio calls were made from Magpie 91 and about a minute later it disappeared from PANAMA's radar screen. No distress call or IFF emergency transmission was received by PANAMA or any other agency.



Canberra A84-231 on a bombing mission. As Magpie 91, crewed by Mike Herbert and Bob Carver, it suddenly disappeared without a trace on 3 September 1970. Image RAAF.

John still has clear memories of what followed and wrote on this subject in March 2010:

'At the time I was like a deer in the headlights as I had no local knowledge and little in country experience I recall walking into the ops room where there was a concerned but orderly activity underway to explain their absence. Activity was directed by the Operations Flight Commander, Arthur Barnes, assisted by Brian O'Shea and others. When it became clear that the aircraft's fuel would obviously have been exhausted and there were no reports of the aircraft diverging, a request for suspension of squadron operations was made and a search plan initiated.'

The search included other allied aircraft in the area under the coordination of the United States Air Rescue and Recovery Group. Over three days, No.2 Squadron crews flew 38 sorties, amounting to 113 hours.

John recalled that during the search:

".... the crews were flying to the limits. The mood was very subdued and became pessimistic as time wore on. All crews realise the difficulty of spotting a parachute or seeing wreckage in heavy jungle canopy. My attention was drawn to the state of near exhaustion of Arthur Barnes who flew his share of missions but got little sleep as he managed the search. I had to order him to cease flying search missions."

With nothing found, every possibility was explored to explain the disappearance of Magpie 91. In John's words:

"The possibilities of a mid-air collision, loss from artillery fire, offshore bombardment, SAM strikes and so on were all examined and checked again for a court of enquiry. SAM strikes were ruled out because there was

no ELINT (electronic intelligence) showing SAM activity but hand-held SAMs were a possibility Ground fire was a remote possibility as it was a medium-altitude mission.

Throughout, of course there was the pervasive factor of no PLB (personal locator beacon) response. Speculation suggested loss of electrics and loss of control over the sea on a feet-wet return. Oxygen loss was unlikely because there was a clear and coherent request to change after a normal report of bomb release and an acknowledgement of a new heading to fly.”

Following a court of enquiry which could not determine any reason for the loss, the disappearance and fate of the aircraft and Mike Herbert and Bob Carver remained a mystery until the aircraft and its crew were found 39 years later.

At the time, despite the unexplained loss of Herbert and Carver, the Squadron continued to fly nine or 10 sorties per day, and this remained the level of activity for the remainder of No.2 Squadron's operations in Vietnam.

Taskings were done in advance and most sorties were pre-planned and very much “production line”, but sometimes crews were called off pre-planned missions for “troops in contact” situations. On several occasions in February 1971, No.2 Squadron crews were called upon to fly 11 missions per day. On one of these days, 9 February 1971, John and his navigation leader, Squadron Leader Bernie Johnson, flying a pre-planned mission as Magpie 31 (meaning this was the third sortie that day by a No.2 Squadron aircraft), in Canberra A84-234, were diverted to support friendly troops in contact with the enemy.



Canberra A84-234. Image ADF Serials Image Gallery - RAAF Photo 000 140 782

The situation with low-level bombing sorties was that there were enclaves of Vietcong in a fluid situation, so whenever a mission was scheduled a Forward Air Controller (FAC) worked very closely with the local Province Chief to make sure bombs were not dropped without clearance. To cover themselves, No.2 Squadron Canberra aircrews recorded all radio traffic after contact was made with the FAC until the mission was concluded. An audio recording of this mission is available on the Australian War Memorial website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S04275> The calmness of John and Bernie Johnson throughout is amazing to listen to.

The usual procedure for this type of attack was once airborne to navigate by TACAN Station to the relevant rendezvous point where contact would be made with the FAC who would guide them onto the target using smoke rockets and making corrections on that smoke, as necessary.

In this case, they initially had trouble establishing a mutual frequency with the US Air Force FAC but finally were able to make contact. The action that followed is perhaps best described by Captain Larry D Bruce, 612th Tactical Fighter Squadron, in his report titled ‘*Outstanding Air Strike Performance*’, a copy of which appears over the page.



Captain Larry Dean Bruce USAF, F-100 pilot with 612th Tactical Fighter Squadron 1970-1971 and also a US DFC recipient. Image from Super Sabre Society.

"I witnessed Wing Commander F.J.L. Downing and Squadron Leader B.A. Johnson demonstrate heroism and professional airmanship to an extraordinary degree on the morning of 9 February 1971 as crew members aboard their Australian Canberra bomber as they struck a target in close proximity to friendly troops in contact with the enemy.

They were briefed as they approached the target area of the hazardous conditions of low overcast weather shrouding the high rugged peaks around which they would have to work, of the intense ground fire they could expect, of the restrictions that would be placed on their run-in heading, and of the bombing accuracy necessary due to the nearness of friendly troops. The FAC indicated the seriousness of the engagement on the ground and, having diverted Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson from a pre-planned strike for immediate assistance, was especially concerned to see if they could operate in such an environment.

With no hesitation they maneuvered under the overcast and initiated preparations for attack. Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson could have elected not to strike the target due to the untenable conglomerate of factors or, at most, to have delivered salvo in one pass. No one could have criticised them. But they were determined to make a maximum number of passes, exposing themselves on five successive deliveries to intense ground fire, in order to enhance the effectiveness of their 750 lb bombs and provide some respite for the beleaguered friendlies.

Flying just 100 feet above their minimum altitude over the bomb impact area, grazing the overcast ceiling, they repeatedly flew across a ridgeline from which they were receiving intense ground fire clearing it by only 800 feet. Their restricted run-in placed them in this extremely vulnerable position and their requirement of wings-level stabilised speed/heading deliveries made them sitting ducks. As I sat in the right seat of the FAC O-2 aircraft I could not believe they were not taking hits. Had I been on the ground with an automatic weapon, I feel certain I could have hit them. Their responses to messages passed from the ground praising their accuracy and advising them of the intense fire they were taking on each pass were so calm and professional I was thoroughly dismayed.

Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson, forced to operate beneath the weather and around peaks which disappeared into the clouds, were unable to keep the target in sight since they were as much as five or six miles away at times. This required consummate skill in order to roll out on a final attack heading. The target could not be acquired until the last possible moment due to the enemy held ridgeline, the ragged cloud bases, haze, smoke and thick triple canopy jungle which obscured the FAC's mark.

The accuracy of the bombs dropped by crew of the Canberra drew excited praise from the friendly ground troops who were located 800 metres from the impact area on a mountain top. Other friendly forces had set up ambush positions within 500 metres of the target; these locations could not be marked without revealing their emplacement to the enemy.

On their last pass Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson sustained serious battle damage to their aircraft. A massive chunk of bomb fragment ripped through the nose section where Squadron Leader Johnson was lying prone without a parachute on and without benefit of armour plating beneath him. The fragment passed by him and went up into the pilot's compartment striking the control wheel: and partially severing elevator controls; it continued with high energy six inches past Wing Commander Downing's leg and smashed into the IFF panel. At this particular moment a flight of F 100s was checking in with the FAC. Since Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson had completed the last pass and since the radio frequency was in demand by others, they calmly wished us in the FAC aircraft a "good day" and departed the area. I was incredulous later that day to find they had sustained the battle damage.

Their aggressive and accurate deliveries were directly responsible for the saving of many friendly lives. The first bomb they dropped obliterated five enemy hootches; successive bombs accounted for a secondary explosion, an enemy radio station destroyed, yards and yards of trenches, bunkers, and with no doubt in my mind a significant number of enemy soldiers killed. I can make this last statement for several reasons: There bombs impacted directly on top of a concentration of enemy ground fire; someone must've been manning the radio station or in its immediate area; a FAC overflying the target area the following day detected numerous

fresh graves. This same FAC told me that the enemy makes supreme efforts to bury their dead immediately and to have secure all traces of casualties.

The friendly forces were not able to get to the impact areas until the following day. Dense jungle, sporadic sniper fire and a large blaze which continued for 24 hours subsequent to a 45-minute eruption of an ammo cache touched off by the F-100s on target after Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson, were reasons why the sweep was delayed.

When the area was investigated, only the periphery of one impact area was inspected due to vastly reduced but still persistent hostilities. The friendlies were extracted by helicopter on the morning of the third day after the strike.

Judging from the Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) reports which continued to trickle in for several days it seems certainly enemy was preparing to assault the friendly position in force. The piles of rockets, rocket motors, and mortars found by the friendlies in a bomb impact area, the radio station apparently an FM set fitted with a 20 foot antenna, and the level of enemy activity lends credence to the view that the friendlies might not have survived the assault had it not been for the efforts of Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson.

Being an F-100 pilot myself and having personally witnessed their performance, I can say with no reservation that I was inspired by their selfless courage and envy them the demonstration of the most singular example of true professionalism I have ever witnessed.

Larry D. BRUCE, Capt.
U. S. Air Force”



Above:
US Distinguished Flying
Cross (DFC)

John believed Captain Bruce’s account “demonstrated a distinct contrast between a matter-of-fact Australian understatement and the hyperbole of the Americans.” However, Captain Bruce’s subsequent report appeared to be a citation and unbeknown to John and Bernard at the time, and although they were never formally presented with the medals, Captain Bruce’s report had resulted in John and Bernard Johnson each being awarded the US DFC.

Some years later, John found some references, including in *Australian Awards Vietnam 1962-1991* by Ross Sutton, that they had won the US DFC and John tried to track it down, the Americans denied all knowledge but the Australian Historic Military Division had it listed and the awarding of the medals is recorded on the Australian War Memorial website. Accordingly, John bought two of the medals himself, sent one of them to Bernard Johnson and the two of them had worn them ever since.

The aircraft was carrying 6 x high drag 750lb bombs. Bernard Johnson had to unstrap and crawl forward along a walkway and into the nose of the aircraft where he would lie over the WWII vintage bombsight and direct John onto the target. The bombsight had no problems over flat terrain, but the pilot had to adjust accordingly for rugged terrain. Accurate target height was important and an analogue computer, using parameters of drift height and drag, was used to time bomb release. “Sometimes in nice country and in nice weather, you could see the line, but in this case where there was a lot of terrain changes and thunderclouds around, it was difficult.”

The six bombs were released singly and in pairs and during this time they were experiencing very heavy turbulence. John had fully tightened his straps and came back bruised as a result. Bernard was unrestrained during this entire time and had to repeatedly go back and forth from his position in the front of the aircraft to a panel where he would select the bomb or bombs to be dropped and put on any delay etc. He would then dash back to his forward position. The first bomb was just long and approximately 25 metres right and 25 metres short of where it was required. The last of the six bombs were dropped as a pair and landed right on target, 100% within 10 metres, destroying the radio station.

On each bomb run the FAC was reporting that he was seeing ground fire being directed towards the Canberra from the target area. On the last run, John had felt a “great thump” and knew something had hit the aircraft. With all bombs expended and reporting that the aircraft had apparently taken ground fire, the crew of Magpie 31 had wished the crew of the FAC aircraft a “good day” and departed for Phan Rang.

At the time of being hit by what was later identified as the top suspension lug from one of their last two bombs, John thought they had taken ground fire but did not declare an emergency because his assessment of the handling of the aircraft showed all controls were operating, there were no malfunctions and everything was “as advertised” in the cockpit. All pressures and temperatures were fine and although the elevator controls appeared damaged, the Canberra had a “flying tailplane” and was able to continue flying with full control by adjusting the trim for the tailplane.



Fuselage damage and bomb fragment. Images John Downing.

They would have had to be above 10,000 feet to eject, so Bernard did not return to his ejector seat and remained seated on the floor near the emergency parachute, to which he strapped a harness in case he had to open the door and abandon the aircraft. The aircraft was able to return to Phan Rang and landed safely. That night, the US FAC, Captain Larry Bruce, who was also based at Phan Rang, came over to the No.2 Squadron mess and had a chat and a few beers.

Just over a month later, on the afternoon of Sunday 14 March 1971, John was on his 100th and last mission with No.2 Squadron in Vietnam. He was flying Canberra A84-228 with Flight Lieutenant Allan Pinches as his navigator. They were flying at 14,000 feet near the DMZ. They were performing a “Combat Skyspot” mission that was expected to be a “milk run.”

Neither man should have flown that day. John had just returned two days early from leave, to help ease the burden of missions on his pilots. Allan Pinches was off duty but came back on so another navigator could play in a cricket match at the Base!



Canberra A84-228. Image ADF Serials.

Arriving in the vicinity of the target and under Skyspot direction, they were ordered to turn very steeply onto the target. John believed this sudden turn probably saved them. According to John, “.... about halfway through the turn, the roof fell in. It really did. The sky exploded, and my canopy was shattered.” He said, “The aircraft was still flying - everything was normal according to the cockpit – and then I saw a missile, high to the right, go past the aircraft. It was ballistic, and it hadn’t exploded, but I then realised, of course, we had been hit by its partner, the other surface-to-air missile.” John told Allan Pinches to eject before making a mayday call and ejecting himself.



Painting titled "RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit" by aviation artist David Marshall, showing Allan Pinches ejecting and you can still see John's white helmet under the pilot's canopy. The painting was donated to the Australian War Memorial by Barry Carpenter in 2018. John and Allan Pinches' son Brad attended the ceremony. John and Allan Pinches had called each other every year on the anniversary of the incident until Allan Pinches passed away on Australia Day 2017. Image Gary Petts from a copy of the painting belonging to John Downing, since donated to the South Australian Aviation Museum.

Believing he had given Allan Pinches sufficient time to eject, John reached down and pulled the control column snatch release thereby releasing the control yoke forward, reached for his helmet, positioned himself properly and pulled the blind. "In those days, the technique was to eject through the canopy. When the pilot ejects, the seat actually breaks the canopy before his head does."

John free fell for a while before his canopy deployed and at that point, he saw the aircraft circling just below him. The starboard wing was "just a ball of flame." He was glad to see the aircraft at this time or else he would have always wondered whether he had jumped out of a serviceable aircraft. In hindsight, he believed ejecting was a good decision. There was an undercast at about 4000 or 5000 feet which prevented John seeing the aircraft impacting with the ground. He had time to wave to Allan Pinches before descending into cloud.

Allan Pinches' recollections were that they had been turning onto their target run when they were rocked by the explosion: "...my nav's station was immediately a great turmoil of blasting air stream, flapping canvas, flying papers and charts, dirt, dust, and noise. It had also got suddenly darker. John saw another SAM go by, but it did not explode. A second or so later we felt the aircraft beginning to break up and John ordered me to eject. I blasted my hatch off and pulled the face blind to fire the ejection seat, but nothing happened. A second desperate tug was successful. I was barely clear of the aircraft when I saw John blasting through his pilot's canopy."

Although John's parachute worked, as advertised, by opening automatically at 12,000 feet, Allan Pinches' did not. He was about to deploy manually when the canopy finally blossomed. He said later, "I remember being annoyed ... Annoyed because of the

noise, annoyed because my watch had been ripped off, and because John's parachute opened and mine would not." They had parachuted through cloud and rain and were floating down into the mountainous jungle with near zero visibility. John fortunately broke out of cloud briefly in a valley with just enough time to set himself up for a landing as he crashed through trees on the side of a steep ridge. His parachute snagged about two or three metres up a tree and he landed hard on the ground in a "praying" position, hurting his knee. At the time he thought it was just a bruise, but it later turned out to be a fractured kneecap. He was otherwise uninjured.

Allan Pinches had been operating the four-way bomb release at the time of the explosion and with his harness done up tight, he could not release it. He had slackened off his harness to get to the bomb release in preparation for dropping the bombs. With his loose harness and leaning forward at the time of ejection, he had received four fractured vertebrae and a broken left wrist during ejection. Fortunately, after parachuting down, he had his fall broken by the thick jungle canopy which snagged his parachute, leaving him dangling about a metre above the boulder strewn ground. John believed this had probably saved his life as falling on the boulders combined with his back injuries would most likely have killed him. According to Allan Pinches, "as I lowered myself, I noticed pain in my back but thought I had merely bruised or sprained it. I managed to cut some equipment and a dinghy from the seat pack and scurried from the scene in case there were any 'unfriendlies' nearby."

Both were of the belief that aircrew who had ejected were not taken prisoner and would be shot by the North Vietnamese. According to John, "You stuck out like a thumb being Caucasian and if you landed in 'bad country' you were not going to be able to evade successfully. If you got to higher ground, the 'King Birds' or 'Rescue Birds', who were on station 24/7 could then start homing in on you." John collected his survival kit and headed up the mountain ridge line to evade and secure a likely rescue site. His radio calls from this vantage point remained unanswered. Allan Pinches, who had landed about 400 metres away, could hear his pilot's radio calls but could not climb the ridgeline because of his back injury. He could not bend over and was exhausted after covering only a few hundred metres in a couple of hours, so found shelter for the night. John used his emergency ARC10 radio every 30 minutes and a couple of further times after dark but had no joy reaching any potential rescuers.

The two of them remained separated overnight and the dawn brought renewed efforts for them to make contact on their radios. About midday they were able to establish contact with each other when John changed radios. Making contact was quite a boost to their morale. They then alternated their distress calls to conserve radio battery power.

During the afternoon, John heard the callsign of another "Magpie" overhead, using his callsign of "Magpie 41". John called up using the same callsign and said, "Magpie 41, this is your Commanding Officer Magpie 41 on the ground." A USAF C-130, King Bird, "King 26" from the 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, heard this transmission and told the airborne Magpie 41 to change his callsign and get out of the area. "King 26" then began coordinating the rescue. While they recognised John had a distinctive Australian accent, they had two personal questions to authenticate who he was, and they also asked for distinctive numbers that would only be known to him. John told them he wouldn't have a clue what his distinctive numbers were and that he had heard no enemy activity during the night.

There were no Search and Rescue (SAR) "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters available for the extraction, but they had a Bell UH-1 "Slick." This helicopter had no protruding armaments. A FAC aircraft then overflew their position and directed them to track the position of the aircraft by sound. It was a very quick location, but John could not see the "Slick" because the cloud base had come right down the mountain below John's position. He almost called off the rescue attempt.

The extraction system used by the rescue helicopter, known as a "jungle penetrator" could be lowered by cable through the jungle canopy to lift out downed airmen. The cloud lifted after a quick prayer and the helicopter lowered a "jungle penetrator." This was about 24 hours after their ejection and the helicopter was almost out of fuel. John praised the helicopter pilot who had flown up and down the sides of the mountains trying to locate them in heavy cloud, trying to locate them in "stinking weather conditions."

They were then able to locate Allan Pinches who had struggled to make his way towards the valley floor, but unable to make it, Allan Pinches had dragged himself through heavy jungle and into an overgrown clearing which appeared to be an old Montagnard garden. He said, "When the pilot came in to pick me up, he actually chopped away tree branches with his rotors. He was really sticking his neck out."

Allan Pinches had been expecting a more rudimentary harness type hoist. Upon sighting the "jungle penetrator" he said, "Rather than waste any precious seconds working out how to unfold it (I now know it only takes a second), I slid one leg through a canvas loop and hung on. Immediately that I was clear of the tree tops the chopper swung out into the valley, so that within seconds I was suspended about 1000 feet above the ground. All that was between me, and a big drop was a loop of canvas held in place with the press-start and eyelet, and my grip on the cable. That is how I remained until the winch operator was able to get me into the cabin."

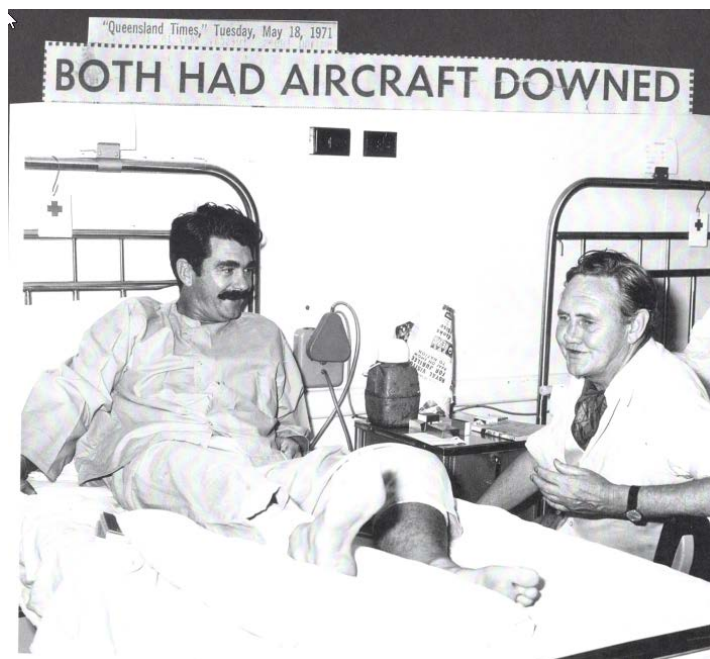
After refuelling at a US fire support base, they were flown to the US 18th Surgical Hospital at Quang Tri, where John had his fractured kneecap plastered. While waiting to be treated, John had watched ground troop casualties being brought in by

helicopter. He describes this as “absolute carnage and like a butcher’s shop.” Everyone who came through the door had a Purple Heart medal around their neck, apparently given to them before arriving at the MASH.

To make way for heavy casualties coming in, they were moved again the next morning. According to Allan Pinches, “Their fun and adventure still had not finished. The medevac Caribou lost both engines on take off. Fortunately, the pilot did a skillful emergency landing and after some repairs they were off again.”

They were transferred to the Cam Ranh Bay Hospital, north of Phan Rang where they were visited by Squadron Leader Arthur Barnes, who was acting CO of 2 Squadron in John’s absence. Arthur Barnes arrived with a large briefcase and said, “I have some confidential papers for you.” The briefcase was crammed full of cans of beer! They were then transferred to Vung Tau.

Right: While passing through Cam Ranh Bay enroute to Vung Tau, John and Allan Pinches had a reunion with their rescuer, USAF Lt Col. Sidney Spilseth (top left), Commander of the 39th ARRS at Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, who piloted the Hercules “King 26”. Images from John Downing.



Left: While in the First Australian Field Hospital at Vung Tau, John and Allan Pinches were visited by the then Defence Minister, Mr John Gorton. The pair found they had a common bond with both having had their aircraft shot down – Mr Gorton twice during WWII. Image Queensland Times, 18 May 1971.

Allan Pinches recovered after about six weeks flat on his back in hospital. He subsequently returned to flying duties but could never again fly in an ejection seat.

John returned to Australia about a week after leaving hospital. He later learned that American ELINT (Electronic Intelligence) had gathered, by use of electronic sensors, the name of the SAM site Commander, details of when they had acquired his aircraft, where they acquired it and when the SAMs were launched. They had apparently been launched right on maximum range, which is probably why the two missiles went ballistic. ELINT even knew that the site Commander received a bottle of champagne for the kill.

RAAF Canberras were not fitted with Missile Early Warning Systems (MEWS) After this event, no aircraft without MEWS were programmed to fly into any zones covered by missile envelopes. On 5 June 1971, the eight dark camouflaged bombers that were the spearhead of No.2 Squadron returned to Amberly Airbase after a record 13 years of continuous service outside of Australia, including four years in Vietnam. John was present to greet them.

While on sick leave in Australia and recovering from his injuries on a Gold Coast holiday, John was told to fly to Canberra for an interview to be a Staff Officer to the Governor-General. He was given three weeks' notice to move from Queensland to Canberra and spent nearly two years in the position of Military-Secretary to the Governor-General.

On 6 December 1971, while serving in that role, John received notification of being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). The recommendation for his award read:

“Wing Commander Francis John Leonard Downing was Commanding Officer of No.2 Squadron in the Republic of Vietnam from 5 November 1970 to 22 March 1971. Throughout his operational tour of duty, Wing Commander Downing displayed outstanding command ability, professionalism, and devotion to duty. By his personal example of professional competence and sincere interest in the welfare of his subordinates, Wing Commander Downing succeeded in maintaining the morale and proficiency of No. 2 Squadron, thus sustaining the already high reputation enjoyed by the Squadron.

On several occasions, Wing Commander Downing was involved in air operations against strongly defended and tactically sound enemy positions. Often the targets were situated in terrain that permitted only restricted attack headings and which thereby placed the attacking aircraft in a vulnerable situation. During these missions, often flown in adverse weather, reduced visibility and low cloud base, Wing Commander Downing without thought of personal safety, pressed home his attacks in the face of enemy fire, and accurately bombed the targets. On one such occasion, when target destruction was essential for the safety of nearby Allied troops, Wing Commander Downing’s aircraft sustained severe battle damage during the final bombing run, necessitating him to carry out an emergency landing under minimal control conditions. The accuracy and success of Wing Commander Downing’s attack was praised and confirmed by Allied troops, who witnessed the attack.

Wing Commander Downing’s tour of duty was cut short when he had to be repatriated to Australia as a result of injuries sustained during ejection from his aircraft after it had been severely damaged by an enemy surface-to-air missile during an operational mission.

Throughout his operational tour of duty in the Republic of Vietnam, Wing Commander Downing continually displayed outstanding leadership, devotion to duty and courage in the air and on the ground. The excellent example he set his subordinates brought great credit to himself and the Royal Australian Air Force.”

John had subsequent postings as a Staff Officer Project Coordination at Support Command in Melbourne and then as Director of Air Force Safety in Canberra, spending nearly two years in the latter position before resigning from the RAAF on 13 June 1977 and taking up a position with the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation (BASI) on 1 July 1977.

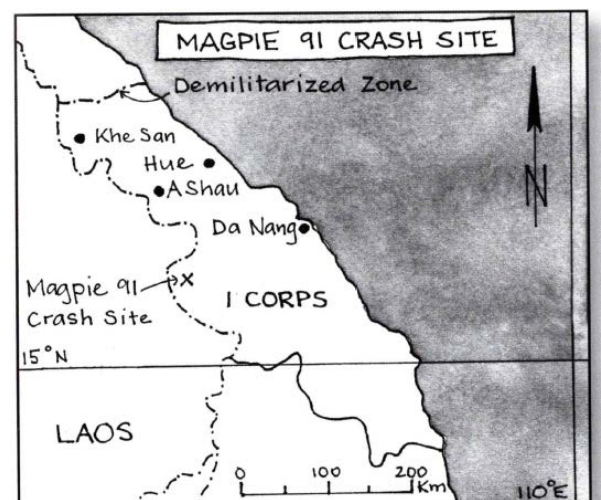
John spent approximately 14 years overall with the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation, initially at the Central Office in Canberra, followed by the Adelaide Field Office, back to Canberra and then back to Adelaide where he became the Superintendent for the Northern Territory and South Australia.

EPILOGUE:

The crash site for Magpie 91 (Mike Herbert and Bob Carver) was believed to be as indicated on the map (Shown Right) by Catherine Gordon, appearing in Doug Hurst’s book *Magpies in Vietnam - Canberra Bomber operations in Vietnam and the recovery of the lost crew thirty-nine years later*.

Hostilities in Vietnam officially ended in 1975. While the war was still on, further access to search the area where Magpie 91 disappeared was impossible and the fate of Canberra A84-231 and its crew continued to remain a mystery. Largely due to widespread civil unrest in Vietnam and post-Vietnam War sentiment in Australia, not much was done about locating Australian MIAs after hostilities ceased.

In 1982, Ka Tu villagers from a remote area in the Quang Nam province, Central Vietnam, found metal wreckage while hunting which was scavenged and things like electrical wiring was used to make snares. They kept this find of valuable scrap metal to themselves, but word later got out.



An Australian diplomatic and military delegation went to Quang Nam Province in 1984, hoping to find information to assist the location of six MIAs, including Herbert and Carver. Little useful information was gained and the search for the aircraft and Herbert and Carver stalled until December 2000 when Americans found aircraft wreckage in Quang Nam Province, that by its nature and position could be the missing Canberra.

Headed by Vietnam veteran and retired Lieutenant Colonel, Jim Bourke, a group called Operation Aussies Home (OAH) was started in March 2002 with an aim “to locate Australia’s six missing in action personnel from the Vietnam war and bring their remains back to Australia, or to prove that no remains were there to be recovered.” By late 2008, the only missing Australian MIAs still in Vietnam were Mike Herbert and Bob Carver.

The search gathered momentum in 2008 following the experienced Army History Unit offering their services to the Air Force Search and Recovery Team and a Report from Jim Bourke, resulted in approval for a combined Army History Unit/Air Force Search and Recovery Team operation. A reconnaissance mission between 5 and 15 January 2009 was a complete success and after further investigation on site, on 20 April 2009 the crash site of Canberra A84-231 was confirmed and plans were made for a full archaeological dig to find and recover all that could be found of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver and bring their remains home for burial in Australia. Finally, on 31 August 2009, the remains of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver were welcomed home in a reception ceremony at RAAF Base Richmond, attended by their families and former comrades from No.2 Squadron in Phan Rang and Amberley.

As part of the 18 August 2010 Vietnam Veterans Day Remembrance Service, held at the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial in Canberra, plaques re-listing Mike Herbert and Bob Carver as Killed in Action instead of Missing in Action were dedicated.



John Downing spoke at that Service, on behalf of No.2 Squadron members, saying “how thankful he was, as a newly arrived Commanding Officer in Phan Rang, to have men who quickly and competently ran a thorough search, and how grateful all who knew Mike Herbert and Bob Carver were that their remains had finally been found, brought home and put to rest in such a dignified way.”

Left: John Downing speaking at the Vietnam Memorial, Canberra, 18 August 2010. Image Magpies in Vietnam - Canberra Bomber operations in Vietnam and the recovery of the lost crew thirty-nine years later.



When John was at a ceremony at the Australian War Memorial in 2018, for the presentation of David Marshall’s painting *RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit*, John said he was forever grateful to those who helped rescue them. He said, “pilots can’t fly unless all the groundcrew do their job and you’ve got to give tribute to them. Without them you can’t operate.... “

Left: David Marshall’s RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit, presented to The Australian War Memorial in 2018. From Left to Right: Director, Dr Brendan Nelson, John Downing and Brad Pinches. Image AWM.

John went on to say: “Now do I have any regrets? Yes. Years ago my daughter was in the Navy serving in Darwin ... An NCO made himself known to her, and he said, ‘I served in No.2 Squadron under Wing Commander Downing. Are you any relation?’ When Wendy said, ‘Yes, he’s my dad,’ he then said, ‘I packed his parachute.’ John said, “So, do I have any regrets? Yes. I didn’t meet that man, and say thank you, and shake his hand.”

John donated a framed print of the painting, together with some of his Vietnam memorabilia to the National Vietnam Veterans Museum on Phillip Island in 2018. During that ceremony John had an emotional meeting with Lindsay Tucker, the man who packed his parachute the day before the fateful flight.

Right: Pictured at the National Vietnam Veterans Museum on 19 April 2018, standing in front of a display dedicated to John Downing are, from left to right, Lindsay Tucker, John's wife Louise Downing, Marion Brennan who created the display and John Downing. Image National Vietnam Veterans Museum Facebook.



John's display at the National Vietnam War Memorial recently underwent cleaning and maintenance. Wendy Anderson, Education & Interpretation Officer at the Museum, has kindly sent some images from the display, shown below.



John has since donated his own copy of *RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit* to the South Australian Aviation Museum. Today, John lives with his wife of 54 years, Louise, in Rose Park, an inner suburb of Adelaide. John and Louise had four children, two sons and two daughters. Their elder son served in the Australian Army and their eldest daughter in the Australian Navy, both giving around 20 years' service.

John has had a long interest in sporting shooting and firearms, beginning when he was around eight years old, hunting rabbits and foxes. In 1958, John was captain of the eight-person RAAF College Shooting Team which won the RAAF intraservice competition. After leaving the RAAF in 1977, John developed an interest in "Single Action Shooting", also known as "Western Action or Cowboy Action Shooting." The sport attempts to preserve, promote and respect the skills, traditions and pioneering spirit of the historic American Old West, using pre-1898 single action pistols, rifles and shotguns. John was an active shooter in this sport for many years, competing 10 times in the US between 1990 and 2000, and only retiring in 2022. John was also the editor of *The Australian Shooters Journal* and *The Australian Pistol Shooters Bulletin* publications.

His aviation interests and active contribution to the preservation of aviation history continue to this day. John is a member of the South Australian Aviation Museum and a member of the Museum's History Group, a group of volunteers with an interest in researching and preserving SA aviation history and writing profiles on significant SA aviators such as himself.



In May 2023, as part of the South Australian Aviation Museum's contribution to South Australia's History Festival 2023, John gave a very interesting talk about his time as the C.O. of No.2 Squadron and flying Canberras in Vietnam.

Left: Now at 89 years of age, standing alongside the South Australian Aviation Museum's Canberra bomber exhibit, John reflects back on the time he stood alongside a No.2 Squadron Canberra, as captured in the image on Page 7 that was taken 50+ years ago!

Sources:

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John Downing's Photo Collection
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**Gary Petts
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June 2023**