

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT ROBERT 'BOB' CLAUDE HAY DFC & BAR

455 SQN (RAAF), 50 SQN (RAF), 617 SQN (RAF)

Observer & Dambuster



Portrait image of FLTLT Robert Claude Hay taken in June 1943 after the awarding of his second Distinguished Flying Cross.(AWM)

Robert Claude Hay was born in the regional SA Riverland town of Renmark on 4 November 1913. He was the second of six children in a large family with parents John Robert Clare Hay and Margaret Kate Olorenshore. Hay grew up on the family fruit block at Settlers Bend, Renmark. He went to the Renmark West Church of England School and then Renmark West Primary School for his initial education. His father died when he was only nine years old.

Hay completed two years of secondary education at Renmark Secondary School. However, the family relocated to a farm at Bull Creek, a small rural town south of Adelaide due to his mother remarrying. Accordingly, Hay attended and completed his Leaving Certificate at Strathalbyn High School from 1928 to 1929.

Upon leaving school, Hay initially gained employment with the Post Masters General (PMG) Department as a mechanic under training with the Adelaide General Post Office. However, he resigned from the PMG, enrolling in agriculture studies at the Roseworthy Agriculture College near Gawler in 1932. Graduating in 1935 with Second Class Honours in completing a Diploma of Agriculture, he duxed his class, being awarded the College's Gold Medal and the Old Students Cup for obtaining the highest aggregate in agriculture and animal husbandry. He also excelled in sports particularly in swimming where he won several awards and meets and rifle shooting as a student.

After completing his degree, he gained employment with the Queensland Department of Agriculture, working as an agriculture field assistant at the Biloela Cotton Research Station. At Biloela, he met and later married Honoria Edna Millicent Thomson. In 1938, Hay returned to South Australia with his new wife to live in Gawler, taking up a position at Roseworthy Agriculture College as an Assistant Horticulturist.

After his studies, Hay served for more than four years in the Citizen's Militia Force, serving in the 18th/23rd Light Horse (Machine Gun) Regiment, the 6th Cavalry Brigade (Mobile Veterinary Section) and the 27th Battalion.

In May 1940, Hay enlisted at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, as trainee aircrew and proceeded to No 1 Initial Training School, Somers, Victoria, to complete basic training. During July and August, he completed basic flying training at No 2 Elementary Flying Training School at Archerfield, Queensland and then commenced advanced flying training at No 2 Service Flying Training School at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

For unknown reasons, Hay did not complete his pilot training and in November 1940, he embarked for Canada where he underwent Air Observer Training at No 2 Air Observers School, Edmonton, Alberta, and No 3 Bombing and Gunnery School, MacDonald, Manitoba, from January to April 1941. On 28 April 1941, he was recategorized to Air Observer receiving his Air Observers Badge and was promoted to Sergeant.

He received his commission and was promoted to Pilot Officer on 23 July 1941 and in early August travelled from Canada to England. From August to December 1941, he completed light bomber conversion training at No 17 Operational Training Unit, flying the Bristol Blenheim.

On 26 December 1941, more than eighteen months after enlisting, Hay arrived at his first operational unit, No 455 Squadron (RAAF). Established in late May 1941 as an Article XV squadron, 455SQN was a RAAF unit flying Handley Page Hampdens but had only been effectively flying operationally since September as part of No 5 Group, Bomber Command. The unit has the distinction of being the first RAAF unit to drop bombs on Germany when it conducted its first operational mission on 29th August when a single Hampden attacked Frankfurt. While a RAAF squadron, it lacked RAAF aircrew, and the addition of new Australians like Bob Hay was particularly welcomed by the unit. By the end of March 1942, the aircrew situation had stabilised and 455 SQN had a complement of 527 personnel and 25 aircraft, including 116 aircrew of which 77 were Australian.



455 SQN ground crew load bombs onto a RAAF Hampden bomber in the snow during the winter of 1942.(AWM)

Hay flew operational strike missions over Germany, leaflet dropping missions over occupied territories and mine laying sorties along coastal ports. The sorties were at times risky flying a dated aircraft during daytime in enemy territory. In April 1942, Hay completed a Bombing Leaders Course at No 1 Air Armament School, RAF Manby, Lincolnshire, a qualification which would prove critical in his development as a Bomb Aimer for later duties.

On 26 April 1942, 455SQN was transferred to Coastal Command and retasked as a torpedo-bomber squadron. The transfer was the result of an RAF need to reinforce Coastal Command given its apparent limitations in performing its mission to find the enemy, strike the enemy and protect ships, highlighted by the inability of allied forces to stop a German naval squadron comprising the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* from conducting a dash up the English Channel from Brest to Heligoland. The move was not initially popular with 455SQN as it required the transfer out of the unit of a number of aircrew as the establishment of a Coastal Command unit was smaller than that of a Bomber Command flying unit.



Bob Hay ready for another Lancaster mission.(VWM)

Bob Hay joined several colleagues including fellow Australian and future Dambuster, Pilot Officer Mick Martin, in going to No 50 Squadron (RAF) as part of the transfer. Originally a Hampden bomber squadron, 50 SQN was now operating the Avro Manchester Bomber, based at RAF Swinderby, Lincolnshire. Encountering limitations with the two-engine Manchester in terms of power, ceiling and engine reliability, the squadron converted to the new Avro Lancaster in July 1942.

By October 1942, Hay had completed a full Bomber Command tour of duty having flown 30 operational missions flying Hampdens, Manchesters and Lancasters in both 455SQN and 50SQN. More importantly, he had become known as a gifted aviator. At 50 SQN, he largely flew as the navigator for SQUADRON Leader Gordon Hugh Everitt (Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve), one of the squadron's best pilots, and SGT Fred Michael Spafford (RAF) as the bomb aimer.

On 28 October 1942, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for action in a strike mission with SQUADRON Leader Everitt. The Citation read:

"One night in August 1942, these Officers as Captain (Everitt) and Navigator (Hay) of aircraft respectively, were detailed to execute a special bombing sortie. In spite of difficulties, they accomplished their task successfully, and brought back excellent photographs. Squadron Leader Everitt and Flying Officer Hay have completed many sorties and they have always displayed great skill and determination to make every mission a success. Their outstanding operational efficiency and devotion to duty have set a fine example."

From October 1942 to March 1943, Hay was posted to the staff of Headquarters, 5 Group. In November 1942, he was promoted to Flying Officer.

On 26 March 1943, Hay assumed duties at RAF Coningsby, a Bomber Command airbase located in central Lincolnshire established in 1940. He was quickly augmented into the new No 617 Squadron which had just formed up on 21 March under WGCCDR Guy Gibson for a highly classified and innovative strike mission against a yet undisclosed target. Gibson made Hay the Squadron Bomb Leader – an important position responsible for the coordination, advising, instructing, mentoring and generally management of the bomb aimers to ensure the highest possible standard of bombing accuracy. Given the mission of the squadron, the position was particularly important, and Hay's selection reflected Gibson's respect for Hay as a professional aviator. As a 29-year-old, he was one of the oldest airmen at the unit and came to be known as the Father of the Squadron.

This was highlighted in that on 12 and 13 April, only three weeks after arriving at the squadron, Hay accompanied Gibson on two visits to Reculver Bay on the northern Kent coastline in southeastern England. They met Barnes Wallis, the inventor of the 'Bouncing Bomb', and witnessed the first dropping of a full-size bouncing bomb delivered low level by a RAF Wellington bomber. They left impressed but somewhat perplexed as they still did not know the target for the sensitive mission. Ironically, flying back to their base in a small Miles Magister trainer, Hay and Gibson had a lucky escape when the aircraft's single engine failed. Gibson managed to crash land in a field full of devices designed to stop enemy gliders landing.



Avro Lancaster with a Bouncing Bomb conducting trials at low level over Reculver Bay, Kent, in April 1943.(IWM)

During April, training for the sensitive mission stepped up with low level flying at night over countryside and water being the focus. Hay was integrated into the crew of fellow Australian FLTLT Mick Martin, who he had flown with at 455SQN and 50 SQN, flying Lancaster AJ-P 'Popsie'. The role of the bomb aimer for the mission was particularly important as a special bomb aiming device was developed to allow the bomb aimer to identify the best time to drop the bouncing bomb at a low altitude to allow it to bounce up to a dam wall and then settle down to the base of the wall before detonation. In this respect, the capacity of the crew to operate together as one with the pilot flying the aircraft at low level, the navigator in navigating to the target, the air gunners in warding off enemy counter fire and the bomb aimer in ensuring the bomb was dropped at the ideal moment was crucial to mission success.



617 SQN Lancaster AJ-P 'POPSIE', the aircraft flown by FLTLT Mick Martin and FLGOFF Bob Hay, taxiing at RAF Scampton in December 1943. (AWM)

On the 15 May (the night before the raid), Hay was one of four airmen briefed on the targets for the operation, again reflecting the importance of his position in the squadron. Incredibly, on the same day, he had another close call when the bouncing bomb that had just been loaded into their aircraft by the armourers suddenly dropped onto the hardstand. The sudden crash caused all to immediately evacuate the area in case the bomb went off, which did not occur, probably due to it not being fused.



617 SQN Lancaster AJ-G, the lead aircraft flown by WGDDR Guy Gibson on 17 May 1943, with a Dambuster Bouncing Bomb loaded. (IWM)

On 16 May (the day of the raid), Hay joined his crew and the more than 130 other aircrew for a detailed five-hour mission briefing for Operation CHASTISE including the Ruhr Valley dam targets of the Mohne Dam, Eder Dam and Scorpe Dam. Later in the day, the crews were given another briefing where AVM Ralph Cochrane, Commander 5th Group, addressed the crews.



617SQN Dambuster raid Australian aircrew – from left: Robert Hay, Lance Howard, Dave Shannon, Jack Leggo, Fred Spafford, Mick Martin, Les Knight, and Bob Kellow. (VWM)

Late in the evening, the nineteen Lancasters including AJ-P *Popsie* piloted by FLTLT Mick Martin with FLGOFF Bob Hay as bomb aimer, took off for the audacious raid in three attack waves. About three hours later, the aircraft of the first wave designated for the Mohne Dam arrived over the target and commenced their attacks directed by WGCDR Guy Gibson.

Hay's aircraft was the third Lancaster tasked to attack the Mohne Dam. Their task was compounded with the failure of the second Lancaster to successfully attack the dam with the bouncing bomb bouncing over the dam wall and destroying a power station at its base causing much smoke in addition to the German anti-aircraft fire. Notwithstanding, Martin kept the aircraft stable, and Hay directed the dropping of the bouncing bomb at the appropriate time to allow it to bounce up to the dam wall but the bomb veered off to the left potentially damaged by the incident at base the day before when it dropped from the aircraft onto the hardstand. A third bouncing bomb dropped by the fourth aircraft detonated at the dam wall base and finally caused the dam wall to break.



Mohne Dam breached with water cascading down the valley on the 17 May 1943 after the spectacular attack the night before by 617 SQN.(AWM)

For his role in planning and execution of the mission, Hay was awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross. The Citation read:

“On the night of 16th May 1943, a force of Lancaster bombers was detailed to attack the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams in Germany. The operation was one of great difficulty and hazard, demanding a great degree of skill and courage and close cooperation between the crews of the aircraft engaged. Nevertheless, a telling blow was struck at the enemy by the successful breaching of the Mohne and Eder dams. This outstanding success reflects the greatest credit on the efforts of the following personnel who participated in the operation in various capacities as members of aircraft crews.”

Hay received the award from Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, the wife of King George VI, at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace on June 22nd along with a number of other aviators who participated in the raid. On 23 July 1943 he was promoted to the rank of substantive Flight Lieutenant.



Flight Lieutenant Robert Hay and partner at Buckingham Palace for the awarding of his Bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross in June 1943 for his actions in the planning and execution of Dambusters Raid (OP CHASTISE). (IWM)



617SQN aircrew after the famous Dambusters Raid. From left: FLTLT J. Leggo DFC and Bar, NSW; FLTLT H. Martin DSO DFC, NSW; FSGT T. Simpson DFM, Tas; FLTLT R. Hay DFC and Bar, SA; PLTOFF B. Foxlee DFM, Qld (IWM)

Demonstrating the potential for precision strike bombing in the Dambusters Raid, 617 SQN was tasked to further develop precision bombing techniques and conduct precision strike missions. It experimented with new bomb sights, target marking techniques and new bombs including the 'earthquake' bombs developed by Barnes Wallis. Hay remained on strength at 617 SQN and as the Squadron Bombing Leader was a key element in these initiatives. He was instrumental in the integration of the Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight (STABS) capability developed to drop bombs accurately from altitude. Hay set the standard with an average accuracy deviation of just 64 yards.



A RAF WgCdr lays a poppy on the grave of FLTLT Robert Hay in 2016 honoring the former Dambuster aviator.

On 12 February 1944, Martin and his crew including Hay, flying AJ-P *Popsie* were conducting a strike mission on the Antheor Viaduct in southern France near Cannes. The viaduct was a critical rail link to Italy. The mission involved dropping the new 12,000lb bomb using the STABS targeting device and the target was heavily fortified with at least twelve heavy AAA guns and several light AAA. Martin's aircraft was being used as a pathfinder to mark the target. However, the crew had trouble identifying the target and Martin had to make repeated runs over the target. On the final run, a 20mm shell fired from AAA at the viaduct hit Martin's aircraft exploding in the ammunition trays under the front target. Upon exiting the target area, Martin made a call with the aircraft to verify the status of his aircrew. There was no response from Bob Hay who was found to have been killed instantly by the exploding shell. The Flight Engineer was wounded in the leg. Martin landed the badly damaged aircraft at a small airfield recently prepared on Sardinia and Hay's body was extracted from the nose of the aircraft. He was buried the next day at the Cagliari (St Michele) Communal Cemetery which the Americans were using for their own dead. In 1947, his body was exhumed and re-interred in a different section of the same cemetery which had been given to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Upon his headstone are the words "*Too dearly loved to be forgotten.*"

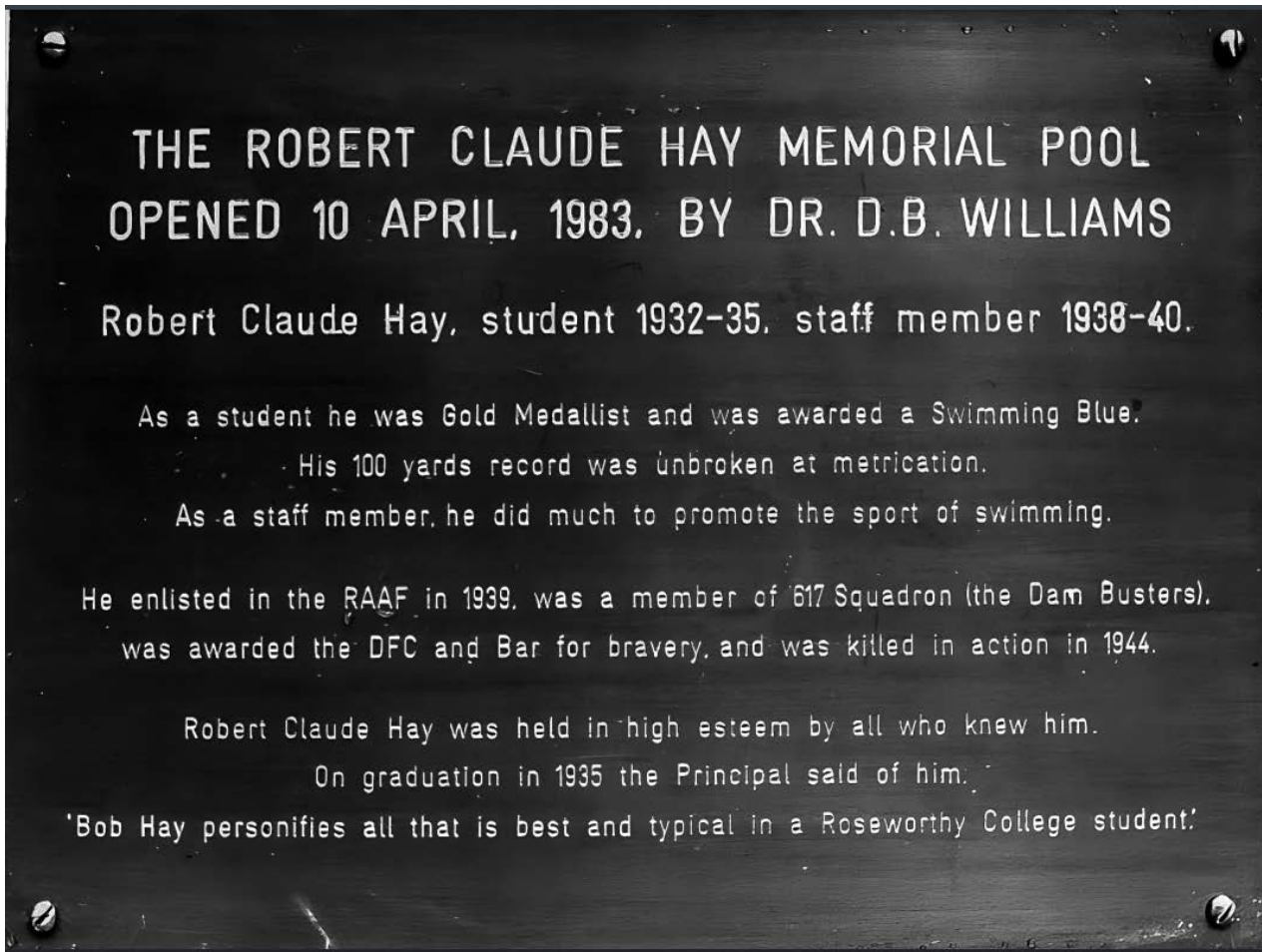
Tragically, the squadrons bomb leader who had survived two Bomber Command postings, the audacious Dambusters Raid and was nearing the completion of his third posting had been killed. Ironically, he was the only member of Martin's AJ-P *Popsie* Dambuster crew to not survive the war. His death hit Martin hard; he did not fly a 617 SQN mission again but did return to operational duties later in the war flying Mosquito's.

The principal of Roseworthy Agriculture College wrote:

"It has been the lot of very few men to do more in the way of active service in this war than Robert Hay. His luck held so well, for so long, that to learn of his last flight was most grievous to us all. Both as a member of the staff and as a student, Bob Hay, with his happy carefree disposition more nearly symbolised the life of an agricultural college student than anyone I've known."

Meanwhile, Hay left his wife and a daughter he had never met.

The Roseworthy College later honoured their former student and staff member, FLTLT Robert Hay, by naming their pool in his honour. The plaque is still emplaced on a wall at the pool:



FLTLT Hay was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar, the 1939-1945 Star, Aircrew Europe Star, Defence Medal, and War Medal 1939-1945.

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