

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

FLG OFF Ernest John Milde (1924 – 2023)

World War 2 Bomber Command Pilot

Ernest John Milde was born on 5 March 1924 in Kilkenny, an inner suburb of Adelaide, the son of Edward John Milde and Eliza Agnes Ann Cotton. His father, known as Eddie, enlisted with the 15th Reinforcements for the 3rd Light Horse Regiment and saw action as a Gunner on the Western Front in some of the major World War 1 battles with the 14th Field Artillery Brigade and the 15th Field Artillery Regiment in 1917 and 1918. He suffered injuries including shellshock, spending substantial time in hospital and not returning to Australia till late 1919. Post war, the effects of war remained, and he struggled to maintain steady employment to support his family living in a War Service home in Kilkenny.

Ern grew up attending Challa Gardens Primary School and then completed one year of High School at Woodfield High School. He enjoyed all sports and played cricket for his schools. However, the impact of Polio outbreaks in schools and the sudden death of Eddie in an industrial accident in late 1939 forced Ern to leave school and seek work initially as a messenger boy at a drapery shop and then as a trainee salesman with Dunlop Company to support the fatherless family.

The coming of war offered Ern the opportunity to seek alternative employment. He once recalled "I didn't know much about planes and wasn't even very keen on them - It wasn't until a mate said that we needed to do something about joining up, because if we didn't do that we were going to get called up anyway when we were 18 and shoved into the army – and we didn't want to do that." Thus, Ern registered with the RAAF for enlistment and was placed on a reserve until being called up in mid-1942. He enlisted in the RAAF at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, on 9 June 1942 aged only 18 years old. Indeed, he learnt to fly a plane before he learnt to drive a car.

Rather than initially going to Victor Harbor for basic training, Ern was immediately posted to No 1 Recruit Depot at Shepparton where he completed basic training. No 1 Recruit Depot was established in Melbourne in 1940 to conduct basic recruit training including drill, weapons, and aircraft identification. The unit moved to Shepparton at the Shepparton Showgrounds in February 1942. Accommodated in tents, Milde recalled the training and conditions as being tough with drill instructors who were 'nasty'. In addition to conducting basic recruit training, the unit also trained drill instructors, guards, aerodrome defence instructors, air defence Officers and Warrant Officers (disciplinary).



Studio portrait of Ernest Milde taken in 2016. (AWM)



Enlistment photo of Ernest Milde. (NAA)

Milde was then posted to No 6 Service Flying Training Squadron (6SFTS) at RAAF Station Mallala not as a trainee pilot but as supplementary staff. For four months he served in various support positions including conducting guard duties. It seems the Air Force had placed him in a holding pattern waiting for training slots to emerge. Finally, he was able to commence his formal training and from December 1942 to March 1943 he completed basic training at No 4 Initial Training School, Victor Harbour. He then completed No 1 Elementary Flying Training School at RAAF Parafield in northern Adelaide from March to May 1943, achieving 68 hours on Tiger Moths. He got into trouble in his last week for low flying and found himself in the kitchens washing dishes for a week prior to graduation.



RAAF Tiger Moths training aircraft of No 1 Elementary Flying Training School at RAAF Parafield in World War 2. (SAAM)

Milde was then posted to 6SFTS at RAAF Mallala from May to September 1943 flying Ansons and Oxfords. Established in August 1942 at RAAF Station Mallala, 6SFTS was one of the training units to train aircrew trainees who had completed their elementary flying training in more challenging flying training such as instrument flying, night flying, advanced aerobatics and formation flying.

Flying training had its risks. During the war there were more than 35 aircraft accidents across South Australia of which 20 involved Avro Anson training aircraft. 39 aircrew perished in flying training accidents alone at 6FTS, Mallala, between 1941-45. Between March and September 1943 alone there were five RAAF Avro Anson crashes in South Australia in which 16 RAAF personnel perished including three involving 6SFTS at Mallala. On 14 July 1943, a 6SFTS Avro Anson crashed into St Vincent Gulf, off Parham, South Australia, resulting in the deaths of all five RAAF members aboard. Only a week later, another 6FTS Anson crashed near Mallala on 21 July 1943 on a night navigation exercise, resulting in the death of the young trainee pilot. On 23 September, another 6SFTS Anson crashed near Tarlee, east of Mallala, killing all four crew on board. One wonders what impacts these crashes would have had on trainee pilots like Milde at the time.



RAAF Base Mallala during World War 2 showing the large number of hangars and aircraft. (SAAM)

Milde successfully completed his training in September, recording 144 hours on Avro Ansons and receiving his flying Badge and being promoted to Sergeant on 23 September 1943. He was selected for duty in England and sailed from Sydney on 4 November 1943 travelling via ship to San Francisco, train to New York and the *Queen Mary* to England arriving on 10 December 1943. Due to the large number of aircrew awaiting operational training in England, Ern spent some time on secondment sorting mail in London as well as a stay in hospital.

He attended No 3 (Pilot) Advanced Flying Unit at RAF South Cerney in Gloucestershire from May to August 1944, recording 58 hours flying Airspeed Oxfords. The advanced flying units provided essential consolidation training and familiarisation with European flying conditions for Commonwealth aircrew trained through the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Milde then attended No 21 Operational Training Unit located at RAF Moreton-on-Marsh in Gloucestershire from August to November 1944. 21OTU was a heavy bomber conversion unit where aircrew came together to form a crew and convert onto the Vickers Wellington heavy bomber. During the training Milde recorded more than 76 hours on Wellingtons with most at night. He then proceeded to No 1656 Heavy Conversion Unit at RAF Lindholm where he converted on to the Avro Lancaster, recording 47 hours on the heavy bomber with his crew from November 1944 to March 1945.

He finally arrived at No 460 Squadron (RAAF) at RAF Binbrook on 5 March 1945 on his 21st birthday. After three years of training, he was posted to an operational unit to conduct active service. Ten days later he flew his first operational mission on a risky strike mission targeting the Deurag Oil Refinery at Misburg in northern Germany. As per a unit convention initiated by the former Australian Commanding Officer Huey Edwards, a 460SQN pilots first mission was always as a co-pilot alongside an experienced pilot to show them the ropes. Milde later modestly recalled the mission was an eye-opener.



Ern Milde (front center) with his Lancaster crew (Milde family)

Two days later he flew his first mission as captain – a nine-hour sortie deep into Germany targeting Nuremburg. The attack comprised 270 Lancasters and 27 Mosquitos with 19 from 460 SQN including Erns. The mission encountered significant air defence and ten percent of the Lancasters were lost in action. He later referred to the mission as ‘nerve racking’.



460SQN Lancasters being loaded for a strike mission in July 1944 at RAF Binbrook. (AWM)

In all, Milde flew ten operational missions for a total of almost 60 hours in the air including raids against dangerous targets such as Nuremburg, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Nordhausen, Keil, Heligoland and

Bremen. While the war was in its closing stages, flak and enemy air defence were still prevalent. In its last eight bombing raids, 460 SQN lost seven Lancasters and 33 brave airmen Killed in Action.

He once recalled one hairy mission when his aircraft was attacked by a German Messerschmitt fighter and he had to throw the massive Lancaster into a corkscrew manoeuvre, banking left and right, climbing and diving to evade the German fighter at 20,000 feet in the dark. Survival in such circumstance was largely dictated by a combination of luck and airmanship by the crew.



Ern Milde and his crew perched on the inboard port engine of a 460SQN Lancaster at RAF Binbrook. (Milde family)

Thankfully, Ern had those elements. His last strike mission was on 22 April 1945 – he missed the famous final 460 Squadron strike mission of the war on 25 April, ANZAC Day, on Hitler's Eagles Nest at Berchtesgaden in southern Germany due to aircraft issues.

During the last weeks of the war in Europe, the allies conducted humanitarian relief operations in German controlled areas of the Netherlands to provide famine relief for the Dutch population. Codenamed Operation MANNA, RAF Bomber Command delivered 6,680 tons of food from more than 3,150 Lancaster sorties. The missions were somewhat different to the traditional bombing mission as they required the aircraft to deliver the food at low level due to the lack of parachutes and using designated flight paths. 460 SQN conducted seven OP MANNA drops delivering over 340 tonnes of food in total which would have been enough to feed 400,000 people for one day. Milde flew the second of the 460SQN sorties on 1 May 1945 delivering food to the Rotterdam area.

He also participated in OP EXODUS, the evacuation of allied prisoners-of-war from German controlled areas. He flew the last of the 460SQN flights evacuating 24 POWs from Germany on the 11 May 1945.



Relief supplies being loaded on to an RAF Lancaster for OP MANNA. (AWM)

Reflecting the operational tempo of flying at a heavy bomber unit late in the war, Between March and September, Milde also recorded 95 hours flying the Lancaster on routine unit training missions in addition to the dedicated 60 hours on strike missions.

With the war ending in June 1945, Ern arrived back in Adelaide and was discharged in December 1945. For his operational service, Ern was awarded the 1939 – 1945 Star, France and German Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939 – 1945, and the Australian Service Medal 1939 – 1945. He was awarded the Legion of Honour from the French government in 2015.



Ern Milde WW2 medals - from left: 1939 – 1945 Star, France and German Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939 – 1945, and the Australian Service Medal 1939 – 1945. (Milde family)

Returning to Australia, Milde started an accounting course and accepted a job in Angaston, where he met his future wife Daphne. The couple were married for 71 years.

Milde participated in veteran’s organisations including the Returned Services League and the Royal Australian Air Force association (later Air Force association). He was a member of the Victor Harbor RSL and served in various positions. Milde was a regular participant in Anzac Day marches in Victor Harbor and Adelaide.

A long-time member of the Air Force Association (South Australia) Mitcham Branch, Milde attended Air Force Commemorative services in Adelaide in recent years. He returned to Mallala where he had trained during World War 2 for the special Air Force Centenary Commemorative Service at Mallala inn September 2021 where he spoke to



Ern Milde with His Excellency, Hieu Van Le, Governor of South Australia, and Group Captain Andrew Hoffman, a former CO 460SQN. (AFA-SA)

schoolchildren about his service in World War 2. Ern was a loved, quietly spoken and well-respected man member of the Association.

Ern Milde passed away on 7 July 2023. He was one of South Australia's few remaining Bomber Command veterans and the second last 460 Squadron aircrew veteran in South Australia. He was one of a special generation who gave their all for our country. He was part of the Air Force family and so members of RAAF Edinburgh including No 462 Squadron, a Bomber Command squadron, and the Air Force Association joined the family, friends and members of the Adelaide community to farewell him at his funeral on 18 July 2023.



Ern Milde at Mallala War Cemetery during the Air Force Centenary in 2021. (Defence)



Ern Milde talking to school children about World War 2 during a 2021 Commemorative Service (Defence)



Ern Milde in his lounge room wearing his World War 2 peaked cap

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