

LAC James Langstone Cronk

Young South Australian participates in the Tarakan Amphibious Landing

As we acknowledge the 99th anniversary of Victory in the Pacific and the end of World War 2 on the 15 August, it seems appropriate to acknowledge in the August SAAM Newsletter, a local South Australian RAAF veteran who recently turned 100. Born on 6 August 1924 in Prospect, Adelaide, South Australia, James (Jim) Langstone Cronk was the eldest of four children. He grew up in the Prospect area during the Depression when times were hard. He left school at 14 and worked as a labourer before gaining employment at an ammunition factory at Islington located near Prospect making 25 pounder shells.

Aged only 19, he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force on 9 November 1943 at No 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide. Having been a volunteer with St Johns Ambulance Brigade, he wanted to be a medical orderly in the RAAF but was enlisted as a trainee technician. He completed recruit training at No. 1 Recruit Depot, Shepparton, Victoria. The unit 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, the training and conditions were tough. In addition to conducting basic recruit training, the unit also trained drill instructors, guards, aerodrome defence instructors, Air Defence Officers and Warrant Officers (disciplinary).



Portrait image of Jim Cronk in World War 2 (Cronk Family)

He was then posted to No. 4 School of Technical Training located in Adelaide on North Terrace from early December 1943 to early March 1944 to complete initial technical training. Located in Adelaide's central business district on North Terrace, No. 4 School of Technical training was formed in April 1940 as one of seven technical schools around Australia to assist in training the thousands of airmen required to sustain what became the fourth largest air force in the world in late 1944. Accommodation and training were provided in the one area. The school



No. 4 School of Technical Training on North Terrace, Adelaide, during World War 2. (SLSA)

conducted training for maintenance

personnel, service police, storekeepers, trainee technicians, electricians, cooks, stewards, fitters, armourers, and dental staff. By late 1945, almost 22,000 trainees had passed through the school.

He then attended No. 1 Engineering School located at the Melbourne Showgrounds, Ascot Vale, from early March to June 1944. Formed in March 1940, the school quickly grew and by December, 205 courses had already been commenced with 2,600 undergoing training with 740 staff including 40 officers. Maintenance training on Wirraway aircraft commenced in March 1941. New courses commenced in 1943 included electrician instruments, instrument maker and fabric worker, reflecting the need to further expand to support the needs of the ever-expanding Air Force and the need for diverse specialist trades.



Trainee flight mechanics learning about an engine at No 1 Engineering School. (SLVIC)

Accordingly, the school had a significant operational tempo and conducted many ground training courses beyond the engineering field including intelligence, communications, language, motor transport, and cooking. While the end of the war in August 1945, caused a sudden burst of Japanese linguist courses, by November, the school had largely ceased training with staff being posted out and discharged. In March 1946, the school was reformed as RAAF Ground Training School and integrated into No. 5 Aircraft Depot. Over its six years of service at the showgrounds, No. 1 Engineering School had trained almost 58,700 personnel.

Cronk later recalled that he “was shifted to the Ascot Vale showgrounds in the middle of winter, and we were sleeping out in the grounds in Masonite huts with wooden floors.” Talking about the training, he said “We had to learn all about the magnetos, the timing of the engines, and the different sections along internal combustion engines. We had a couple of engines there that we pulled to pieces – we had to take the pistons out and the con rods, and all that sort of thing – and then we had to put them together again. From there, we had to learn all about the air screws and the different types.”

Completing his training, he was re-mustered to Flight Mechanic on 4 June 1944 and posted to No 6 Service Flying Training School at RAAF Mallala, South Australia. 6SFTS was established on 25 August 1941 by Wing Commander, R.N. Brearley DSO, MC, AFC, a World War 1 veteran and noted aviation pioneer between the wars, as one of the Empire Air Training Scheme schools in Australia to train air crew for the Commonwealth. Designed to consolidate trainees who had completed elementary flying training at other units, the Service Flying Training Schools introduced techniques such as instrument flying, night flying, advanced aerobatics, and formation flying. One of eight such units established around Australia to train pilots under the Empire Air Training Scheme, 6SFTS operated Avro Anson and Airspeed Oxford twin-engine trainers with Tiger Moth and Moth Minor aircraft in support roles.



Jim Cronk in uniform in Adelaide in 1943. (Cronk family)

Over 2,250 trainees, including a course of Royal Netherlands East Indies Air Force airmen, completed pilot training at the unit during World War 2, until it was disbanded in January 1946. It was a large and busy base with two large aprons, over 14 hangars and over 160 aircraft. The unit flew 7,689 flying hours and graduated 2,250 trainee pilots between 1942 and 1946. As a junior flight mechanic at the unit, Cronk would have worked on the various aircraft performing routine maintenance and repairs to base infrastructure such as buildings in a similar role to what a civilian electrician would perform.



Aerial image of RAAF Mallala during World War 2 showing the two extensive main flightlines, numerous Avro Ansons and Oxford Training aircraft, hangars and infrastructure. (SAAM)

While at Mallala, he married Audrey Hill in October 1944. They had met while he was making shells at the ammunition factory and he would ride his bike around to see her every Sunday before he enlisted.

For the first several months of 1945, Cronk was posted to No. 2 Personnel Depot at Bradfield Park, Sydney, for one month, and then No. 1 Reserve Personnel Pool, Townsville, for several months where he was essentially placed into holding units awaiting movement orders to an operational unit in northern Australia. In April 1945, he was posted to No. 75 Squadron based at Morotai in the Dutch East Indies. He sailed for Morotai with the 2/48 Battalion which was deploying to Morotai ahead of the ahead of forthcoming Borneo operations.

75SQN had already seen distinguished service in the New Guinea campaign. Formed as one of three fighter squadrons in early 1942 to defend Australia's north from Japanese attacks (76 Squadron and 77 Squadron being the others), 75 SQN was quickly thrown into the thick of combat one day after arriving in Port Moresby conducting a strike against Lae destroying 12 aircraft on the ground. Until this stage, only four of its 21 pilots had ever seen combat. The squadron's younger pilots had an average of nine days training on the Kittyhawks and had fired their guns only once. The unit saw daily combat over a dramatic six weeks in the defence of Port Moresby before withdrawing a month later to Townsville with its remaining serviceable aircraft after American Airacobra aircraft reinforcements arrived.



75SQN Kittyhawk at Milne Bay in 1943. (AWM)

Reconstituted over the next several months, the unit returned to New Guinea in late July where it again proved instrumental in the defence of Milne Bay for several months of fierce combat before withdrawing again to Horn Island for reconstitution. During 1944, 75SQN conducted operations as part of No. 78 Wing, No. 10 Operational Group, along the northern coastline of New Guinea progressively moving in support of the advancing allies operating out of Nadzab, Cape Gloucester, Tadj, Hollandia, and then Noemfoor in the eastern islands of Dutch East Indies. In December 1944, the unit was relocated to Morotai, an island located centrally between the Celebes and New Guinea that the allies captured to mount operations to the Philippines and Borneo.

Cronk arrived at Morotai at a particularly interesting time, with the forces preparing for the forthcoming OBOE operation on Borneo. RAAF elements were suffering morale problems, highlighted by a group of fighter pilots declaring their resignation due to the RAAF being used in mop up operations in what is now known as the Morotai Mutiny. The actions were ironic in that the RAAF units were about to participate in major joint operations called the OBOE Operations on Borneo including the first actions against Tarakan, a small island located just off northeast Borneo.

On 24 April, only several weeks after arriving at 75SQN, Cronk embarked on a United States Navy Landing Ship Tank (LST) in an advance party of 75SQN personnel to participate in the initial Tarakan Landings. They sailed on 27 April and arrived off Tarakan in the early hours of 1 May. The LST went ashore in the evening and the 75SQN flight began disembarking in the early hours of the following morning. Cronk later recalled not knowing what to expect as they had been hearing and seeing ongoing naval gunfire support and airstrikes. He went ashore only with his rifle and bayonet, field kit and emergency rations.

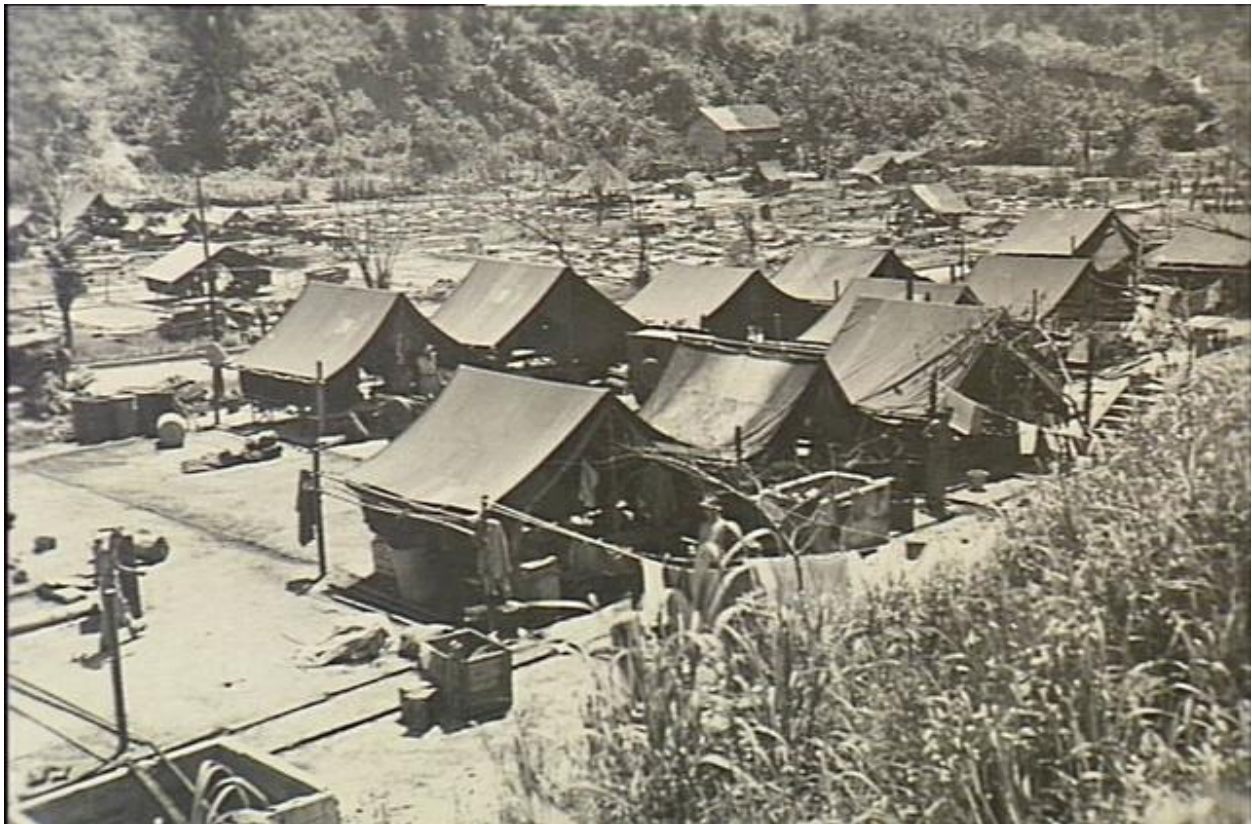


RAAF personnel watch the airstrikes on Tarakan Island from a United States Navy LST on 1 May 1945. (AWM)

The 75SQN party worked unloading equipment and stores during the day under the protection of both air patrols and strikes and ground defence operations. Cronk returned to the LST that night and then came back onshore the next morning. They walked to their selected camp site and immediately established a defensive perimeter with all ranks sharing guard duties. On the evening of 4 May, Japanese forces attacked the RAAF camp with RAAF personnel accounting for three Japanese soldiers for the loss of one RAAF ground defence guard. He recalls the Japanese had a 75mm howitzer hidden in a cave on a nearby hill that they would bring out to fire rounds onto the airstrip while they were working on it. Meanwhile, the 75SQN personnel also had to deal with the threat of mines. On 6 and 7 May, RAAF bomb disposal crews cleared 114 mines around the airstrip and dispersal areas.



Australian vehicles and equipment being unloaded from American LST at Tarakan in early May. (AWM)



RAAF accommodation tents on Tarakan, established just after the initial landing on 1 May. (AWM)

By 7 May, the unloading was completed, and a stronger defensive perimeter was established, allowing the 75SQN detachment to move into basic housing without roofing in the Tarakan village providing a welcome relief to the sweltering, sweaty and mud laden tents used thus far. For the next month, Cronk and the 75SQN detachment assisted No. 2 Airfield Construction Squadron in repairing the airfield for air operations. Being largely a swamp, there was little stone on the island and thus, bomb craters had to be filled by filling empty fuel drums with dirt in the craters and then pour oil over the top to bind them. Similarly, small trees were chopped down and placed side by side covered with oil and dirt to create roads. It was hot, humid and physically draining work.



RAAF personnel working with Dutch East Indies staff repairing the Tarakan Airfield by filling oil drums with sand and dirt. (AWM)

The airfield repairs took longer than expected and finally after a month, the airfield was ready to take aircraft and the 75SQN detachment prepared for the arrival of the unit's Kittyhawk aircraft. The aircraft arrived on 28 June and combat operations commenced only two days later from the repaired airfield with the 75SQN maintainers now focused on servicing their Kittyhawk aircraft. Their task was not easy – challenged by the hot, humid conditions combined with various operational risks, the maintainers had to not just complete routine servicing but also mechanical repairs, battle damage repair and repair aircraft damaged by using the poor airfield which was still proving problematic with poor drainage and being very soft.



RAAF personnel taking a break, getting a brew in the second week after the initial landing on Tarakan. (AWM)

He later recalled sitting out on the end of the wing in the heat as the aircraft taxied into alert areas after missions. He said "It was the only way the pilot could see where he was going because the nose was so high, so you would have to walk out there and sit down. The pilot couldn't hear what you were talking about, so it was no good talking. It was all hand signals ... and you would have to guide the plane – straight ahead, round the corner."



75SQN Kittyhawk damaged after landing on the soft and boggy Tarakan Airstrip, highlighting the challenges faced by the squadron and its personnel in the first month after landing on Tarakan on 1 May 1945. (AWM)

On 23 June, he was posted to the co-located No. 30 Squadron which had only just arrived to participate in the Borneo air operations. Formed on 9 March 1942 at RAAF Richmond, No. 30 Squadron was the first ever RAAF Beaufighter squadron. Intended as a long-range fighter unit, it completed work-up training and initially deployed to Townsville where it escorted anti-shipping patrols. A small detachment then deployed to Milne Bay where it conducted anti-shipping strikes, seeing its first action. The squadron was then deployed to Port Moresby from where it operated as a low-level ground attack unit supporting the Allied efforts in Papua, a role in which the Beaufighter proved highly successful.

The squadron saw service in the Southwest Pacific, in New Guinea and the Dutch East Indies, mainly in ground attack and anti-shipping missions. Its most notable action was in March 1943 when the squadron saw action in the Battle of Bismarck Sea, conducting low-level attacks on a Japanese convoy – it played a crucial role in the battle which was a heavy defeat for the Japanese forces.

As part of the Australian First Tactical Air Force, No. 30 Squadron moved to Morotai in the Netherlands East Indies in November 1944, conducting operations in the Celebes Sea and the islands of Ambon, Ceram and Halmahera. The squadron relocated to Tarakan just after 75 Squadron to conduct offensive operations against Japanese forces on Borneo as part of the Oboe Campaign. The move was no doubt related to operational need and would have posed challenges for the young Cronk, having to immediately conduct maintenance on a new, larger two-engine aircraft in a combat zone.



A RAAF Beaufighter of 31SQN, a sister squadron of 30SQN, lands at the Tarakan Airfield in late June 1945. (AWM)

Cronk remembers the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, as it occurred on his 21st birthday – 6 August 1945. With the Japanese surrender coming on 15th August, there was a thought they could be home soon but 30 Squadron remained in theatre conducting patrols and leaflet dropping through the Dutch East Indies until December 1945. Cronk was offered the opportunity to deploy to Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupational Force that had a large Australian contingent. Cronk elected to return home and be with his wife who he had seen little of over their first two years of marriage. He returned to Australia in December and was discharged on 29 January 1946. For his service with the RAAF, Cronk was awarded the Pacific Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal 1939 – 1945, and the Australian Service Medal 1939 – 1945.

On 6 August 2024, Jim Cronk celebrated his 100th birthday – one of South Australia's few remaining World War 2 veterans and the State's last 75SQN veteran.



Portrait of Jim Cronk taken between 2015 and 2017 for an AWM WW2 veterans initiative. Note the 75SQN tie. (AWM)

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