

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

### SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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#### Wing Commander Alexander Lewis Hamilton (1914 – 1977)

*South Australian who flew in the Battle of Britain and served with the RAF Postwar*



Portrait image of a youthful  
PLTOFF Alexander Lewis Hamilton

Alexander Lewis Hamilton, commonly referred to as Lewis or Lew, was born on 17 December 1914 in Adelaide, South Australia. His father, John Alexander Hamilton, was born in Glasgow moving to South Australia gaining work as mining engineer who at one stage managed the Paringa and West Kanmantoo Mining Company. His mother, Alice Lewis, the daughter of Peter and Esther, came from Kanmantoo, her mother came from an early settler family that arrived in South Australia in 1839 – only three years after the colony was founded. Lew was the youngest of two sons in the family. John Alexander Hamilton passed away at his home in 1915 when Lew was only eight months old leaving Alice to bring up the two boys as a widow.

Living with his mum and brother in Grange, Lew attended Grange Primary School before completing high school at Adelaide Technical High School. He commenced work with the Adelaide Electric Supply Company in 1931. During the 1930's he commenced studying Commerce at Adelaide University part time. While at university, he was a member of the Adelaide University rifle shooting team taking part in the inter varsity shooting competitions in 1936 and 1937. From 1931 to 1934, he served in the militia reaching the rank of sergeant serving as a Quartermaster with the Engineers in the 4<sup>th</sup> Military District (South Australia).



SGT Lew Hamilton participating in a rifle shooting competition in the 1930's in Adelaide. (Hamilton Family)



Lewis had a keen interest in aviation and was actively involved with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia at Parafield undergoing flying lessons and participating in a number of cross-country flights including one to Naracoorte flying a Miles Hawk aircraft. He was one of ten people including World War 1 Australian Flying Corps veteran Fred Huxley to fly in five aircraft on the cross-country two-day exercise.

The Royal Aero Club of SA Miles Hawk that Lew Hamilton flew in to Naracoorte in January 1939. (Hamilton Family)

In 1938, he applied for a short service commission in the Royal Air Force coordinated through the Australian Government. In January 1939, the Australian Minister of Defence, Brigadier Geoffrey Street, announced fourteen Australians, including South Australians Alexander Lewis Hamilton and Clarence Charles Bennett, were selected out of a large field of applicants for short service commissions with the Royal Air Force. The initiative was one of several where the Australian Government faced with limited RAAF pilot training capacity provided several contingents of trainee aircrew to the RAF in the leadup to World War 2.

On the 11 January, friends farewelled Lew Hamilton at a party at an Adelaide hotel. Attending were three of those who had accompanied Hamilton a week earlier the Aero Club navigation exercise to Naracoorte including the clubs Chief Flying Instructor, J.H Buckham and Lloyd Dunn, Lew's best mate. Lloyd Dunn



Lew Hamilton (seated centre) alongside J. Buckham, Chief Flying Instructor, Royal Aero Club of SA being farewelled at an Adelaide hotel before he departed for the UK. (Hamilton Family)

later became very successful in producing metal windmills and became the Godfather of Lew's eldest son, John Hamilton.

On 2 February 1939, Lewis and his fellow South Australian, Charles Bennett embarked on the SS *Ormonde* at Melbourne bound for the UK with the thirteen other Australians.



The 14 Australians selected for RAF Short Service Commissions in January 1939 onboard the SS *Ormonde*. Lew Hamilton is the first from the left in the front row. His future 248SQN mate, Clarrie Bennett is first on the left in the 2<sup>nd</sup> row. (Hamilton Family)



The 14 Australians selected for RAF Short Service Commissions after arriving in London on their way to join the RAF. Lew Hamilton is in the centre carrying overcoat on his arm. (Hamilton Family)

Lewis along with the other 14 young Australians completed initial flying training at No 10 Elementary & Reserve Flying Training School at Yatesbury in Wiltshire from March 1939. From 1936, the flying school was operated by the Bristol Aeroplane Company to train pilots for service in the RAF or the Reserve, using de Havilland Tiger Moth aircraft. Hamilton's course was one of the last such courses with the RAF Air Ministry taking over site in 1939 to upgrade the airfield to wartime standards including the construction of Bellman and Blister hangars, Stanton air raid shelters, and the laying down of a Sommerfield Track (steel mesh matting) on the two runways. In late 1939, pilot training at RAF Yatesbury was transferred elsewhere so that the base could be used for airborne wireless operator training.

Hamilton and Bennett were then posted to No 5 Flying Training School (5FTS) at RAF Sealand located northwest of Chester on the Welsh-English border to undertake intermediate flying training and obtain his Wings. Originally established as a civilian airfield, it was taken over by the military in 1916 for training with two twin hangars built in 1917 used by the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. Originally named Royal Flying Corps Station Shotwick and later RAF Shotwick, the station was renamed RAF Sealand at the start of World War II.



Trainee pilots and Miles Master Aircraft at RAF Sealand in World War 2



A RAF Airspeed Oxford training aircraft similar to what Lew Hamilton would have trained in at RAF Sealand. (IWM)

Completing pilot training and receiving his Wings and commissioned as a Pilot Officer on 6 November 1939, Hamilton was immediately posted to No 248 Squadron (RAF) joining his South Australian colleague Charles Bennett who had joined, travelled to England and completed flying training with him. By March 1940, he was confirmed in his appointment as a Pilot Officer following probation.

Originally formed in August 1918, 248 SQN was a seaplane squadron that flew anti-submarine patrols off the Yorkshire coast before disbanding in March 1919. The unit reformed on 30 October 1939 at RAF Hendon in London as a night fighter squadron in Fighter Command. It received 18 Bristol Blenheim IF aircraft which were modified from the light bomber version for night fighter operations with additional guns.

The Bristol Blenheim was a light bomber. It was one of the first British aircraft to feature an all-metal stressed-skin construction, retractable landing gear, flaps, a powered gun turret and variable-pitch propellers. When first incorporated into the RAF in 1935, the Blenheim was a modern aircraft with a top speed of 266 kmph and able to fly faster than many existing bomber and fighter aircraft. However, by 1940 it was faced with significantly better German fighter aircraft and the Blenheim quickly proved unsuitable for daylight fighter missions. The aircraft had three crew comprising a pilot, observer/navigator and wireless operator/air gunner.



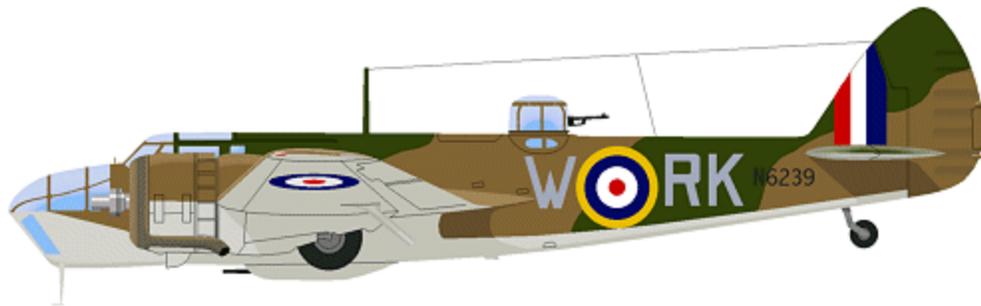
A No 248 Squadron (RAF) Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF with the characteristic extended nose and gun pack for fighter missions on its underbelly. (IWM)

The Bristol Blenheim IF proved inadequate as a night fighter during workup training due to the absence of radar and speed. Thus, 248 SQN was transferred to Coastal Command and relocated to RAF North Coates, Lincolnshire in February 1940 until it received the updated Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF. The Mk IVF featured a revised and elongated nose, heavier defensive armament, additional fuel capacity, more powerful Mercury XV engines and a gun pack mounted under the aircraft.



248SQN Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF on a coastal patrol mission. (IWM)

The unit began conducting long range reconnaissance operations before returning to Fighter Command in April 1940 where it conducted long



A Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF in No 248 Squadron livery

range fighter patrols over the North Sea. These missions were inherently risky as they invariably involved the aircraft flying as single aircraft or at most, in pairs. In May, the unit relocated to Dyce near Aberdeen in Scotland with a detachment at Montrose on the eastern Scottish coastline to extend the Blenheim range on patrols out across the North Sea. In July, the squadron was moved further north to Sumburgh in the Shetland Islands in the far north of Scotland. It returned to Coastal Command tasked with anti-invasion patrols, reconnaissance flights over the Norwegian coast, attacks on enemy shipping and long-range air patrols for convoys. Their Norwegian coast patrols operated between Kristiansand in the South and Alesund in the North including areas such as Egersund, Stavanger and Bergen. For example, on 18 October, Hamilton took off from his base at Sumburgh in Bristol Blenheim WR-V tasked to conduct a reconnaissance patrol of the Norwegian coast. At Sando Island, he bombed a lookout scoring several hits and then continued along the coast finding two merchant vessels in the Fjords.

On 23 October, 248SQN received a report that an enemy aircraft was shadowing Royal Navy destroyers operating in the North Sea and Lewis Hamilton was tasked to conduct a long range intercept to either destroy it or drive it away. Without radar, the task was like finding a needle in a haystack at night and thus, the enemy aircraft was not detected.

In press reporting of January 1941, Hamilton, now a Flying Officer, had completed 39 operational sorties from the Shetlands and described its remoteness as akin to a Central Australian shanty town. He noted the squadron's only pastimes were seal hunting, duck shooting, and fishing, when the region is free from blizzards and gales. In 1940, the base had yet to be fully developed and the conditions were basic with all personnel sleeping in tents.



The harsh conditions at RAF Sumburgh on the Shetland Islands.

On 1 October, his South Australian mate Clarrie Bennet, accompanied by SGT George Brash (Observer, RAF) and SGT Gordon Clark (Wireless operator/air gunner, RAFVR), was flying a Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF (R3626 / WR-J) on a daylight long-range reconnaissance mission along the Norwegian coast. Departing England in the early afternoon, the single aircraft failed to return, and the three aircrew were posted missing in action. Sadly, the squadron heard nothing more about from the crew of R3626 / WR-J.

Lew Hamilton wrote to Clarrie's brother, Len Bennett, brother stating *"he left to do a sticky job by himself and we have heard no more. We in the squadron have great faith that he will be reported as a prisoner of war so don't give up hope. He was a good pilot who concentrated on bad weather and blind flying. He was popular with*

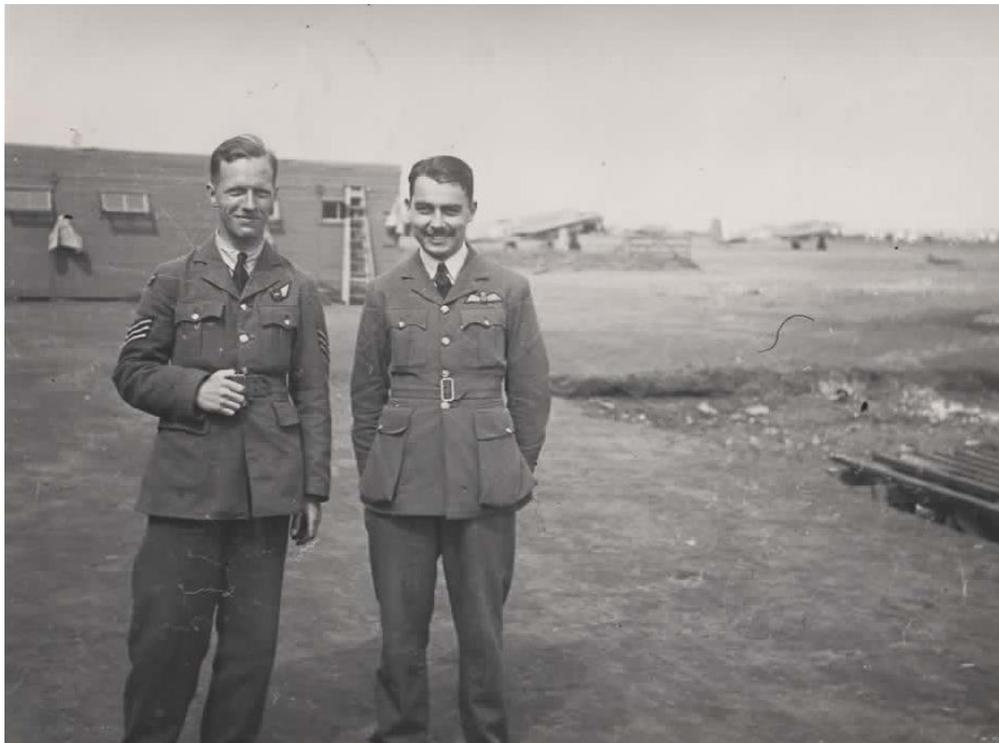


Image of PLTOFF Clarrie Bennett at 248SQN with torn uniform after surviving an attack by enemy aircraft on a patrol over the North Sea

*his brother officers and with the ranks and you should be proud of such a brother."*

Of the 27 pilots who served in the Squadron during this period, 13 lost their lives and by January 1941, only three of the original 10 pilots who had been with the squadron when Lew Hamilton had arrived in November 1939 were still alive.

By January 1941, 248SQN and Hamilton returned to the relative luxury of Aberdeen in mainland Scotland. He had a brief interlude away from the squadron from 27 Feb to 2 Mar 1941 when he briefly served on an anti-aircraft cruiser *HMS Curacoa* to act as an RAF fighter liaison to help the Navy better defend a convoy. His role was to communicate with Fighter Blenheim's protecting the convoy. Unfortunately, the fighters couldn't find the enemy bombers and as a result the Luftwaffe carried out several attacks resulting in a number of ships being hit.



Lew Hamilton (right) with his 248SQN Blenheim air gunner at RAF Sumburgh (Hamilton Family)

By June, the unit had again moved to Bircham Newton in eastern England where it was re-equipped with Beaufighters. However, by this stage, Hamilton had completed his 18-month tour with 248SQN flying almost 200 hours on the now dated aircraft. Whereas a tour in Bomber Command was defined by the number of operational missions one had flown (ie 30 missions), in Coastal Command a tour was defined as 800 operational hours or 18 months with the Unit. Given the relatively shorter time for 248SQN missions (ie 2 - 4 hours) missions it would have required approximately 150 missions to log 800 hours so it was more common for aircrew to complete 18 months at 248SQN. With 248SQN, Hamilton had completed more than 200 hours on Blenheim's – the majority on long range sorties out over the ocean as a single aircraft in severe weather often at night.

Airfield	County	Dates
Yatesbury	Wiltshire	13 MAR 39 to 13 MAY 39
Sealand	Cheshire	26 MAY 39 to 6 NOV 39
Hendon	London	6 NOV 39 to 26 FEB 40
North Coates	Lincolnshire	26 FEB 40 to 8 APR 40
Thorney Island	West Sussex	8 APR 40 to 16 APR 40
Gosport	Hampshire	16 APR 40 to 23 MAY 40
Montrose (Aberdeen)	Scotland	23 MAY 40 to 24 JUN 40
Dyce	Scotland	24 JUN 40 to 4 AUG 40
Sumburgh (Shetlands)	Scotland	4 AUG 40 to 7 JAN 41
Dyce	Scotland	7 JAN 41 to 9 MAR 41
Wick	Scotland	9 MAR 41 to 14 APR 41
Dyce	Scotland	14 APR 41 to 3 JUNE 41
Bircham-Newton	Norfolk	3 JUN 41 to 28 JUN 41

Table showing the constant movement of 248SQN while Lew Hamilton was on strength with the unit

One of the few to survive their Battle of Britain tour, Hamilton qualified for the Battle of Britain Clasp, the Air Crew Europe Campaign Medal and the Battle of the Atlantic Clasp while serving with 248SQN.

In June 1941, Lewis was posted to Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, taking up an instructor position in early August 1941 at No 24 Combined Air Observation School at Moffatt, Gwelo, in central Rhodesia, training aircrew trainees in bombing and air navigation under the Empire Air Training Scheme. Southern Rhodesia was the last of the Commonwealth countries to enter the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) but the first to turn out fully qualified pilots and by size of total population, it was the largest training scheme. Eventually there were eleven operating aerodromes that required a huge national effort to build, maintain and staff—at the scheme's peak more than a fifth of the white population was involved in the bases and training. Of the 168,800 aircrew trained across Commonwealth nations of Australia, Canada,



No 24 Combined Air Navigation School Fairey Battle aircraft of the Rhodesian Air Training Group towing a drogue sleeve while the student operates the power turret of Airspeed Oxford AS515. (IWM)

New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia, Rhodesia trained 8,235 aircrew or 5% of the total Commonwealth aircrew trained.

At the bombing, gunnery and navigation school, Hamilton primarily flew Airspeed Oxfords but also Avro Ansons and Harvard aircraft. He once recalled how they had to go to Capetown in South Africa to pick up Avro Ansons that had been assembled there after offloading from ships. The journey back to Moffat was challenging as it required navigating over trackless bush which thus had to be performed by instrument navigation. He was aware that at least one aircraft conducting such a trip was lost and despite extensive searching was never found.



Portrait image of FLTLT Lew Hamilton as an instructor in Rhodesia

Lew Hamilton served in the instructor position until April 1944 when he was posted back to the United Kingdom to take up a flying position at No 464 Squadron (RAAF) flying Mosquito's. From July to October 1944, he attended No 60 Operational Training Unit based at RAF High Ercall, Shropshire, to convert onto Mosquito Fighter Bombers, a twin-engine aircraft like the Blenheim, Ansons and Oxfords but with much greater performance including greater thrust and maneuverability. It must have felt like going from an old slow family sedan to a modern sports coupe.

No 464 Squadron was officially formed on 1 September 1942 at RAF Feltwell, Norfolk, in the United Kingdom, as an Article XV squadron under the Empire Air Training Scheme. Equipped with Lockheed Ventura light bombers, the squadron joined No 2 Group of Bomber Command. After work up training over the next three months, 464SQN conducted its first operational mission on the Phillips radio factory at Eindhoven in the Netherlands on 6 December 1942. While losing three aircraft, the strike inflicted significant damage and became a precedent for the unit in conducting precision strike operations.

Although a RAAF squadron of the RAAF, its personnel were drawn from many countries and upon formation only about 30 per cent were Australian a figure that later grew to over 50 percent as the war progressed.



464SQN Mosquito with its starboard engine running in May 1944. (AWM)

The unit converted on to Mosquitoes in July 1943. In February 1944, it conducted the famous Jericho Raid on the Amiens Prison in France; a precision strike designed to release members of the French Resistance held prisoner there. On 14 July 1944, it conducted a raid on a SS Barracks at Bonneuil-Mantours in western France.

464SQN also conducted several attacks on Gestapo headquarters in Denmark. By mid-1944, 464 SQN was now part of 140 Wing of the 2nd Tactical Air Force specialising in interdiction patrols behind enemy lines.

In November he arrived at 464SQN now based at RAF Station Thorney Island, West Sussex between Portsmouth and Chichester. Built in 1938, it was a large airbase that had borne Luftwaffe attacks during the Battle of Britain and had been the home of various RAF and allied units of Fighter Command and Coastal Command during the war. He arrived just after 464SQN conducted its famous precision low-level attack on the Gestapo complex at the Aarhus University in Aarhus, Denmark on 31 October.



RAF Station Thorney Island in West Sussex during World War 2. (IWM)

During November, he conducted 12 missions, mostly being patrols and consolidation unit training. During December, he flew eight missions including several patrols and three missions behind enemy lines in support of the Ardennes Offensive where the weather was particularly cold and severe. In January 1945 he flew five missions all within the period 13-18 January.

In February, 464SQN relocated to Rosieres-En- Santerre, in northern France in February 1945 to be closer to the operational area. He flew 17 missions during February – the most for the squadron. This included three separate missions on the 3 February and four missions on the 26 February. The operational tempo was high. On the 10 February, he flew an interdiction mission targeting railways lines between Cologne, Dusseldorf, and Duren only to lose his starboard engine after it caught fire and having to nurse the aircraft home landing on a single engine. Meanwhile, the weather was again particularly severe with freezing temperatures and heavy fog. He subsequently flew with a heavy cold which later caused sinus problems for the rest of his life. His reward was taking some leave in March and not doing too much flying.

By April, Lew Hamilton had completed his 6-month tour with 464SQN and after the high operational



Group photo of 464SQN personnel in front of a unit Mosquito at at Rosieres en Santerre in February 1945. Lew Hamilton is standing in front of the starboard prop with a moustache.

tempo of a forward deployed combat unit, was posted to an Air Dispatch & Liaison Squadron from April to September 1945 flying Avro Ansons delivering safe hand dispatches between London and numerous airfields in newly liberated northwestern Europe completing his wartime service. It would have been a welcome but significant change from his tense 464SQN posting.

It was in Brussels that he met Sylvia Mary Horsbrugh, a Women's Auxiliary Air Force Officer managing a hotel which catered to aircrew transiting through Belgium. Lew later married Sylvia in February 1947 in England.

Lew Hamilton remained in the RAF post war. After several subsequent postings in Germany, he was a member of the RAF Mission to Australia and New Zealand. In 1946 it provided the opportunity to visit

family and friends in Adelaide whom he had not seen since 1939. He returned to the UK in early 1947 where he accepted a permanent commission in the RAF with the rank of Squadron Leader. He then completed a series of postings including 2 years in Germany during the Berlin Air Lift. In 1952 he was promoted to Wing Commander and was the Commanding Officer of an early warning radar station on the south coast of England. He was then posted for 2 years to the Headquarters of the Allied Air Forces Europe at Fontainebleau, France. As a specialist Fighter Controller and second in charge of the Fighter Control Branch, he then served for three years in the RAF at Fighter Command Headquarters at Stanmore north of London.

In 1961, he decided to take early retirement from the RAF to move back to Australia. Initially he worked as a Company Secretary but later accepted a position in the Joint Intelligence Bureau of the Department of Defence in Canberra. A keen fisherman, on 1 October 1977 Lew Hamilton was fishing with two others on a boat on the bar to Lake Womboyne south of Eden on the far south coast of New South Wales. The cabin cruiser overturned in rough water and Lew Hamilton and his friend John Croppin tragically drowned. Lew was only 62 years of age. It was a tragic end to a World War 2 and Battle of Britain veteran who had survived two operational tours, four flying tours and countless hours flying over ocean.

Of the just over 30 Australians to fly in the Battle of Britain air campaign, more than one-third perished in the critical air campaign. Lew Hamilton was one of the Few to have survived. His name is recorded on a Battle of Britain Honour Roll Board located at the RAAF Edinburgh Officers Mess.



The Battle of Britain Honour Board at the RAAF Edinburgh Officers Mess listing Australians who flew in the epic air campaign including the names of South Australians PLTOFF Clarence Bennett and PLTOFF Alexander Lewis Hamilton. (Department of Defence)

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