

GOOD OLD HARRY - THE HARRY TICKLE STORY



Harry Tickle at work, 460 Squadron, an undated photo. – Courtesy Mrs Margaret Biggins.

When it comes to South Australians who served in the two World Wars in air force units as groundstaff, two names stand out; Wally Shiers in WW1 and Harry Tickle in WW2. Keeping their memories alive is the fact that both men were associated with famous aircraft, Wally with the Smith brothers Vickers Vimy that can be seen at the Adelaide Airport and Harry with the Lancaster that is now the largest and arguably the most popular exhibit on display in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Harry was born in England in 1911 and emigrated to Australia with his mother and brothers and sisters in 1914. Prior to this his father had gained employment with the South Australian Railways as an axle turner and once settled and able to fund the long sea voyage to Australia for the rest of the family they followed him out to Adelaide. Harry was educated at the Lockleys Public School to Year 7 and from there learned the rudiments of fitting and turning over a 12-month period at the Thebarton Technical School. Subsequent learning was “hands-on” as an apprentice for five years working for businesses around Adelaide as either a fitter or

apprentice mechanic until he gained his Motor Mechanic’s Certificate. In his private life he played soccer, completed his compulsory 18 months military service, married his long-time girlfriend Edith at a young age and started a family in 1932.

Thanks to his new qualifications Harry applied for other work including in the country and in 1936, and now father to two children, was successful in his application for the position of workshop foreman in a motor garage at Loxton. He started work late in the year, making his home there where they also welcomed their third child into the family. The owner of the garage, Mr Kingdon, later gave Harry a glowing reference prior to his enlistment in the RAAF.

Within months of the commencement of hostilities in September 1939 Harry applied to join the RAAF through the Adelaide Recruiting Centre (his application form indicates that he wanted to be a “flight rigger”, which was probably what the Recruiting Centre had suggested he start out as) at a time when despite there being a big interest in RAAF ground maintenance work greater numbers were still needed. The new Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett RAF, told a Sydney reporter on 15 February 1940 that “the training of expert mechanics presents the most important and most difficult problem for air force authorities . . .” On the following day the Adelaide Recruiting Centre advised Harry in writing to be at the Centre, which was in North Terrace, by 9 a.m. on the 26th with all required paperwork for movement to Laverton, Victoria, that night for subsequent enlistment in the service. He did as requested and following arrival at Laverton was enlisted into the RAAF. He moved on to No 1 Engineering School at the Melbourne show grounds in April where he learned about

aero engines and undertook a trainee engine fitter course. From there he was posted to No. 1 Service Flying Training School at Point Cook on 26 July. Earlier that month he was remustered from Flight Rigger to Fitter IIE, or engine fitter. A magazine article of the day regarding No. 1 Engineering School told readers that Fitters IIA were skilled men that worked on aircraft airframes; Carpenter Riggers (all-metal aircraft were still a long way off for the RAAF in 1940) were “equally skilled aircraft specialists”, Flight Riggers (Harry’s first RAAF job) were “aircraftsmen less highly skilled”, Flight Mechanics were, similarly, “enginemen less highly skilled” whilst Fitter IIEs, such as Harry, were regarded as “engine specialists”.

Harry had accepted that his wartime duties may see him stay in Australia or be posted overseas and he signed an official document to that effect, but in 1941 the RAAF began forming squadrons for service in Britain and this was the beginning of events which were to change his life. The squadron that Harry subsequently joined, No. 460 Squadron, was one of these British-based units and of these early days and the high standard of RAAF groundstaff that were available at this time, No. 455 Squadron Adjutant and, later, the squadron’s first historian wrote:

“In May, 1941, when the Squadron was formed [460 Squadron formed six months later], only men with at least a year’s service were regarded as eligible, so that almost all Squadron members were early enlistments who had survived the very strict screening and examination with which the Royal Australian Air Force welcomed its earlier volunteers. In addition, all members had volunteered a second time for overseas service at rates of pay lower than they would have received had they remained in Australia. It would be wrong not to emphasize that the original Squadron ground crew were selected in a manner which gave to the squadron a distinctly above-average sample of the Royal Australian Air Force.” (J. H. W. Lawson, *Four Five Five*, Melbourne, [1951], pp. 13-14)

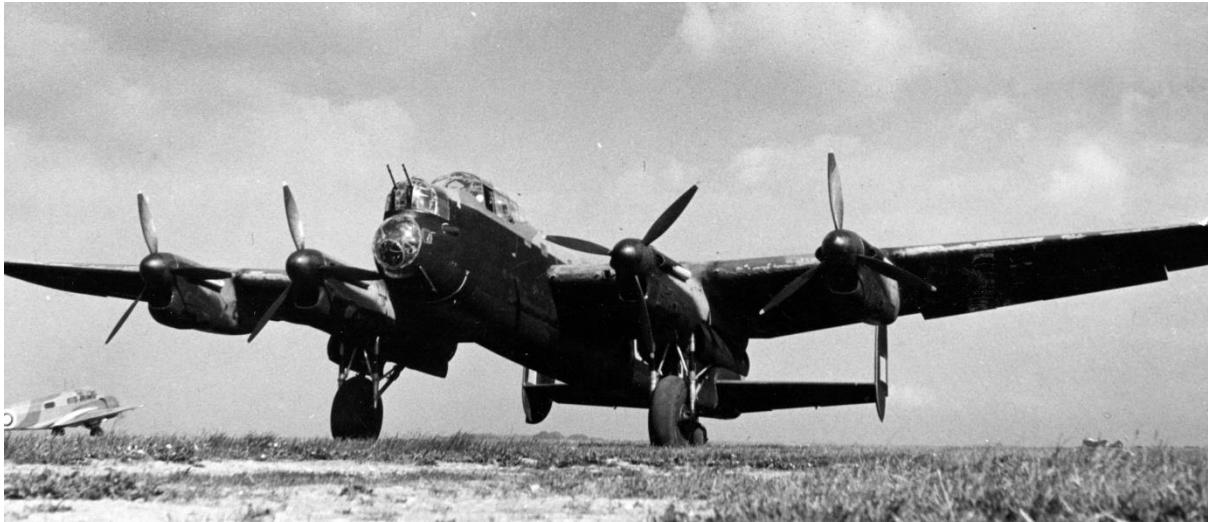
So it was, around April-May 1941, that Harry Tickle was among those chosen to be posted to Britain for service with an as yet unidentified RAAF squadron. He travelled with other Australians but details of the trip are not presently available. The first aircraft-related posting for Harry in Britain, though, was to a Spitfire-equipped RAF fighter Operational Training Unit (OTU) in Wales so it seems likely that his original path was being directed towards an Australian Spitfire squadron. This all changed in December 1941, though, when he was posted to bomber squadron No. 460 Squadron, RAAF, then based at RAF Station Molesworth but which transferred to RAF Breighton in January 1942 and later (May 1943) to RAF Binbrook.

These early RAAF groundstaff arrivals began their service in Britain “either as “other ranks” or as junior non-commissioned officers under RAF men with previous experience. As experience was gained, these Australians were to graduate from their junior positions . . . receive promotion to more senior technical positions and to take over the original functions of the RAF technical men.” (J. H. W. Lawson, *Four Five Five*, Melbourne, [1951], p. 10)

Harry, promoted from corporal to sergeant on 1 January 1942, started out working on and being responsible for the Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp engines that powered 460 Squadron’s Wellington Mk IV bombers until later in the year when it was decided that the squadron would convert to Rolls Royce Merlin-powered Halifaxes, but only a small number were received and by October it was known that they would be replaced by the latest heavy bomber type available, the Avro Lancasters, also Merlin-powered.

Mike Nelmes and Ian Jenkins, authors of a book on the most famous Lancaster with which Harry was associated (which because it carried squadron identification letter ‘G’ became known, thanks to the phonetic alphabet of the day, as “*G for George*”), subsequently explained Harry’s role with the aircraft as follows: “It was always either he or a corporal from his maintenance crew who personally supervised and carried out George’s repairs.” (Mike Nelmes & Ian Jenkins, *G for George*, Campbell, 2010, p. 172)

There was nothing unusual about this association, but what was unusual was that while most Lancasters saw only brief service because of their high loss rate due to both accidents and operations,



The Lancaster was the most famous British bomber of WW2. (Author's collection)

G for George, RAF serial number W4783, led a relatively charmed life over the entire time it was in 460 Squadron's hands; that is, from the point of view of operations flown, from December 1942 to April 1944. The Lancaster was shot at by both ground defences and on a small number of occasions by German aircraft but it always made it home.



Harry Tickle in the cockpit of *G for George*, circa June 1943.
(Charles E. Brown via Phil Jarrett/Jon Lake)

It is not necessary in this article to go into detail about each of the operational flights it participated in but it is interesting to note that in November 1943:

“. . . a letter from RAAF Headquarters arrived at 460 Squadron, asking if a suitable Lancaster might be available for display in the [Australian War] Memorial. *G for George* had already been suggested for preservation: it was thought to be the oldest Lancaster still in service, had a high and distinguished operations tally, and was flown mainly

by Australians. In his reply the squadron's Commanding Officer at the time, Squadron Leader F. A. Arthur DFC, referred to *George's* "unique historical value", but he also had a more immediate role in mind: its potential as a powerful publicity tool in Australia." (Nelmes & Jenkins, p. 162)

There was already a Lancaster in Australia which had been flown out from the UK around six months earlier but it was a new aircraft with no operational service that was needed as a pattern aircraft for

proposed Australian Lancaster production. It was also used for publicity purposes in Australia but was damaged in a landing accident at Evans Head on 26 October 1943.

G for George's last operational sorties were flown in April 1944, and according to squadron records whilst the last sortie flown was officially the 89th, at some point along the way (researchers Mike Nelmes and Ian Jenkins suggest between the 19th and 30th sorties) an extra bomb symbol appeared on *G for George's* "bomb log" that had been added to its nose, which took the total symbols added to 90 as still seen today.

It had already been decided that "G" would fly no further raids (Harry had noted in a note book he kept that its last operation in April was its "last war flight") and, on 20 May 1944, in the course of a visit to 460 Squadron's Binbrook base by Australian Prime Minister John Curtin, *G for George* was transferred to the Commonwealth of Australia's care and officially retired from active service. Harry Tickle was, of course, present and gave the Prime Minister a look-over "his" bomber and undoubtedly gave a great account of its history, a history that he alone knew so well.

Shortly afterwards, in June, in recognition of the high standard of maintenance work carried out on *G for George* by Harry and his team, Harry was awarded a Mention in Despatches (MiD). Peter Firkins' history of No. 460 Squadron notes that this was one of only eight MiDs awarded to squadron personnel.

Research for the *G for George* book established that the veteran "Lanc" left the Squadron on 29 May when it was flown to RAF Waddington for a major overhaul, but Harry remained on squadron strength until at least the end of September. No doubt his responsibilities for maintenance moved to other Lancasters, but details about that time are now unknown.

Meanwhile it had been decided that *G for George* would be flown out to Australia with a veteran crew and on 25 September 1944 an Air Movement Order was issued to RAF Station Melton Mowbray for work to be carried out by No. 4 Aircraft Preparation Unit to make the flight possible.

By this time it seems likely that the crew for the flight home had also been selected. It comprised Flt Lt Eddie Hudson DFC and Bar, pilot; FO Wilf Gordon DFC, navigator; Flt Lt Tom McCarthy DFC, bomb aimer; FO Clive Tindale DFM, wireless operator, FO George Young DFM, rear gunner; Sgt Keith Ower, airframe fitter and, appropriately, Harry, who had been promoted to Flt Sgt on 1 December 1943, as engine fitter. The seven men flew *G for George* to RAF Station Melton Mowbray on 30 September.

Full details of the work done at Melton are not known, but this, presumably, was where the bomb bay of the Lancaster was fitted with long-range fuel tanks, space for a small number of passengers was provided and bunks for the crew added. Total weight for the flight was specified as no more than 52,260 lbs. The crew also learned about the requirements of the flight at RAF Melton and website historyfare.co.uk, where the author found this information, proudly describes this preparatory work as "One of Melton's claims to fame during World War 2".

Meanwhile, in Australia, it had been announced that the Commonwealth Government would be fund-raising again from the population over a set period of around five weeks from 26 September to 31 October 1944. Called the Second Victory Loan, the plan was to raise £160,000,000 during this time by investment or re-investment through loans. There needed to be "sweeteners" for big investors, though, and it was thought, not unrealistically, that flights in a veteran Lancaster bomber that had bombed targets in occupied Europe (including 'The Big City'; Berlin) in return for an investment of £100 or more would work well for both the public and the Commonwealth Government. The only trouble, however, was that *G for George* was destined not to arrive in Australia in time so it was too late to participate in the Second Victory Loan. The "Lanc" had left Prestwick, Scotland, on 11 October 1944 but problems encountered on the flight, mainly repairs to the wireless set, caused delays which led *G for George* not arriving in Australia until 8 November.

Instead, the RAAF made the 'other' Lancaster, A66-1, available for fund-raising purposes, but only between 14-30 October. Nevertheless, there was great interest in becoming a Lancaster bomber passenger and after its visit to Adelaide on 22 October the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* reported that "One hundred and twenty Loan subscribers, who bought bonds to the value of £12,720 were given flights in the bomber, which took off from Parafield aerodrome."



A Second Victory Loan line-up with Lancaster A66-1 at Parafield, 21 October 1944. (*Adelaide Chronicle* 26 October 1944)

There would be a Third Victory Loan to follow in 1945 but Harry was in the news again, briefly, prior to that time, as on 8 January he was aboard A66-1, in an unspecified capacity, on a flight from Laverton made "over factories in industrial suburbs of Adelaide, where parts of Lancasters will soon be made". This was "spin" more than anything else but Harry was attached to the RAAF's PR Department at that time (8th to the 11th January) and undoubtedly the inclusion of him and one other *G for George* crew member, Don Delaney, gave the flight some credibility. Perhaps that time with the "spin doctors" gave them a chance to school Harry in what to say if approached during the next Victory Loan.

The Third Victory Loan lasted from 13 March to 29 April 1945 and unlike the flights involving A66-1 in October, *G for George* was to cover as much of Queensland as possible, as well as landing at some airfields in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The South Australian stopovers were to be made at Mount Gambier, Port Pirie and Adelaide in March and Loxton (as will be seen, probably a late addition to the itinerary) in April. A Sunderland flying boat was also involved to assist in the fund raising process (it visited Western Australia and Tasmania primarily) and a veteran Australian-made

Beaufort bomber accompanied the “Lanc” so that the work of the RAAF in the Pacific War was also represented. The RAAF really pulled out all stops to assist the fund raising process.

Just when the itinerary for *G for George* was finalised is not presently known but it must have caused some problems for the organisers. One major problem, particularly, was the inclusion of Loxton as there was no existing airfield there (most stopover points on the itinerary were RAAF bases) but the Loxton War Loan Committee, identified in *The Murray Pioneer* as the body that was in charge of arrangements, was insistent that as Harry came from Loxton, Loxton should be included.

Perhaps the Committee was not aware just how much space a Lancaster needed to take off and land (British airfield runway lengths started out as 1,000 yards in 1940 but all were progressively extended as the sizes of bomber aircraft increased) but time was of the essence so the local council of the day, the District Council of Loxton, perhaps with RAAF assistance, scouted around for paddocks that could be used and came up with land owned by Mr Oscar Habel about two miles (3 kms) west of Loxton. Mr Habel made the site available for what was destined to be a short but busy time. A newspaper report gave no real detail as to the extent of the work but did say that “the take-off area” was “specially graded by the council”. Undoubtedly compaction of the soft sandy soil would have also been necessary.



Harry Tickle on Mr Habel's property near Loxton, probably on the morning of 26 April 1945. Note ladders and board so that engine checks could be carried out. (Habel family collection courtesy David Habel)

Whatever the Council did, though, enabled the Lancaster to land and take-off on numerous occasions on the afternoon of 25 April and morning of the 26th. *The Murray Pioneer* paper reported on the 26th what a great success the visit by the Lancaster had been:

“A total of 94 people invested the £100 each in the loan entitling them to free rides in the famous ‘plane. This number, together with 123 persons who were given a look through the ‘plane in return for investing £10 in the loan, represented the fine sum of £12,900. The total amount raised for the loan by the bomber now stands at £271,000 . . .”

Adding Loxton to the list of stopovers for *G for George* had been very worthwhile and it was personally rewarding for Harry to be back in Loxton again for the first time since February 1940 among so many locals he knew. In an official address at the landing ground in which Harry’s work was front and centre there was plenty of loud applause and cries of “Good old Harry”.

All towns had quotas for these loan programmes and *The Murray Pioneer* was pleased to report that (no doubt through the presence of *G for George* at Loxton) that Loxton, Kingston-on-Murray, Waikerie and Berri had all passed the figures set for them.

Other Upper Murray towns whose residents had been £100 investors thanks to the Lancaster’s visit were Renmark, Barmera, Moorook, Cobara, Pyap and Glossop. That it was a big deal at the time is confirmed by Nelmes and Jenkins who record in their *G for George* book that “the [Loxton] crowds were among the biggest of the tour.”

From Loxton *G for George* was flown to Mildura on the 26th, Ballarat on the 27th, Melbourne (Essendon) on the 28th. The stopover at Essendon marked the end of the Third Victory Loan flights and from there *G for George* was flown back to Laverton.

The last flight made by *G for George* was on 24 September 1945 when it was ferried from Laverton to RAAF Station Canberra and whilst the crew names for the flight are not known there is a good chance that Harry was among them. He was discharged from the RAAF four weeks later and returned to his family who had relocated to the Adelaide suburbs to be near Mrs Tickle's parents while he had been away.



Plaque at the Harry Tickle Memorial Pool, Loxton (monumentaustalia.org.au)

The family did later move back to Loxton where Harry established his own motor garage in Edward St. He remained a local identity until his death in 1969. Whilst he had worked for most of his life to serve others, towards the end of that time he also became the prime mover for plans that Loxton have its own swimming pool. The pool, in Pine Avenue, Loxton, was named the Harry Tickle Memorial Pool following its completion. A plaque by the pool's entrance explains that:

"THIS SWIMMING POOL IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF HARRY TICKLE WHO DID MORE THAN ANY OTHER MAN TO BRING IT INTO EXISTENCE"

Although Harry's connection with the famous Lancaster *G for George* has dimmed with the passage of time, visitors to the Loxton Cemetery who come across his memorial there are reminded of it by the inscription proudly added by his family; HARRY TICKLE FLT/SGT 9399 460 SQUADRON "G FOR GEORGE", a rare case of one man's life and the association that he had with one particular plane being commemorated together.



(Right): Memorial at the Loxton Cemetery (Author)

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