

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

WING COMMANDER ALBERT LLOYD WIGGINS DSO DFC

WORLD WAR 2 PILOT: 38 SQN (RAF), 455 SQN (RAAF)



Portrait WGCDR Albert Lloyd Wiggins DSO DFC, taken in February 1945. Image AWM

Albert Lloyd Wiggins was born in Middleton, a small seaside community on South Australia's southern coast, southeast of Adelaide. His father, Thomas Herbert Wiggins, came from Salisbury in the north of Adelaide while his mother, Mary Beatrice Thomas, was born in Rosewater, also a northern suburb of Adelaide. Completing school, he gained employment as an auctioneer's clerk and salesman with Evans and Clarke in Adelaide. His father died early at the age of only 52 in 1931.

Registering for the RAAF in June and then finally enlisting on 9 November 1940 at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide as an aircrew trainee, Wiggins conducted initial training at No 5 Initial Training School, RAAF Pearce, from November to December 1940. He then proceeded to No 9 Elementary Flying Training School, RAAF Cunderdin, completing basic flying training from January to March 1941.

He then completed advanced flying training at No 4 Service Flying Training School, RAAF Geraldton, from March to June 1941 receiving his Flying badge on 2 May 1941. Over the two courses he flew 31 hours dual and 24 hours solo on DH-82 Tiger Moths and 24 hours dual and 50 hours solo on the Avro Anson.



A trainee pilot boards an Avro Anson of No 4 Service Flying Training School at RAAF Geraldton

Wiggins was commissioned on 1 July 1941 with the rank of Pilot Officer and was selected for duty in the United Kingdom. He embarked at Sydney on 17 July 1941, arriving in England on 2 September 1941. He was then posted to No 21 Operational Training Unit based at RAF Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire where he converted on to Vickers Wellington aircraft from September to December, amounting more than 100 hours on the bomber aircraft.

In January 1942, he was transferred to the Mediterranean theatre to undergo further operational training from early February to early March with No 238 Wing, a medium bomber wing, before being posted to one of its units, No 38 Squadron, on 16 March 1942. Based at Maaten Bagush, a key British base in western Egypt, 38SQN had only just transitioned from night bombing role to an anti-shipping role, flying night torpedo missions against Axis shipping in the Mediterranean and along the North African coastline as part of the allies Desert Air Force.

While somewhat dated, the twin engine Wellington had good range and was the mainstay of the RAF strike capability in the Mediterranean in the early years of the war. Adapted for the maritime strike role, the 238 Wing used innovative tactics with radar-equipped Wellingtons, commonly known as 'Snoopingtons' patrolling shipping lanes throughout the night and using flares to illuminate enemy convoys and directing the strike Wellingtons, or 'Torpingtons' that attacked at sea level armed with two torpedoes. This required strike aircraft to fly and release the torpedo approximately seventy feet above water on approach to the target. Such missions were unusual and risky for the slow-moving and nonagile bomber aircraft making them vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and at risk of inadvertently crashing into the sea.

However, the squadron found some success. In May 1942, 38SQN conducted its first successful torpedo attacks on a convoy resulting in two direct hits and one ship beached. The missions were a key part of allied attempts to prevent resupply of Axis forces in North Africa from Italy and thus, their overall defeat. Indeed, when Wiggins arrived in Egypt, the Axis forces were advancing on Egypt again in Rommel's second ground offensive. On 21 June, they recaptured Tobruk and by 29 June had reached El Alamein just west of Alexandria. Such rapid advances significantly stretched the Axis resupply lines for Rommel's Panzer forces extending all the way back to key ports such as Tobruk, Benghazi and Tripoli making the interdiction strikes by the Desert Air Force to disrupt resupply even more crucial.



A RAF 38SQN Wellington being loaded with its two torpedoes for a maritime strike mission. (IWM)



A RAF 38 SQN Wellington on a maritime strike training mission flying low level has just dropped its torpedo into the ocean. (IWM)

This was no more strongly demonstrated than during the allied counteroffensive during October when allied forces began to turn back Rommel's Panzer forces at the 2nd Battle of El Alamein from 23rd October to 11 November 1942. Three days into the decisive battle and the Axis forces were already experiencing severe logistics issues - Most units were operating on half rations, limited ammunition and the *Panzerarmee Afrika* only had fuel for three days.

Allied signals intelligence revealed a convoy comprising the *Proserpina*, a tanker carrying 4,5000 tonnes of fuel, the *Tergeste*, a 6,000 ton merchant vessel carrying 1,000 tonnes of fuel and 1,000 tonnes of ammunition, and the steamer *Dora*, escorted by four torpedo boats (*Cyclone*, *Lira*, *Partenope* and *Calatafimi*), was due to transit from Taranto for Tobruk from 24 to 26 October to provide vital resupplies for the German offensive. Allied assets were accordingly tasked with intercepting the convoy.



The *Tergeste* moored in a harbour in the Mediterranean.

On the evening of 24 October, six Wellingtons from 38SQN (RAF) attempted to locate the convoy but failed due to poor weather. On the evening of 25 October, the convoy was heavily attacked with bombs and torpedoes by British Vickers Wellington and American Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers, but no ships were hit with the convoy employing evasive maneuvers and intense anti-aircraft fire. The convoy was again attacked late morning on the 26 October by 18 American Liberators from the 18th Bombardment Group flying out of Egypt but again, the convoy avoided any strikes. However, in the mid-afternoon, the allies conducted a third attack comprising Blenheims of No 15 Squadron (SAAF) and Beauforts from 47SQN (RAF) escorted by RAF Beaufighters. While initially, the convoy again avoided any strikes, a Beaufort and two Blenheim's caught the *Prosperina* lagging behind the main convoy successfully attacking and sinking it. A second wave of Beauforts and Beaufighters launched shortly afterwards failed to locate the convoy after encountering and engaging enemy aircraft in the area.



Vickers Wellington II torpedo bomber (HX366) of 38SSQN (RAF) similar to that flown by Wiggins.

The Allies were determined to destroy the other main freighter, the *Tergeste*. Launched in 1926 in Trieste, the freighter had operated in the Mediterranean for some time and was a seasoned veteran resupplying Axis forces in North Africa from Italy. It had survived a narrow escape on 11 October when the convoy she was in was attacked by American Liberator bombers and a bomb exploded very close to the hull of the *Tergeste* causing a leak in the engine room forcing the vessel to return to port for repairs.

However, by the afternoon, the allies had effectively used all their available day maritime strike assets in the previous four strikes. Notwithstanding, 38SQN (RAF) was tasked with conducting a final last-ditch attempt to stop the ship from reaching Tobruk at dusk noting the squadron was trained in night operations. Accordingly, Wiggins was tasked with leading a 3-ship formation to attack it in one last bid to stop it from reaching Tobruk.

Taking off at about 1540hrs, Wiggins planned the mission to initially fly north for about 60nm at 100ft to avoid enemy radar and fighters and then turn west and fly parallel to the coastline until they reach northeast of Tobruk and then turn towards Tobruk to take both the convoy and other ground-based air defences by surprise. He expected to intercept the convoy just as it was nearing the port at dusk and thus would be the first mission at dusk attempted by 38SQN.

Leading the formation flying at speed at only 100ft above the ocean in Wellington HX633, Wiggins spotted the convoy and in particular, *Tergeste* several miles outside of Tobruk harbour. The aircraft immediately attacked taking the convoy with its many escort destroyers completely by surprise. In the final stages of their approach, the RAF aircraft encountered

significant anti-aircraft fire but all aircraft released their torpedoes about 600 yards from the target with three successfully striking the freighter. Wiggins flew his aircraft over the top of the ship to draw flak away from the other aircraft and to ensure they saw the freighter was struck. Enormous plumes of smoke erupted from the ship as successive explosions took their toll on the doomed ship.

The *Tergeste* quickly sank with only two survivors, two sailors manning forward guns. Wiggin's aircraft was struck multiple times with his tail gunner receiving serious injuries that required immediate treatment. and one of the other Wellingtons was struck and seen to be tailing off eventually crashing into the ocean. Wiggins and the remaining other Wellington landed at their airbase at 2200hrs knowing they had inflicted a devastating strike on the Axis forces.

On 28 October, another tanker, the *Luisiano* carrying 2,5000 tonnes of fuel headed for Tobruk, was torpedoed by Wellington bombers near Greece. Rommel told his commanders, *"It will be quite impossible for us to disengage from the enemy. There is no gasoline for such a maneuver. We have only one choice and that is to fight to the end at Alamein."* On 1 November, the tankers *Tripolino* and *Ostia* were torpedoed and sunk by allied aircraft north-west of Tobruk. The severe fuel shortage forced Rommel to rely increasingly on fuel flown in from Crete on the orders of General Kesselring.

For his actions on the 26 October, Wiggins was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. The Citation read *"at dusk one evening in October, 1942, this officer led an unescorted section of three bombers to attack on enemy supply convoy off Tobruk. In the face of heavy defensive fire from escorting destroyers and shore batteries, Flight Lieutenant Wiggins secured two hits on an enemy merchant vessel of 6,000 tons, causing its destruction. He has displayed similar skill, courage and initiative on many occasions."*

In recent years some commentators have overstated the impact of Wiggins' successful strike on the *Tergeste*. For example, Ian McPhedran wrote in July 2014 *"Lloyd Wiggins led a flight of three Wellington bombers on a mission that would change the course of the North Africa campaign and cripple Germany's notorious "desert fox" Field Marshal Erwin Rommel."*



Lloyd Wiggins in 2014 with a photo of freighter he sunk in 1942 several kilometers from the port of Tobruk.

While there is no doubt the strike was a crippling blow to Rommel and the Axis forces, it was one of many during the key period of October to November where successive strikes on Axis attempts to resupply its needy force combined to cripple Rommel's forces. General Montgomery acknowledged the allied air attacks writing *"Recent attacks carried out against enemy ships so vital to his effort were a wonderful achievement. I would be grateful if you could convey to those responsible our gratitude for operations carried out which must be epic against ships at sea."* A modest Lloyd Wiggins commented in

recent years *"There was nothing to it really, we just attacked the ship, and it blew up, that was about it really,"* he said. *"It was just another mission."*

Wiggins completed his posting to 38 SQN (RAF) in late November 1942 having amassed 315 operational hours. He was posted to No 7 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit at RAF Limavady, Northern Ireland), from January to October 1943 as an Instructor training new aircrew on Wellingtons and maritime strike tactics. During this time, he also served as an instructor at Number 1 Torpedo Training Centre at RAF Turnberry, southwest of Glasgow, in Ayrshire, Scotland. He gained another 123 hours on the Wellington aircraft as an instructor.



Aerial image of RAF Turnberry on the western coast of southern Scotland where No 1 Torpedo Training Centre was based.

By late 1943, Wiggins was a seasoned maritime strike pilot having completed one full operational tour and an instructional position. Accordingly, in October 1943, he was posted to No 455 Squadron (RAAF) as the Flight Commander, A Flight. 455SQN, originally a Bomber Command squadron with the distinction of having been the first RAAF squadron to have dropped bombs on Germany in August 1941, was transferred to RAF Coastal Command in April 1942 as part of a considered reinforcement of Coastal Command following repeated issues. Indeed, 455SQN was one of the RAF units that attempted and failed to stop the German battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the channel dash from occupied France to Germany in February 1942.

Wiggins arrived at a significant time. WGCDR Jack Davenport DFC, a 455SQN veteran who had already completed an operational tour with the squadron flying Hampdens, assumed command of the squadron in December 1943. More importantly, at the same time, the squadron was converting from the dated Hampden to the new and much more capable Bristol Beaufighter. Wiggins completed 14 hours flying the Hampden with 455SQN before converting onto the Beaufighter. He once noted *"the Beaufighter was a beautiful aircraft, smooth as silk and with no vices. It was strongly built and withstood a lot of punishment. Having spent a lot of time flying Wellingtons with Pegasus engines the Beaufighter felt like a racer with its two powerful engines."*



455SQN Hampden aircraft being loaded with a torpedo for its next maritime strike mission in June 1943

The squadron quickly converted to Beaufighters in a matter of weeks from late December 1943 to early February with Wiggins as a Flight Commander, one of the first to transition to the new aircraft. From March, 455SQN commenced operational missions with the Beaufighter with the first being an anti-shipping patrol along the Norwegian coastline. In early April, 455SQN was directed to relocate to RAF Langham on the North coast of Norfolk to provide better support to the forthcoming Operation Overlord. SGNLDR Wiggins led an advance party to establish the 455SQN presence with the aircraft arriving by 13 April. Wiggins flew an operational mission only six days later involving six Beaufighters conducting individual shipping patrols along the Dutch coastline. He sighted and reported large enemy convoys which led to subsequent successful strikes by other Coastal Command elements.



SGNLDR Lloyd Wiggins (left) with CO 455SQN, WGCDR Jack Davenport, and fellow Flight Commander, SGNLDR Colin Milson in April 1944 at RAF Langham talking in front of a 455SQN Beaufighter

The squadron formed a formidable partnership with its sister squadron, No 489 Squadron (RNZAF) operating out of RAF Langham which also flew Beaufighters in what became known as the ANZAC Wing. 455SQN aircraft would often combine with 489SQN flying flak suppression for the RNZAF Torpedo carrying Beaufighters.

For example, on 6 May, Wiggins flew one of 12 455 SQN aircraft along with six aircraft from sister 489SQN (RNZAF) in a combined 18 aircraft maritime strike on a large heavily defended enemy convoy sailing near Borkum off the German coast near the Dutch Frisian Islands resulting in one merchant ship and numerous vessels damaged. The mission profiles were typical of the high-risk operations they flew for the remainder of the war with the Beaufighters – furious combat flying at high speed at low level attacking shipping and enemy combatants ducking heavy anti-aircraft fire.



Employed with their distinctive D-Day landings livery of vertical black and white stripes, 455SQN had a key role to play in combatting the German fast attack craft such as the E-boat, a heavily armed fast motor torpedo boat, coming out of French and Dutch occupied ports along the English Channel threatening the Normandy invasion landings. With a displacement of 95 tons, heavily armed with 20mm and 37mm guns and torpedoes, their role was similar to the Beaufighter – conduct maritime patrols and conduct lighting strikes against enemy shipping and then return to base. Accordingly, throughout early June



455SQN conducted patrols or was on standby to respond to reports of German attack craft along the French and Dutch coastlines.

On 15 June, Wiggins participated in a large, combined attack formation comprising more than 40 Beaufighters including 12 455SQN aircraft, from four squadrons escorted by 10 Mustangs from a Polish squadron. Near Schiermonnikoog in the Frisian Islands, they encountered a German convoy and engaged on mass. The overall attack was a great success resulting in several vessels sunk and damaged without allied loss. At the time, it was the

largest and most successful strike performed by Coastal Command.

The operational tempo increased. In early July, 455 SQN aircrew conducted patrols on four successive days. On 8 July, the squadron flew missions continuously over a 20-hour period. On 6 July, they employed rockets for the first time on morning and afternoon maritime strike missions providing a much greater punch against shipping than the usual cannon fire. Wiggins led 10 455SQN aircraft in a combined mission comprising over 40 aircraft in the afternoon against a large heavily defended convoy comprising ten merchant ships. It was furious combat with several Beaufighters and aircrew lost in action and captured. The Australian War Memorial has a spectacular image of Wiggins staffing a German minesweeper with 20mm cannon fire during the attack.

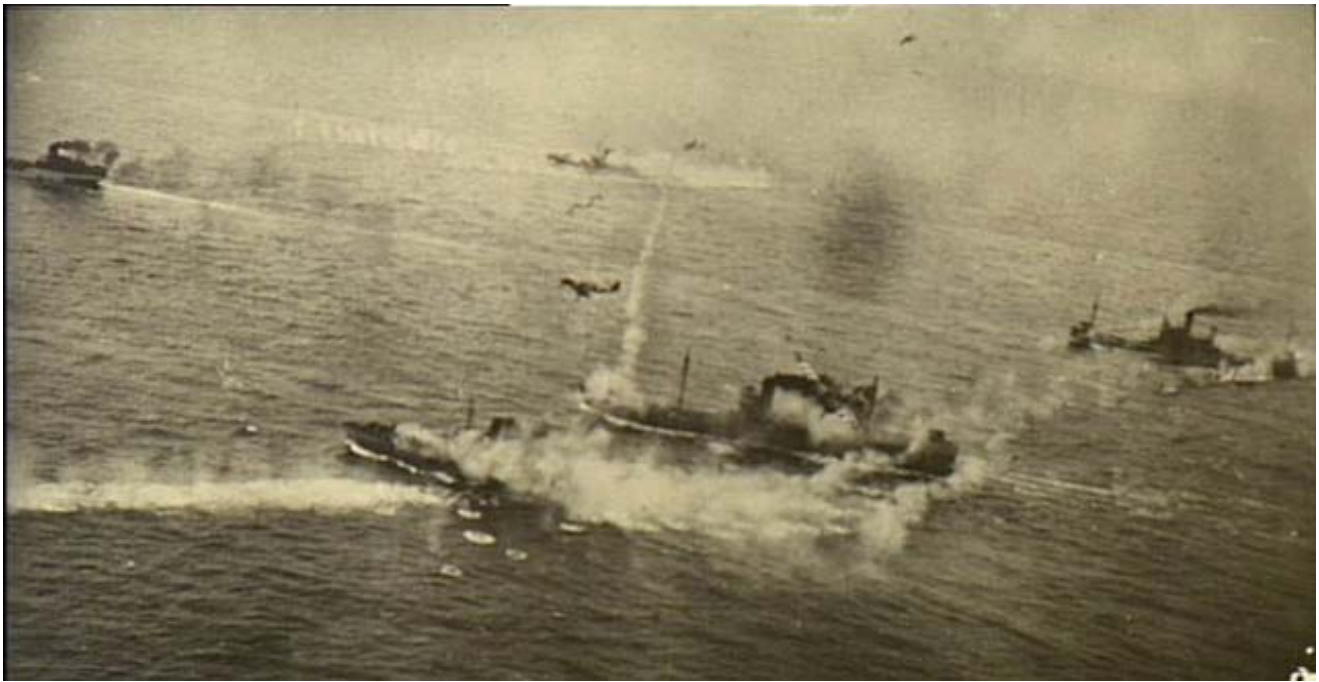


Image of a German minesweeper being strafed with 20mm cannon fire by SQNLDR Lloyd Wiggins on 6 July 1944.

Wiggins was awarded in September 1944 the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions particularly in this mission.

The Citation stated:

"This officer has participated in numerous sorties, including several successful attacks on enemy shipping. In July, 1944, Squadron Leader Wiggins flew the leading aircraft of a formation which attacked a convoy of 10 enemy ships. In spite of considerable anti-aircraft fire the attack was well pressed home. A merchantman was hit and several other vessels were set on fire. By his gallant and skillful leadership. Squadron Leader Wiggins played, a prominent part in the success of a well-executed operation."



RAAF 455SQN Beaufighters attacking armed German vessels off the Norwegian coastline in July 1944 showing the ferocity of the combat and the low altitude from which the 455SQN aircraft were attacking

Such operations continued through the third quarter of 1944 and Wiggins was appointed Wing Commander Flying in early October – a position involving managing the Wing's air operations and lead combined wing strike missions at RAF Langham. He was promoted to Wing Commander on 5 October 1944. During his time at Langham, he had become engaged and married Thelma Wigfield, a young English woman who was a Flight Officer in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and the Officer in Charge of its presence at Langham.

However, as the allies made inroads in France, operations along the Norwegian coast took greater priority and 455SQN was transferred along with 489SQN (RNZAF) to RAF Dallachy in northeastern Scotland. After the relocation, Wiggins' operational tour was completed and he was posted as the Chief Flying Instructor to No 132 Operational Training Unit at RAF East Fortune near Edinburgh, Scotland which operated Beauforts, Beaufighters and Mosquito aircraft. Wiggins served in this role for six months until mid-1945 when he was posted as Commanding Officer, No 11 Personnel Dispatch and Reception Centre in Brighton, England, a RAAF unit responsible for the coordination of RAAF personnel entering and departing England. With the end of the war in Europe, the unit was heavily involved in the return of the vast numbers of RAAF personnel in both RAAF and allied units across England.

After being in the United Kingdom for three and half years, Wiggins departed England in May 1946 arriving in Australia in early August more than five years after he had left for the war. He was demobilized in mid-September.

Completing two intense operational tours and several instructional posts, Wiggins had a distinguished career serving for almost six years. He had flown more than 80 combat missions across his two operational tours and had amassed 1070 flying hours in his logbook. Apart from the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Flying Cross, Wiggins was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, Africa Star, Atlantic Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939-45, and Australian Service Medal 1939-45. He was also Mentioned in Dispatches.



WGCdr Lloyd Wiggins Awards: From left, Distinguished Service Order , Distinguished Flying Cross, 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Star, Africa Star, Defence Medal, British War Medal 39-45, Australian Service Medal 1939-45.

Post war, Wiggins settled in Adelaide with Thelma and returned to work as an auctioneer and valuer eventually establishing his own auction house Lloyd Wiggins and Co which finally closed in December 1999. They raised four children and Wiggins obtained his private pilot's license including twin engine aircraft. His commitment to service continued serving on the Stirling Council, a member of the RSL, RAAF Association and Legacy including being its President. He passed away in December 2015 aged 99.

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