

80 YEARS ON - THE ANNIVERSARY OF OPERATION CHASTISE

Remembering the Australians who participated in the raid on the Ruhr dams 16-17 May 1943



Above: The squadron's badge, approved by King George VI, depicts the bursting of a dam in commemoration of Chastise. The squadron's chosen motto was "Après moi le déluge" ("After me, the flood").

Right: From 9:28 pm on 16 May 1943, 133 aircrew in 19 Lancasters took off in three waves to bomb the dams. Gibson was flying in the first wave and his aircraft was first to attack the Möhne dam (pictured right) at 12:28 am. Five aircraft had to drop their bombs before it was breached. The remaining aircraft still to drop their bombs then attacked the Eder dam, which finally collapsed at 1:52 am. Meanwhile aircraft from the two other waves bombed the Sorpe but it remained intact. (Text and image IWM).



Australian Aircrew of 617 Squadron on the Dams Raid 16/17 May 1943:

First Wave:

In the crew of ED-932 AJ-G (G-George) flown by W/Cdr G. Gibson:
P/O F.M. Spafford (South Australia), bomb aimer**

In the crew of ED-925 AJ-M (M-Mother) flown by F/L J.V. Hopgood:
P/O A.F. Burcher (NSW), rear gunner

In the crew of ED-909 AJ-P (P-Popsie) flown by F/L H.B. M. Martin:
F/L H.B. M. Martin (NSW) pilot
F/L J. F. Leggo (NSW), navigator
F/L R.C. Hay (South Australia), bomb aimer**
P/O B.T. Foxlee (Queensland), front gunner
F/S T.D. Simpson (Tasmania), rear gunner



In the crew of ED-929 AJ-L (L-London) flown by F/L D.J. Shannon:

F/L D.J. Shannon RAAF (South Australia), pilot and captain

In the crew of ED-912 AJ-N (N-Nuts) flown by P/O L.G. Knight:

P/O L.G. Knight RAAF (Victoria), pilot and captain**

F/S R.G.T. Kellow (NSW), radio operator

Second Wave:

In the crew of ED-927 AJ-E (E-Easy) flown by F/L R.N.G. Barlow:

F/L R.N.G. Barlow RAAF (Victoria), pilot and captain*

F/O C.R. Williams (Queensland), wireless operator*

In the crew of ED-886 AJ-O (O-Orange) flown by F/S W.C. Townsend:

P/O C.L. Howard (WA), navigator

* Killed on the Chastise raid

** Killed on later missions



About the South Australians on the Dams Raid

Frederick Michael Spafford (1918-1943) was born on 16 June 1918 in North Adelaide, only child of James Michael Burke, tannery foreman, and his wife Vida Muriel, both South Australian born. On 14 September 1940 Spafford enlisted in the RAAF. After training in wireless at Ballarat and in air gunnery at Evans Head, he arrived in England, under the Empire Air Training Scheme, in August 1941 as a sergeant air gunner.

Sent to 5 Group, Spafford spent short periods with a number of units. In May 1942 he was posted to 50 Squadron and flew in Manchesters and Lancasters as bomb-aimer. After 15 sorties, Spafford was awarded the DFM. He was commissioned in January 1943. Having survived his tour of thirty operations, he was invited to join 617 squadron and participated in the dams raid as part of Guy Gibson's crew.



On the night of 15/16 September 1943, 617 squadron attacked the Dortmund-Ems Canal. In poor visibility, and against alert defences, five of the eight attacking aircraft were lost but only three were definitely shot down. Hit by flak, Spafford's plane caught fire, crashed, and blew apart on the ground. There were no survivors. Spafford was promoted to flying officer with effect 15 July 1943, which suggests his promotion was "in the pipeline" at the time of his death.

Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 16, 2002, online in 2006

Robert Claude Hay (1913–1944) was born at Renmark and attended the High School showing exceptional ability. He then went to Roseworthy college and gained a gold medal there. Leaving Roseworthy, he went to Queensland and studied cotton growing at an Experimental farm, returning to Roseworthy as a master. He enlisted in the RAAF early in 1940 and after training in Australia was sent to Canada before being sent to England.

Hay was on Martin's crew for the attack on the Mohne Dam on 16/17 May 1943. On 12 February 1944, Hay took part in an attack against the Antheor Viaduct in Southern France. As the aircraft was making its bombing run, a shell hit the nose of the aircraft. Hay was killed, and fragments of the shell injured one other of the crew. The others were uninjured, and Martin diverted to Sardinia. At the time of his death, Bob Hay was completing his second tour of operations.



Sources: <https://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/hay-robert-claude-bob-16998>

<https://aviationmuseumwa.org.au/afcraaf-roll/hay-robert-claude-407074/>

David John Shannon, (1922-1993) was born in Unley Park, son of Howard Huntley Shannon, auctioneer and later a member of the South Australian parliament, and his wife Phoebe Madeline. Shannon worked as a clerk with the Western Assurance Co. before the war and joined the RAAF in 1941 and learned to fly under the Empire Air Training Scheme. After further training in the UK he was posted to No. 106 Squadron RAF, operating Avro Lancaster heavy bombers, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in January 1943.



In March 1943, Shannon was selected to join 617 Squadron. Awarded the DSO following the dams raid, Shannon continued to fly with 617 Squadron until October 1944, during which time he earned bars to his DSO and DFC. He was then assigned to transport duties, first with No. 511 Squadron and then, in March 1945, with No. 246 Squadron. As a Squadron Leader, Shannon was demobilised after the war and remained in England, becoming an executive with Shell. He died in South London in 1993, aged 70.

Sources: Wikipedia <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/shannon-david-john-18085>



Perhaps the role the Australians played in the dams raid and 617 squadron generally is best summed up by a former leader of 617, Group Captain Lord Leonard Cheshire VC, OM, DSO, DFC (1917-1992) in a passage he penned shortly before his death for Colin Burgess, author of *Australia's Dambusters* (see bibliography) and quoted in that book:

"My Victoria Cross was given to me, not for anything I did, but for all of 617 squadron. Lots of other chaps in 617 deserved them more than I did. Your fellow countrymen Mick Martin and Dave Shannon, an example. I learned all I know of this low-flying game from Mick. He had a complete genius for low-level attack, and I never saw him make a mistake. In my opinion he was the finest and most determined operational low-flier in Bomber Command. You see, blokes like Shannon and Martin pace you; you've got to keep up with them."

"But Mick and Dave were not the only ones from Aussie land to give us Poms and example and a prod. Partly, I think, it was that they were proud of being Australian and perhaps had a sense of national identity in a deeper way than we in Britain. That's important when you are in an emergency."

"617 was composed of men from a number of countries, each with their own unique contribution, but I think it is fair to say that it could not have been the squadron it was without its Australian contingent."

Aftermath

Of the 133 aircrew that took part in Operation Chastise, 53 were killed and three became P.O.W.s. Eight of the 19 Lancasters were lost. On the ground, almost 1300 people were killed in the flooding that resulted. While the impact on industrial production appeared to be limited, following news of the operation being released by the BBC the morning of 17 May 1943, 617 Squadron became famous and Operation Chastise gave a significant boost to the morale of the people of Britain and became "the most celebrated feat of arms in aviation history."

Guy Gibson was awarded the Victoria Cross and 33 others received decorations, including South Australians Frederick Spafford (DFC), Robert Hay (Bar to DFC) and David Shannon (DSO).

After The Floods and Post War

617 Squadron continued to deliver special weapons throughout the remainder of the war, particularly the 12,000lb 'Tallboy' and 22,000lb 'Grand Slam' (Also developed by Barnes Wallis) which were used to sink the battleship Tirpitz, to destroy previously invulnerable submarine pens, viaducts, tunnels and the V-3 weapon site at Mimoyecques, France.

The squadron remains active today, having flown a range of types post-war, including English Electric Canberra and Avro Vulcan bombers, Panavia Tornado attack aircraft. No. 617 Squadron more recently converted to Lockheed Martin F-35B (known in British service as the Lightning II) fighter operations aboard *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and at RAF Marham, but is still very much a Royal Air Force Squadron and not a "naval squadron", although its personnel are drawn from both Services and the Squadron operates from both a land-based airfield (Marham) and the carrier Queen Elizabeth. Even when commanded by a Royal Navy officer, it still remains a Royal Air Force squadron, and not Fleet Air Arm (and even when operating from the carrier!). Traditions die hard!

617 Squadron Reunion Adelaide 1986

617 Squadron has held regular reunions around the world. In April 1986 the reunion was held in Adelaide. According to records for the event, the only surviving Operation Chastise aircrew member from South Australia, David Shannon, did not attend but a number of 617 Squadron veterans and a 617 Squadron Avro Vulcan flew here for the occasion. Below are images taken at RAAF Edinburgh in April 1986 and at RAF Scampton after the Dams Raid in May 1943.

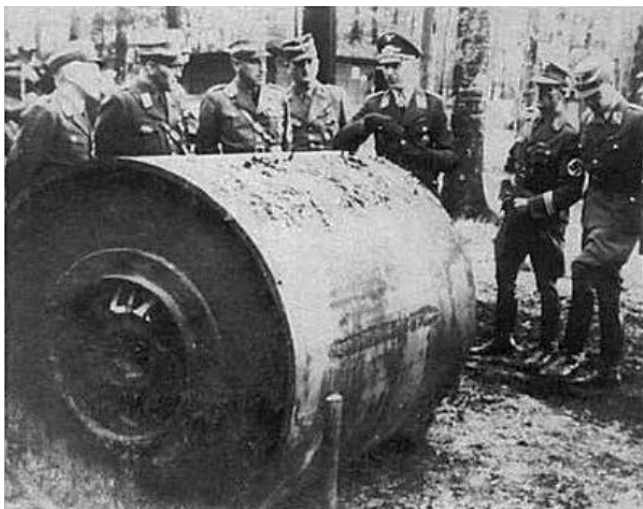




New Zealand born Arthur "Joppy" Joplin, the last World War II pilot of 617 Squadron, died peacefully in Auckland in March 2023, aged 99, leaving Australian, Flying Officer Alan Buxton (A434376) as the sole surviving wartime member of the 617 Squadron Association. Alan Buxton served with the squadron as a navigator (flying with the crew of fellow Australian, F/Lt Howard Gavin of Melbourne) from October 1944 until June 1945, when he was posted to No. 467 (RAAF) Sqn - another Lancaster Squadron. Alan Buxton was born in Paramatta NSW in 1920 and will be 103 this December.



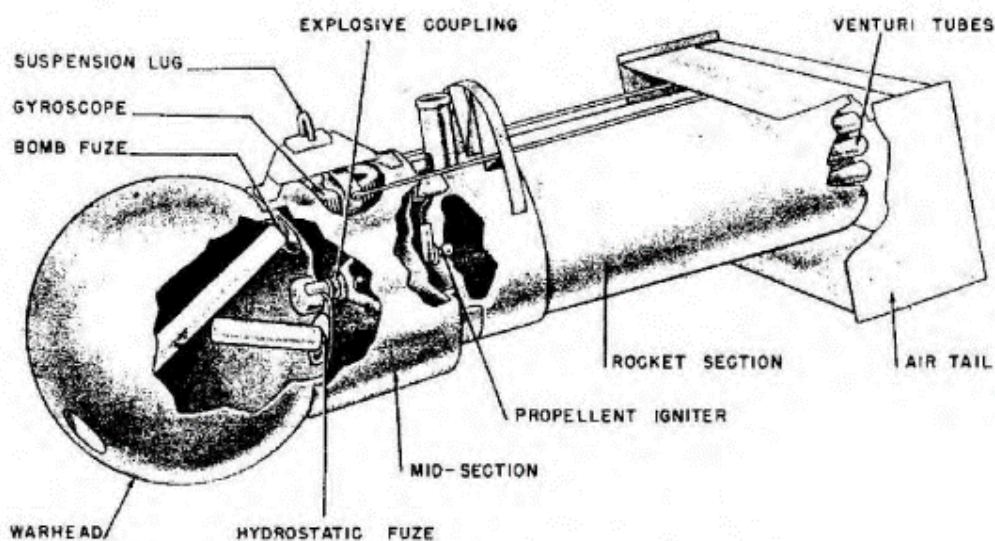
When interviewed in later life, Alan Buxton (above) said, *"The best thing about the service was when I was posted on the famous 617 Squadron which is recognised as the most elite squadron. This consisted of flying in Lancasters and travelling to the Dutch Coast and Bergen in Norway where we had special targets such as E-boat pens, railway yards, bridges, viaducts, canals, oil fields, V2 rocket sites with the Tallboy (12000lbs) and the Grand Slam (22000lbs) bombs."* Image RSL LifeCare.



Above - the Upkeep weapon recovered and defused by the Germans. Likely to have been from Australian F/L Norm Barlow's aircraft ED-927 AJ-E, which crashed after hitting wires.

A perhaps less known postscript to Chastise was the capture of an intact 'Upkeep' (pictured left). The Germans understood that it was a bouncing bomb intended to breach dams. They set about building a similar weapon. "Kurt," the German "bouncing bomb" was a much smaller weapon than 'Upkeep' and intended for anti-shipping attacks. In this respect it was really a German version of the Mosquito weapon "Highball" rather than Upkeep. The difference between the British and German versions was that the former were pre-spun with backspin prior to release, whereas "Kurt" was not spun, but was rocket-powered, any spin being induced only by the high forward velocity after initial impact with the water. The Germans had not deduced the importance of backspin and precise speed and altitude at release.

'Kurt' (right) proved too dangerous to the launching aircraft and was dropped in 1944.



Additional reading:

Australia's Dambusters; Flying into Hell with 617 Squadron, Colin Burgess, Simon & Schuster 2022.

Enemy Coast Ahead, Guy Gibson VC, various publications - mine is Simon & Schuster 1946.

Chastise; The Dambusters, Max Hastings, William Collins 2020.

Dambusters; The Definitive History of 617 Squadron at War 1943-1945, Chris Ward, Andy Lee & Andreas Wachtel, Red Kite 2008.

Dam Busters - the Race to Smash the Dams (Corgi paperback 2013) by James Holland.

The Complete Dambusters - the 133 men who flew on the Dams Raid (History Press, 2018) by Charles Foster.

My thanks to Dr Rob Owen, Official Historian, 617 SQN Association and Gary Petts for their assistance with this article.

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History Group

South Australian Aviation Museum

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APPENDIX - RAAF MEMBERS OF 617 SQUADRON DURING WWII
(Provided by 617 SQN Association Official Historian Dr Rob Owen)

Astbury	C.K.	Colin Keith	Aus	A400897	F/O	A.B.	Serving in RAF
Barlow +	R.N.G.	Robert Norman George	Aus	401899	F/Lt	Pilot	
Barry	R.P.	Robert Percival	Aus	427426	F/Sgt	R/G	
Birch	L.J.	Leslie John	Aus	425265	W/O	Pass	
Burcher	A.F.	Antony Fisher	Aus	403182	F/O	R/G	
Burrows	L.H.J.	Leslie Henry Joseph	Aus	435095	F/O	R/G	
Butler	W.T	Warren Thomas	Aus	405951	P/O	Nav	
Buxton	A.G.	Alan George	Aus	434376	P/O	Nav	
Carey	D.W.	Daniel William	Aus	416650		Pilot	
Chapman	J.F.D.	James Farquhar David	Aus	416000	F/O	R/G	
Clarke	G.K.	George King	Aus	412916	F/Sgt	A.B.	
Edge,	R.J.	Ross Joseph	Aus	424521	F/Sgt	W/Op	
Evans,	A.L.	Alan Loyd	Aus	414544	P/O	W/Op	
Foxlee,	B.T.	Bertie Towner	Aus	404595	P/O	F/G	
Gavin,	H.V.	Howard Valentine	Aus	408185	F/Lt	Pilot	
Gordon,	J.I.	John Irvine	Aus	412218	F/O	Nav	
Hager,	J.L.	John Leslie	Aus	413582	P/O	Nav	
Hall,	E.T.	Ernest Theo	Aus	406976	F/O	R/G	
Hall,	S.G.	Stanley George	Aus	411775	P/O	W/Op	
Hay,	R.C.	Robert Claude	Aus	407071	F/Lt	A.B.	
Howard,	C.L.	Cecil Lancelot	Aus	406248	P/O	Nav	
Jewell,	K.S.	Kenneth Sydney	Aus	418424	F/Sgt	R/G	
Jordon,	A.J.	Alan Joseph	Aus	410599	F/Sgt	W/Op	
Kell,	A.E.	Arthur Edward	Aus	412969	F/O	Pilot	
Kellow,	R.G.T.	Robert George Thomas	Aus	411453	P/O	W/Op	
Knight,	L.G.	Leslie Gordon	Aus	401449	F/Lt	Pilot	
Learmonth,	R.A.	Roy Alexander	Aus	425680	F/Sgt	R/G	
Lee,	W.R.	William Richard	Aus	405693	F/O	Pilot	
Leggo,	J.F.	Jack Frederick	Aus	492367	F/Lt	Nav	
Lovatt,	G.M.	George Midleton	Aus	424774	F/Sgt	W/Op	
Martin,	P.H.	Phillip Herbert	Aus	427006	A/F/O	R/G	
Martin,	H.B.	Harold Brownlow	Aus	68795	F/Lt	Pilot	
McRostie,	A.G.	Arthur George	Aus	27306	F/Sgt	MU	
Morieson,	K.C.	Kenneth Charles	Aus	13751	F/O	A.B.	
Murray,	J.D.	John Desmond	Aus	429605	P/O	Nav	
Pask,	M.	Mervyn	Aus	426150	W/O	W/Op	
Perry,	G.L.	Grant Liston	Aus	417882	F/Sgt	A.B.	
Reddan,	T.K.	Thomas Kevin	Aus	429437	F/O	MU	
Robin,	D.W.	David William	Aus	422359	F/Sgt	Nav	
Ross,	I.S.	Ian Stewart	Aus	18839	P/O	Pilot	
Ross,	I.S.	Ian Stewart	Aus	18839	F/O	Pilot	
Sainsbury,	N.E.J.	Neale Esmond Joseph	Aus	428794	F/O	W/Op	
Sayers,	J.L.	John Lyall	Aus	414844	A/F/Lt	Pilot	
Shannon,	D.J.	David John	Aus	407729	S/L	Pilot	
Simpson,	T.D.	Thomas Drayton	Aus	408076	F/O	R/G	
Snell,	F.W.	Frederick William	Aus	425234	P/O	MU	

Spafford,	F.M.	Frederick Michael	Aus	407380	P/O	A.B.	
Spiers,	J.W.	John William	Aus	21639	F/O	Pilot	
Stanford,	R.M.	Ross Milton	Aus	416624	F/O	Pilot	
Stott,	J.K.	James Kenneth	Aus	400843	F/O	Nav	
Street,	R.A.J.	Roy Alexander John	Aus	434043	F/Sgt	W/Op	
Strom,	E.G.	Eric Greve	Aus	410748	F/O	Nav	
Tuxford,	M.R.	Maxwell Ronald	Aus	403231	F/O	Pass	
Weaver,	A.G.	Arthur George	Aus	424247	P/O	A.B.	
Weaver,	E.W.	Ernest William	Aus	414740	F/O	A.B.	
White,	W.M.	Warren Murray	Aus	408471	F/Sgt	A.B.	
Williams,	C.R.	Charles Rowland	Aus	405224	F/O	W/Op	
Wittmer,	F.E.	Frank Elgar	Aus	400896	F/O	Nav	