

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

SERIES THREE

AIR

VOLUME IV

AIR POWER OVER EUROPE, 1944-1945

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

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EUROPE
1944-1945

by

JOHN HERINGTON

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PREFACE

THIS volume continues and concludes the story of Australian airmen who served in or beside the R.A.F. in the struggle against Germany and Italy. In general, it covers a period when, both in the Mediterranean and in northern Europe, air superiority, the vital pre-requisite of successful air assault, had already been gained over the enemy. Emphasis thus largely turns from air fighting (although this was by no means lacking in local engagements or in the strategic bombing campaigns) to the total achievement of Allied air power in land and sea campaigns.

Against this changing background of the air war and the very rapid expansion of Allied strategic and tactical forces, the Australian contribution requires consideration on a scale and by methods somewhat different from those adopted in *Air War Against Germany and Italy, 1939-1943*.

Some of the main difficulties of research and presentation of the story of Australian squadrons and individuals in the European air war were noted in the preface to the third volume of this series, and in general still apply to this present study. While the geographical boundaries of the main air war had shrunk, the size of the Allied air forces grew apace during the last two years. Individual and squadron effort tended to be more and more submerged in the frequency and complexity of mounting operations against Germany so that Australian contribution becomes less identifiable or assessable. Even R.A.F. squadron operational records, the main source books for the activities of the majority of R.A.A.F. airmen, tended during constant operations to contain increasingly abbreviated details of actual raids or engagements. Nevertheless, the small R.A.A.F. Historical Records Section which worked within the Air Historical Branch of Air Ministry until 1948 did exceptional work in extracting significant details from the huge mass of primary R.A.F. material with which they were confronted. In particular, the voluminous preliminary narrative and appendixes compiled by Squadron Leader W. Worth have proved invaluable to the writer in the main task of depicting the strategic air bombardment against Germany. Many points have been clarified and additional detail obtained from personal interviews with former R.A.A.F. men, although each year the value of individual recollection of events has naturally tended to diminish. Much help has been obtained from personal diaries lent by men or their next-of-kin, as in these contemporary notations appear droll, idealistic, extrovert and at times deeply penetrating comments on the reaction of citizen airmen both to their own operations and the general circumstances of war. By kind permission, portion of one such diary has been reprinted at Appendix 1.

In the main the statistics in this book are based on wartime compilations, corrected wherever possible by any obviously authoritative reassessment. Passage of time has by no means eliminated all the errors which arose in wartime figures because of differing bases of compilation on units, commands or headquarters, or by the concurrent use of the "short"

(American) or "long" (British) ton in assessing weight of attack against various targets. The author has used his discretion in choosing in each instance whichever of apparently conflicting figures appeared best supported, but has also frequently rounded off to the nearest hundred tons the assessment of bombfall on targets. All statistics except those relating to domestic R.A.A.F. matters must therefore be treated with extreme caution and regarded rather as measures of relative than finite fact.

As in the previous volume the background of military and naval campaigns, of political decisions and strategic planning which so profoundly affected air action, and in which Australians took no part except at relatively minor levels, is recorded only in sufficient detail to make R.A.A.F. effort understandable. Care has been taken to make the broad generalisations give as accurate as possible a picture of prevailing circumstances but undoubtedly many statements if taken out of their context in this volume would give false impressions. There are also many omissions of background events which had no precise relevance to an Australian record. More comprehensive and detailed accounts of campaigns and strategy are available in the United Kingdom Official War History series. By contrast, in relation to the actual detail of squadron or individual exploits, the story has frequently been told from the restricted viewpoint of the actual participants in air operations. It will be seen that crews returning from the same bombing raid frequently reported very different opinions concerning enemy defences, their own bombing or the general success of the attack. Some strikes which appeared to be well concentrated on the target were later found to be relatively unsuccessful; conversely a single bomb well placed in a scattered attack thought to be a failure against a soft-skinned vulnerable target such as a synthetic oil refinery might temporarily halt all production. Care must be taken, therefore, in accepting too literally either the assessments of Australian crews given at debriefing on return from their target, or contemporary official reports.

As far as practicable the night raid reports have been checked against later photographic interpretations, such enemy records as survived and became available, and the United States post-war surveys of bomb damage made in all areas except the Russian zone of occupation. There is much room for doubt as to the precise damage caused during many attacks and it is necessary therefore to give only generalised assessments of success on individual raids; it is also possible only in a minority of cases to separate R.A.A.F. effort from the whole and indicate when Australian bombing was better or worse than the over-all average. Similarly, the problem in most cases of assessing true combat successes against the *Luftwaffe* has proved insoluble, and the claims made for R.A.A.F. fighter and bomber crews must be viewed against the undeniable conclusion that Allied war-time assessments proved nearly always inflated, but in varying degrees at different times.

With air superiority, the nature of aerial warfare became less a seesaw struggle *in* the air between fairly evenly matched forces, and more a

constant application of pressure *from* the air on to military objectives of the ground battles and enemy support potential. Operations became very repetitive and, despite the general flexibility of air power, incidents involving individual airmen became increasingly stereotyped. The choice of what to record from many comparable exploits of those Australians actually engaged in the fighting proved on many occasions extremely difficult. Some experiences of individual airmen have been included because they are particularly relevant to a raid under discussion, while almost identical incidents have been ignored or given passing reference only in contexts where introduction of detail, however heroic, would have impeded the narrative. In general, therefore, the introduction of personal incident is illustrative rather than comprehensive. This Draconic rule of relevance is essential to an over-all history, but readers may find much of the detail omitted here in the various squadron histories and memoirs which are now available. Where a man is first mentioned by name in this volume a footnote provides some brief biographical details, but where the name has already appeared in Volume III of this series the footnote is not repeated.

The author is deeply grateful to the men themselves whose lives in action supply the dominant theme of this book; to all those who have read and commented on sections of the text and to all who have lent personal documents. He has a great continued indebtedness to Mr Gavin Long for patience, valuable advice and sympathetic criticism as General Editor. Some of the preliminary work of literary assistant on this volume was done by Mr J. Seymour but the bulk of it was done by his successor, Mr G. McKeown. He traced material, checked facts, chose the illustrations, wrote the index and made the path of the cartographers, Mr Hugh Groser and Miss Elaine Oates, easier by the excellence of his map drafts.

J.H.

Melbourne,
22nd August 1962.