



JOURNAL OF THE 458 SQUADRON COUNCIL
Year 76 No. 279 April 2025



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TAS, NT, ACT and New Zealand – Looking for volunteers.

*** Mail all communications for Squadron Secretary to Stephen Bruce (address above), and for the Squadron (and NSW Flight) Treasurer to Beryl Dodds (address above) ** Have you notified Editor Roland Orchard if you prefer to receive your newsletter by email? Are there others in your family, or circle of friends, who would like to receive a copy by e-mail? Please advise the Editor – see postal address above or email Roland at editor@458raaqsquadron.org**

***Contributions and reports for the next Newsletter #280
are due to The Editor by 31st July, 2025.***

FLIGHT REPORTS



New South Wales Flight Report by Stephen Bruce

With Anzac Day 2025 only a few weeks away it is a timely reminder to us all to reflect on this year's 80th Anniversary of the cessation of WW2 in Europe on 8th May, 1945.

We will march off at 11:00am ish having assembled at Corner of Martin Place and Elizabeth St. Sydney. At this stage we have 20 either marching and attending our function at The Castlereagh Boutique Hotel following The Anzac Day March.

There should be considerable discussion over lunch with our plans for our Reunion in Malta from 13th October through 17th October.

Our proposed **Malta Reunion itinerary** includes a familiarisation tour on Monday 13th October by Maltese Tourism Association visiting in and around the historical sites of Malta.

On Tuesday 14th October we will visit the memorial sites and museums in Valetta & Floriana including Lascaris WW2 war rooms, Kalkari Cemetary & Fort St. Elmo along with Valletta Memorial & Saluting Battery.

Wednesday the 15th, our formal commemoration ceremony will take place at The Valetta Memorial to be organised by Australian & Maltese High Commissions. The office of the President of Malta will be represented along with Commonwealth War Graves Commission and RAFA Malta and other dignitaries.

Thursday 16th will be a special day indeed as we will be visiting 458's home for two years during WW2 at Luqa Airport hosted by Lt. Colonel Grech where we will get an historical perspective of WW2 operations in this airfield that was charged with air defence of Malta.

A farewell dinner is scheduled on Friday night 17th and hosted by Maltese Tourist Authority at a yet to be determined location.

If anyone would like to attend the reunion and hasn't signed up already or needs any further information regarding this reunion feel free to contact me, Stephen Bruce.



United Kingdom Flight Report by Keith Wilkinson

Pleased to report that our squadron co-president Charles Humbles has celebrated his 103rd birthday.

Charles is still living independently at his home in England, albeit these days with the help of a round-the-clock live-in carer. He has had reasonably good health recently and tells me he is "soldiering on". Charles enjoys a tippie of spirits and I gave him a bottle of whisky to mark his special occasion.

Despite his age, he still has a good memory of his squadron days and his long involvement with aircraft, both in war and peacetime. Charles used to work on 458 Squadron Wellington aircraft and after the war he had a successful career in aero engineering. His work took him all over Europe. In a recent chat, he told me he didn't retire until he was nearly 67 years old when he was presented with a big leaving card - three feet across. Before his time with 458 squadron, Charles was very much involved in the Battle of Britain, working on Hurricanes. He became close to many of the Hurricane and Spitfire pilots defending Britain from wave after wave of German fighter attacks. He still has happy memories from those days but also unsettling ones.

"It was dreadful when the pilots you knew didn't come back," he said.

Charles is very pleased to hear about plans for the squadron reunion in Malta but such a trip now would be too difficult for him to make.

Our squadron co-president Bill Wake also sends best wishes to all heading to Malta. He too is about to celebrate his 103rd birthday. We wish them both all the very best and the gathering in Malta will no doubt have a special toast for them to say - good on ya mates!

Meanwhile...there is some great news from Derek Hammersley, son of 458-er Clarence Hammersley. He wrote to us about a large

number of photographs that had been in the possession of his father.

He wrote: "These photographs are, I believe, taken by an official military photographer during the move of 458 Squadron from Egypt to Libya in 1943. My father was part of that move, seconded from the RAF. He is in a couple of the photographs as the photographer rode with him."

I had a good chat with Derek who told me more about his dad. Clarence, who was born in 1915 and died in 1990, was an English motor mechanic working on the squadron's vehicles. He was an LAC. One of his first postings was to Holme on Spalding Moor (where 458 was then part of Bomber Command).

Motor vehicles were a lifetime passion of his. After the war he maintained a fleet of vans for a bakery.

Here are some of the amazing collection of pictures. Clarence Hammersely is second left in the group with two lorries. And he is the man in the coat in the photo of the German aircraft.









Queensland Flight Report by Brett Taylor

The only communication I have received since my last newsletter was from Peter Hedgcock son of Flight Lt Peter Hedgcock. Peter's father serviceman's story is in the association website. Peter was pleased to read in my newsletter about when his father and crew were Tour Ended from Italy as his father did not talk much about the war.

My father in contrast did talk about many of his WWII experiences and I am fortunate to have inherited his diary from that period. As my father's diary information helped Peter, I hope the following diary extracts below might help others to understand the day-to-day training experience to convert onto Wellington aircraft and Ground Reconnaissance work.

This part of my father's diary starts when he was posted to Limavady, Northern Ireland for training and ends when he has identified his all-Australian crew. Over the previous 18 months he was training Army pilots to fly gliders that could carry 6 troops.

My father used abbreviations and slang in his diary which I transcribed for my sons and family to read.

10.6.43 Thursday

As ever I've left this book of words for ages, this time damn (near) a month. Well, I got through the G.R. course and received an immediate posting to Limavady in North Ireland. I came here with F/Sgt Markey & we all dreamed of Liberators. Boy, were we shaken. Our Libs consisted of Night Torpedo Wimpies. I don't think I've ever been so browned off as I was when it fully hit me. Many a true word spoken in jest. Rusty and I used to say "Roll out your torpedo bombers" when things got a bit beyond us at Bridgnorth. Roll 'em out they did.

My time to laugh duly came though, as now a lot of the other stooges have turned up George Burton, Don Taylor, Derrick Harvey, Wigley-

Jones, Herbert James, the gen-kid, Don Greenhill, P/O Shopcott, Vic Game. Boy, did I laugh when I saw them.

There is an Aussie S/L here, one Dowling, and a damn nice fella he is. He has been stooging in Australia for quite a long time. He is a regular Air Force type. He has only been in England a month & the poor blighter has been sent here.

Geoff Briggs is in the mess here as an instructor & now he has the D.F.C. He won it out east.

Had a letter from "Dunga" Rees today & he said that Allan Ellis & Pat Ferrero & Dave Richlands are there with him. He mentioned that life has been very grim, but Australians in his barracks have been unchained & that now he has something to eat.¹

Still no news of Karl Girrbach. I'm beginning to fear the worst now, although the longer it goes perhaps the more hope there is.

Getting to like the old Wimpey but it is fairly heavy. No sensation of flying at all, just like a bloody bus.

Had a parcel from home. Good show.

13.6.43 Sunday

Have put in the night writing letters. Just about time too. Heard from Scotch Gordon that he is sticking his neck out over Germany these days or should I say, night(s). Expected to start night dicing here tonight, but for some reason it has been postponed. Good show.

Actually, it is a stinking aerodrome for night flying as it has bloody great hills 1800 feet high all about it. Only one safe side & that is close to the Lough.

I'm beginning to get a crew together but the observer position is not at all healthy, if we must have all Australian crew, I would like at least one more officer but unless I can get one for second Dickie, I'm afraid it won't be too good.

Thursday 17.6.43

Had quite a good night flying & am "dicing" again tonight, this time with Johnny Dowling. Five hours circuits & bumps. Bloody long time for circuits but we will get around.

¹ "Dunga" was a prisoner of war at the time.

Read in the paper some weeks ago that Sir Nigel Norman, my old C.O. was killed. The old gliders? Today's paper contains a personal tribute to a S/L Crichton-Miller who was killed last Feb. I wonder if that is our old "Cic" (?) from Netheravon. I think it must be as he was a Met Officer. Poor chap volunteered to go on a Bomber raid for "gen". No news about Karl, so I'm afraid he must have "bought" it unless he has managed to escape.

Gosh, I'm looking forward to some leave. It's now over five months since I've had any. Not so good. I'm gradually getting a crew together and now have two W.O.P's & a navigator - all sergeants & all Australians. Must dash off or I'll be late. Am suffering a bit from hay-fever. Gosh, it's a swine.

Monday 28.6.43

I've got my complete crew together now & we are all from "down under". They are a good crowd. They are: "Bernie" McLoughlin {second pilot}, Tom Phillis {navigator} Roy Schoppe (wireless operator), Dick Hatton (tail gunner), Bill (Snow) Hortin (radio operator) {W.O.P's}

I only hope I am well enough equipped in every way to do a good job. I now realise just how much their lives are in my hands. We are, of course, a team & must work as such & I certainly believe that we will. Dick Hatton is a good shot, was a King's Cup Rifleman for West Australia. Bill Hortin & Roy Schoppe are also from the Golden West. Bill is an old pal of Ossie Tomlinson, who he says is still an instructor back home. Mac & Tom hail from Queensland, so we are well represented. All the small states.

We got along very well together and I like to think that we were a good crew.

Had a letter from old Whitrod who is coming over to Northern Ireland & is threatening to pop in to see me. Hope he can make it.

Mail from home has been very sparse of late. A hell of a lot of Aussies have come into the camp over the last week or so. There were a lot of French men here before, but their place has been taken by our fellows. I hope we leave as good, if not a better impression than the French.

1.7.43 Thursday

Am in my room having just got out of bed and the time is 10:45am. Nice going. Truth to tell I went on a Nav trip last night or rather yesterday at 4:30pm & got back again at 10pm. We went up around the Hebrides. Damn nice trip actually and I'm quite pleased the way the crew worked particularly the W.O.P's.

Some poor blighters went into the drink in a Beaufighter, well out in the Atlantic. Some of our boys are back again after searching for him. No sign & cloud right down on the water. Poor devils have probably "bought it" by now.

I've pumped dinghy drill into my crew, but I'm afraid it would be an awful shambles if we ever went into the sea. So much to be done in such a short time. Excellent equipment is supplied to us including two pigeons,² two strong husky birds I hope.

Heard from Bob Fender, Sir Nigel "bought it" on take-off, engine failure. He was on his way to Africa. Dick Jesse was the pilot & got away with it. Wilkie & Peter Davis & all that gang are all overseas, so it looks rather interesting. Guess the papers are right when they mentioned that a glider & tug were shot down over the Atlantic & that the Hun expects an airborne invasion.

Ireland has redeemed herself on the weather lately, - it has been absolutely marvellous. I went for a swim at Magilligan Point a few nights ago with Joan Reeves & another W.A.A.F. Officer plus our intelligence officer. My first swim in the Atlantic. Hope I can always put one foot on the bottom if needs be.

5.7.43 Monday

Going out for our first night trip tonight. Take off 20:30 hours on my half day off. Dear Bill, wouldn't it. Forgot to mention that Bob Bungey came to a sad end. He returned to Australia & shortly after his wife died. He was subsequently found dead on the beach at Somerton with his baby son wounded alongside him. Poor devil what a finish after such a courageous career. Bad luck, Bob, but I guess you knew best. He must have loved his wife very very much. Well must dash off

² In both WWI and WWII aircraft and ships carried homing pigeons to send an SOS message back to base, which seems incredulous when today we simply carry an emergency EPIRB for back up help.

for my tea, but I'll bet we won't go on this trip, bloody weather looks bad. That blasted low must have moved in from the Atlantic.

10.7.43 Saturday

We didn't go on that trip on Monday as I expected but we went off today despite a lousy weather forecast. We were briefed at 11:30 for a 13:30 take off but the Met gen was bad, so we were told to standby until 14:00 when it was decided that we would dice at 15:30, so I finally got airborne at 16:15 for a 690-mile trip over sea all the way. The weather was bad, damn bad & I got lower & lower, finally ended up blind flying at 300 feet above the sea. Every minute I expected it to clear but no sign of it so I told Roy to report the weather conditions & that we were returning to base. Quite a flap on at the 'drome as poor old Bill Heaton was in the drink. He had a bloody awful aircraft & I heard them tell him that one motor would overheat & that he would have to "nurse" it along. How bloody silly to send six fellows out for an exercise for 690 miles over the sea in a particularly ropery kite. Ye Gods, they are all ropery enough, but this thing was lousy as Vic Game force landed at Stornoway only two days ago due to engine trouble. Oh, well, I suppose there are bags of aircrew about, so what the hell. Old Bill got away with it, so to hell with the kite. The atmosphere at this & I believe all other O.T.U's stinks. Training Command, hell what an atmosphere.

I hear Bossie Foreman has the A.F.C. Good stuff, must write to him. Thank God for John Dowling. He is a bloody good fellow. Would like to be in a squadron with him.

13.7.43 Tuesday

Just back from the worst flight I've yet done. Shocking weather, shot at by an aircraft & wireless U/S. The worst feature being that Jimmy Tait & his crew crashed into Binevenagh & all were killed except P/O Moss, who of course is very sick.³ It seems a criminal shame to me that Jimmy, who has just come out of hospital, was sent on a six-hour cross-country mainly at night. I know how he felt when he got back here, I was all in after I finally landed at West Freugh⁴ this morning.

³ Binevenagh is a large, steep-sided hill in County Londonderry,

⁴ West Freugh is on the coast 120km SW of Glasgow

Poor Jimmy crashed just five minutes before I landed. The remarks in the authorisation book in the remark's column, is typical of the outlook. "Crashed 0250 hours. D.N.C.O." "Duty not carried out". What a farce.

Last night I realised just what can happen, first shot at, wireless U/S, lost in cloud for ages. No answer to "Darky". Oh well, I'll bet there was a hell of a panic here. It is quite impossible for anybody who has not flown to appreciate how one feels in these circumstances. Cloud all around, lost & yet not daring to come below 5000 feet because of the fear of running into a hill. Just cloud & darkness all around.

26 July 1943 Monday

Left Limavady last Tuesday and were all ready to go over to Turnberry, when the 4 Australian Crews, that is John Dowling, Don Anderson, John Markey & mine were all posted on six days leave to report to Talbenny⁵ on the 28th. I left Ireland with the boys, losing Dick Hatton & Bill Hortin en route {they missed the train} & then I went on to Manchester to meet Emmie {Mrs Glover Lea}, Karl's friend.

She is very firmly convinced that Karl is safe but I'm sure that he went into the North Sea. He went to Kiel & it was his second raid. Nothing further was heard. To this tragically long list, I now must add Len's name. Len (Harrison) went to Mulheim on the 22nd June & again nothing more was heard. Please God, Len must be a prisoner of war. Poor Pop, Harrie & Loine. He was in 460 Squadron.

I met Ray Whitrod in London & old Ray is going out again, this time as navigation officer to his squadron. Ray deserves a good job as he really has put up a good show.

Thursday 29th July

Talbenny and it stinks. Here we are in very pretty country, but what a station. No batmen & all in a long barrack room, which was previously occupied by some Czechs. This is enough, but now I've lost or more correctly had my little black bag stolen.

⁵ Talbenny is on the west coast, 85km WNW of Swansea in Wales

We managed a small supper tonight & I managed to get a quarter pound of margarine without producing any coupons. That takes some doing.

Well, we are about to get cracking and these are the crews.

1/ S/L John Dowling, F/O A3 {Crusher} Jones, F/O AC {Shorty} Coulter, Sgts Jenkins, Sheerlock & Hedgecock.

2/ F/Sgt John Markey, F/O Joe Bartlett, Sgt Tom Rogers, F/Sgts Shipard, Taylor & Huntley.

3/ F/Sgt Don Anderson, F/O Brian Lawler, Sgt Bill Scott, F/Sgt Malcolm Knox, Sgts Gould & Roy Simpson.

4/ Me, P/O McLoughlin, F/Sgt Tom Phillis, Sgt Roy Schoppe, Dick Hatton, Bill Hortin.

Monday 2nd August 1943

Got my aircraft, my own beautiful kite & if I have my way, nobody else will fly same or at least until I reach our destination, when I expect some bloody senior officer will take same from me. I went to Llandow & picked her up and took Roy along with me.

In accordance with my luck, the weather closed down & I had a hell of a job getting in. Old John went up to the Control Tower & tried to get me on R/T, but there was too much interference and I couldn't hear him. I asked for Very lights at the end of the runway as I'm damned if I could find it. Every landing run I made was 100-yards one side or another of the runway. When I finally got in, I couldn't close the port throttle & I had to switch off the motors to keep the kite on an even keel. Add to that a lack of brake pressure & the game becomes interesting.⁶

Now to swing compasses, calibrate loops, harmonise guns etc & then bring out your Golden Star, hoist your Golden Banners, I'm on the way. Bring out your JU 88's, but for God's sake have bags of clouds about.

The camp stinks, no batmen, dispersal all over the place. To hell with this place. It is in pretty country but the camp is pretty bloody.

Thursday 5.8.43

⁶ Bill's Wellington was a Mark XIII No. HZ603

Not much doing today as my aircraft is U/S. There is something wrong with the air pressure in the brake system. I lost 30lbs in taxiing 30 yards, which is not quite good enough. Old Crusher Jones, John's second dickie, has just turned up in his new battle dress. All the fellows now have their own aircraft and we are all trying to get finished first.

...to be continued

I hope this record provides new information for 458 relatives and friends.

I can be contacted on **btaylorc6@gmail.com**



Canada Flight Report by Adam & Cate Wagstaffe

In the recent edition of the 458 Squadron newsletter, we shared the story of WO2 Peter Brown, the Wireless Operator and Air Gunner aboard the Wellington that tragically crashed on February 13th, 1943, killing all but one of the crew members. We now hope to provide more information about two more crew members: P/O Laurence Harry Gleason (Pilot) and F/O Maurice McAllister Kempton (Observer).



P/O Gleason

Lawrence Harry “Gleason” was born on March 26, 1918, in Canora, Saskatchewan, to parents Agnes and Harry. He had an older sister, Agnes (who passed away in 1978), and a younger sister, Yvonne (who passed away in 2010). We have reached out to Yvonne's granddaughter, Arianna, via Ancestry and

hope to share this newsletter with her soon.

Maurice McAllister “Kempton,” was born October 8, 1914, in Moose Jaw Saskatchewan, to parents Clifford and Mary. He had one sister Gwendoline (1917-1998) and an older Brother Eric (Born 1913-1942). Eric tragically died in a car accident while Kempton was serving overseas. His brother’s truck flipped



F/O Kempton

while trying to avoid a horse in the middle of the road. Because the newspaper clippings of Eric’s death are combined into his brother’s service records, there are multiple sources that have mistaken the two brothers, and many forums and documents have Kempton’s previous occupation before enlistment with the National Light and Power Company Limited.

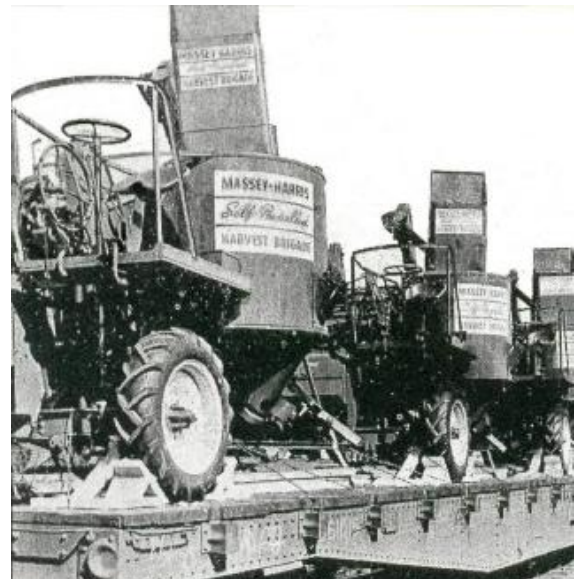
He earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, followed by studies in Petroleum Engineering at the International Correspondence School (ICS) in Scranton, Pennsylvania, from 1938 to 1940. Throughout his education, Kempton worked as a Chemist and Operator at the British American Oil Company Limited Refinery in Moose Jaw. During the war, a large number of Canada's petroleum companies were repurposed to produce aviation fuel.



The British American Oil Company factory in Moose Jaw where Kempton worked from 1934 to 1941.

Meanwhile Gleason attended Canora High School, where he was actively involved in extracurricular activities. He developed into quite a skilled athlete, excelling in hockey, rugby, and other sports. He also had a deep interest in machinery and enjoyed operating all kinds of transportation vehicles. While it might not be essential to this article, we think it is worth noting that Gleason enjoyed one of Canada's famous pastimes—tobogganing.

Before enlisting, Gleason worked at the Massey Harris manufacturing plant in Toronto, one of the city's leading employers at the time. During the war effort, Massey Harris transitioned from producing agricultural equipment to building wings for Anson aircraft — the same planes that Gleason himself would later train in.



Massey Harris produced Agriculture equipment like the Carbine harvester before reallocating their work for the war effort. Source: www.heritagecalgary.ca/heritage-calgary-blog/masseytanks



De Havilland Mosquito <https://www.canada.ca/en/air-force/services/aircraft/de-havilland-mosquito.html>

The first Canadian De Havilland Mosquito aircraft, affectionately nicknamed the “Mossie,” was built in secret in a rented building at 888 Dupont Street in Toronto. Massey Harris would later

be awarded the contract to build the wings for the

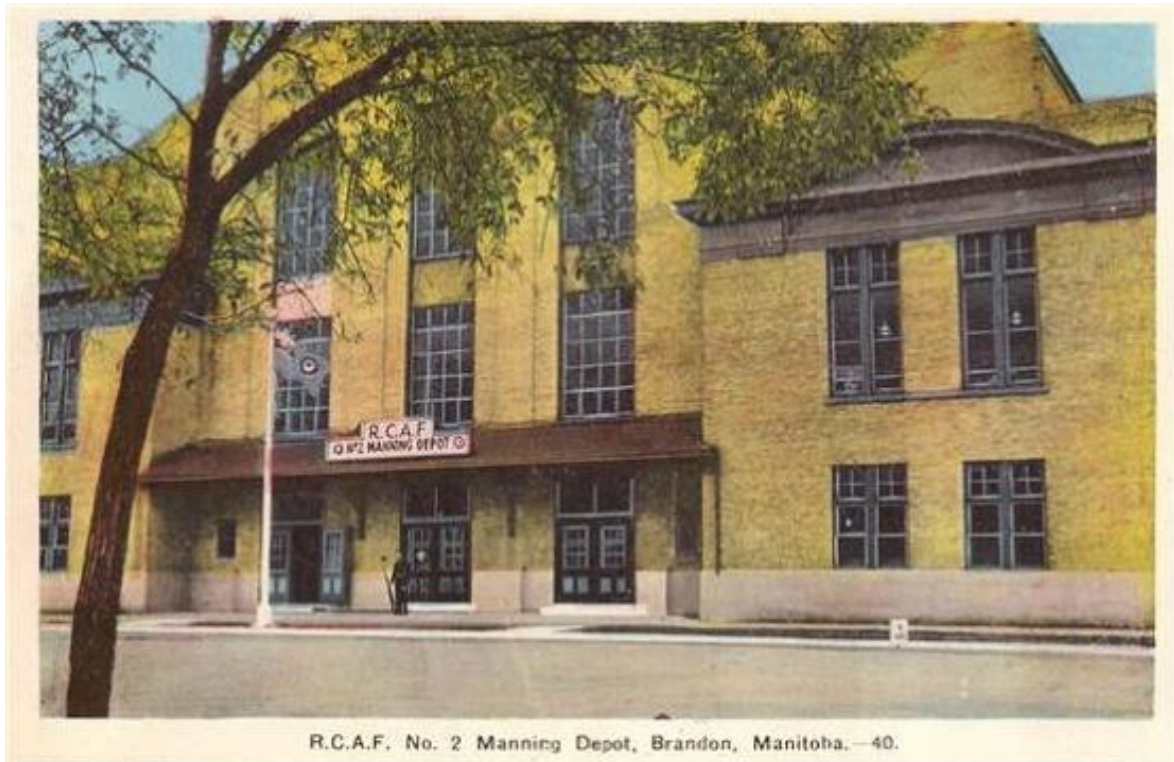
Mosquito. Originally designed as an all-wood light bomber, the Mossie quickly proved its versatility, transitioning into roles as a reconnaissance aircraft, fighter-bomber, and night fighter.

Gleason became an assistant postmaster just before enlisting on February 24th, 1941 at the Saskatoon Recruitment Centre. He provided four references for his RCAF application, all of whom praised his passion and dream of becoming a pilot. Both his interviewers and references highlighted his fine character and general abilities, noting that he possessed the qualities they believed were essential for a successful pilot.

Gleason reported to the Saskatoon Recruiting Centre on February 24th 1941 while Kempton reported to the Regina Recruiting Centre on March 6th 1941. Both men would fill out the requisite forms, say “Agh” and watch their knees bounce. With that, both would report to the No. 2 Manning Depot for training.

We have touched on Manning Depot in numerous newsletters now. During the Second World War, the Manning Depot No. 2 was an integral component of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan.





The building (pictured above) on Eleventh Street at Victoria Avenue in Brandon was where new recruits from all over Western Canada, some 1,000 to 1,500 at a time, came for their introduction to military life. They attended classes in precision drills, physical fitness, swimming, sunbathing, as well as general outfitting. At the end of their two- to four-week stint here, the prospective airmen were sorted into three training classes: Pilots, Air Observers, or Air Gunners.

Manning Depot No. 2 was the first such facility in Western Canada, supplementing the Manning Depot No. 1 at Toronto (Ontario). After securing a lease for the former Brandon Winter Fair Building (also known as the Brandon Arena) from the Brandon Winter Fair and Livestock Association (BWFLA), work began to convert the livestock-holding structure into a military facility. Winnipeg architect Cyril William Upton Chivers provided a renovation plan and starting in May 1940, a 60-man work crew began a thorough cleaning of the building. Cattle stalls on two floors of a large adjacent structure were removed and replaced with sleeping quarters. The wooden annex building, formerly a stable, was converted to a recreation hall and sergeants' mess, with a dining room (with seating for 450) in a former poultry building. In just two months, the renovations were completed

at a cost of some \$85,000. Finishing touches were mostly completed by mid-June 1940.

*We are aware of a “Barbers Book” with over 22,000 signatures of recruits that had haircuts at No. 2 Manning Depot, including Kempton and Gleason no doubt.



Following completion of the course at No. 2 Manning, Kempton was posted to No. 4 Training Command in Regina, Saskatchewan. No. 4 TC was an umbrella command for the initial training. Kempton's first stop was the No. 2 Initial Training Squadron (ITS) June 10th, 1941. as described in previous issues, cadets were tested on the Link Trainer, maths, basic navigation to determine their eligibility for pilot training. Kempton was part of Course 29 consisting of 167 recruit airmen. At the

completion of the course on the 19th of July 112 were selected as potential pilot material. Kempton along with 21 others designated observers, 2 Wireless Air Gunner and a further 30 designated “wastage”! “Including 21 who needed to rewrite one or two subjects.” Harsh marking indeed.



Aerial View of the No. 3 Bombing and Gunnery School. Source: Archives of Manitoba

Gleason would graduate from No. 2 Manning Depot and move on to No. 3 Bombing and Gunnery School situated in the northeast of Macdonald, a rural Municipality of Portage le Prairie in Manitoba. The base was also home to No. 2 Advanced Flying School and No. 1 Pilot Weapon School. The RCAF Aerodrome at Macdonald

was formed on March 10th, 1941, the exact same day that Gleason arrived!

The station was created to train air observer, navigators/bomb aimers and wireless operators on the techniques of air-to-air firing. An essential and necessary training in order to carry out bombing missions. All practical training was done on the accompanying bombing and gunnery ranges on the base. We are unsure why Gleason skipped straight to this training, but we suspect the Aerodrome was relatively new and not fully complete, so he was reassigned to No. 2. Initial Training in Regina, Course 26 from May 16th, 1941 (one month before Kempton was in the same training with Course 29).

During Gleason's time at No. 2 ITS, he developed a reputation for using his clerk skills from when we worked at the post office as well as repairing farm implements from his time at Massey Harris. This was noted in the remarks of his test scores of which his overall mark for mathematics, armament, signals, hygiene and sanitation, drill, and law and discipline were 422 out of 500 with an overall placement of 50 out of 174 classmates. Gleason was considered an above average pilot at this point.



The Dalton Navigation Computer E6 B to calculate altitude computations and temperature readings.

Kempton was posted to No. 3 Air Observer School in Regina Saskatchewan on July 22nd, 1941. No. 3 AOS was equipped with Avro Anson Aircraft. Trainees were taught to navigate via dead reckoning and visual methods using aeronautical charts with magnetic compass, watch, trip log, Douglas protractor and

Dalton Navigational computer (I knew this when learning to fly as the E6 B).

From June to August Gleason was at No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at High River, where he began flying the Tiger Moth. It was noted that he was "inclined to be careless [yet] had no real bad faults." Despite his progress, the constant, demanding training schedule led Gleason to go AWL (Absent Without Leave) on June 1st. He left the station for 3 hours, from 2230 to 1300 hours, and was confined to barracks for 3 days — likely recovering from the previous night's activities.

During his Service Flying Training with No. 7 Squadron (Course 35) at Fort Macleod Alberta in August, Gleason made "high average progress throughout the course, was keen and conscientious, and possessed a good air sense" while flying Ansons. He ranked 21st out of a class of 51, which was an excellent achievement.

Kempton graduated from No. 3 Air Observer School (AOS) from July to October 1941, and was posted the very next day to Bomber and Gunnery School. Specifically, he was assigned to No. 5 B&GS in Defoe, Saskatchewan from October to November 1941, where he



The Fairey Battle of No. 63 Squadron. Source: Wiki

would serve as an observer/bomb aimer with a crew of three — a pilot, a radio operator/air gunner, and himself. The crew flew a Fairey Battle, a British single-engine light bomber powered by a Rolls-Royce Merlin piston engine, the same engine that powered

iconic British fighters like the infamous

Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire.

The community of Dafoe, Saskatchewan, is located on the south shores of the Quill Lakes region of South Saskatchewan. In 1940, this was a very remote part of populated Canada. Unlike most airfields which are located fairly close to their namesake towns, the Dafoe base was situated more than 20 kilometers from the town itself. Opened on January 7th, 1941,



Training student gunners and bomb-aimers was not a pleasant task in Saskatchewan during winter. Young pilots, who had joined only months before to fight, were now freezing for hours on end, towing targets and squiring gunners about the Quill Lakes region near Dafoe. Here we see a Dafoe-based Fairey Battle after a winter storm. Starting a Battle frozen solid after the down time was most certainly a painful experience. Photo via CanadianWings.com

No. 5 B&GS closed on January 11th, 1945. Aircraft used at the base include the Westland Lysander, Bristol Bolingbroke, Avro Anson, and primarily the Fairey Battle.

The former station's property is now used for farming. The only building that remains is one of the hangars. The only other remnants are the hangar pads, the gun butt and the crumbling roadways and airfield. The property owner still uses a portion of the old airfield as a private aerodrome.

The following is a quote from a 427 Squadron navigator and his experience at a Bomber and Gunnery school in Quebec, just a few months after Kempton:

“Our course last six weeks and we were delighted to learn that there would be a lot less classroom work than at AOS. We learned about the construction and fusing of bombs and the many factors affecting the trajectory of the bomb on its way downward. We were trained on the Vickers gas operated machine gun (VGO for short) even though by now it was virtually obsolete. However, it served the purpose and we learned how to take the gun apart and put it back together again. In theory we learned how to clear troubles when the gun jammed but the stoppages which were frequent sometimes had to be cleared by an armourer after we landed. In those days, I wasn't very good at things mechanical and not much has changed in the intervening years.

The practice bombing exercises were fun - better than today's video games for sure. The students went aloft in pairs with an RCAF pilot flying the Fairey Battle. Each of us had six 11 pound practice bombs to drop, but first we had to fly a triangular course to calculate the wind speed and direction. As with navigation the wind factor was the unknown and an accurate wind was absolutely essential for good bombing results. We use the Mark 9 bombsight which was still in general use on most squadrons overseas. There were other settings such as height and airspeed and then we were all set to do our thing.”

On completion of this course Kempton was on the move again. This time east to Rivers, Manitoba and the No. 1 Air Navigation School November to December of 1941. No. 1 Air Navigation School was

formed to give navigators/bomb aimers advanced navigation training as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

The following is a quote from 427 Squadron. Sgt Observer Vernon Moore White, who trained at Rivers a scant few months after Kempton. It gives a great flavour to the workload and training that Kempton went through for two months and the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942:



ANS: No. 1 Air Navigation School Badge. Source: RAF.info

“At Rivers we spent hours on end learning to be proficient with the sextant. We had some previous at AOS but nothing as concentrated as now. In addition to using the sextant on practice flights, we were required to take 250 star shots on the ground and plot them using the international air almanac. On several occasions we stayed up until 4.00 a.m. To complete the exercise and to find the required stars in the summer sky. We noted that the latitude and longitude of the base after every reading and to this very day I know the

coordinates of Rivers to be 50 01 N and 100 18 W. So much for that but we did become very accurate at least on the ground. In the air it wasn't quite that easy but under ideal conditions we could fix our position within five miles. Astro navigation was intended to be a supplement to all the other aids, and as new technology became available, we seldom resorted to the sextant on operations. More often we used Polaris, the pole star, as a general reference point to satisfy ourselves that the compass was behaving. I completed ten cross-country flights in the space of 23 days. Six of these trips were at

night and we used a combination of star shots and radio bearings to find our way.”



No. 1 Air Navigations School was located in Rivers Manitoba. Source: Manitoba Heritage Society

Following graduation from No. 1 ANS on January 16, 1942, and with no break it was East again to Prince Edward Island and the No. 31 General Reconnaissance School (GRS) in Charlottetown. Reporting for duty and the same day Kempton's records indicate. The General Reconnaissance School trained pilots and air observers in the techniques required for ocean patrol. It was the equivalent to an Operational Training Unit (OTU), and last stop before aircrew were assigned to operations. The topics included DR Navigation, Astro Navigation, Compasses and Instruments, Meteorology, Signals, Reconnaissance, Coding, Ship Recognition, Aerial Photography, and Visual Signals.

Gleason was also posted to 31 GRS in Charlottetown (Course 23) November 17th 1941 to January 17th 1942, probably waving at Kempton as he was arriving and Gleason was heading off to his next

training course. Gleason spent most of his time in Charlottetown training in Ansons during the Day to log more flying hours. He was above average and a confident navigator. His instructors noted that he was neat and methodical in the air.

Canada may have been far from the “Fighting” but accidents and losses occurred often in the training environment. Just one month



No. 31 GRS - located near Charlottetown PEI. Source: Militarybruce.com

before Kempton arrived at 31 GRS, two Ansons on a night fight collided killing all on board both aircraft. The report suggested that one of the two engaged in a mock attack on the other causing the collision. The report went further and recommended that former fighter pilots not be employed as instructors at Reconnaissance schools!

The next five or six months would be an interesting time for Kempton: Part training -- part operational. Working with 31 GRS and then with No. 31 Operational Training Unit (OTU), he flew in Ansons and then Lockheed Hudsons on Submarine hunting in the St. Lawrence seaway of Canada as well as the Atlantic and as part of

Ferry Command flew at least one trip from Gander, Newfoundland to Prestwick, Scotland and possibly back. It was a hectic period with orders given, cancelled, re-ordered and cancelled again.

Gleason was again also in No. 31 OTU, at Debert in Nova Scotia (Course number: 4 pilots) from January 19th, 1942, to April 10th 1942. This time Gleason was flying Hudson. Most of his course records have “NIL” stamped across the results– the reason being: “As the Bombing & Gunnery Ranges have not yet been completed no Air Firing or Bombing exercises could be carried.” Not to sound snarky but what were they doing then at the bombing school if they couldn’t practice bombing? Gleason was getting his flying hours and logged over 25.30 hours of day and night flying.

By the time Kempton was posted here in February 1942, they had slightly better access and training. Debert provided a wide range of challenging terrain and features and was near major centres and logistic points. The Bay of Fundy and Northumberland Straits were at hand. It was near Halifax and located near a major rail junction in Central Nova Scotia at Truro.

“OTU 31 was equipped with Lockheed Hudson bombers. Its task was to conduct training over long distances, in marginal flying conditions, to train men who had rarely flown out of the sight of land, under realistic conditions. The syllabus for operational training proper was designed for a course of twelve weeks for pilots and wireless operator/air gunners and eight weeks for observers. Training of each group was conducted separately until the final stages. The crews, consisting of one pilot, one observer and two wireless operator/air gunners, were joined together as a crew.

Debert and other training units in maritime Canada operated in the Bay of Fundy, the Gulf of St Lawrence and well into the Atlantic to the extreme limits of their aircrafts’ endurance to provide this maritime protection and to project power. It was not a cushy jammy posting. There was danger involved both in the training and in the operation!

According to Hudson plane historian Bill Walker, of London, Ontario, "The instructors also used the school's aircraft to search for German U-boats in Canadian waters when the U-boats moved into the western Atlantic in 1942 and 1943". Part of the mission was training, but more importantly, they served an operational function as well. They placed the fear of God into German submariners who were forced to keep their heads down in the presence of these aircraft.

Additional training was then provided to those pilots who were deemed capable of and selected for the trans-Atlantic crossing. These pilots received an additional eight weeks of training before being sent to Ferry Command.

Many of the more experienced Ferry Command flyers were inclined to shake their heads in disbelief at the process. They were being augmented by 'kids' in their late teens and early twenties, with a maximum of 350 hours flying time to their credit. A trans-Atlantic air crossing in that day and age was a foreboding experience. It was new and unknown.

Few experienced crews had actually ever undertaken the challenge prior to the war. It was both equally dangerous and demanding as there were few external navigational aids to guide the intrepid in the task. A safe crossing would all boil down to training, skill and luck to arrive there safely. For some, luck would run out before they ever took the trip."

(Source Madiganstories.com)

In April 15th 1942 Gleasons records show he was stationed at RAF Ferry Command with no further details on what he was doing there. We suspect he was waiting around for the bombing school to have bombs... and sure enough on May 2nd, 1942 he went back to 31. OTU in Debert to do the 'real' training this time.

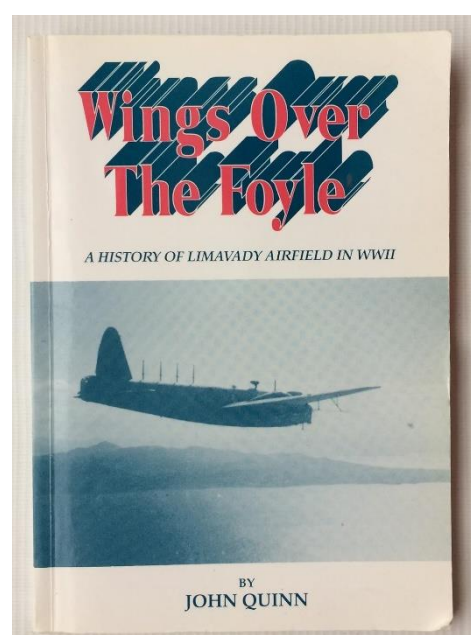


Meanwhile promotions for Kempton had been regular. Starting with everyone else as an Air Cadet in March of 1941 he was promoted to LAC in July and Sergeant in November (following graduation from AOS) of the same year. In December of 1941 Kempton was promoted to Pilot Officer.

In January 1942 he was promoted again to Flying Officer. In July of 1942 Kempton was posted to the No. 7 O.T.U(c) at Limavady Northern Ireland, using Vickers Wellington long-range aircraft. This would be Kempton's first introduction to the Wellington. He arrived at Limavady just three months after the OTU(c) was formed, with the primary missions of general reconnaissance and Air to Surface Radar training.

"... with so many over water flights in poor weather and with high ground on its circuit the OTU's own accident rate was high. The local church graveyard bears witness to the losses of Limavady's Wellington crews"

Winds of the Foyle by John Quinn





After three more months of training Kempton was posted to RAF Lyneham. On 14 October 1942, No. 511 Squadron RAF (511 Sqn) was formed from the No. 1425 (Communication) Flight RAF (1425 Flt) at RAF Lyneham. The squadron operated regular transport schedules to Gibraltar using the Consolidated Liberator. To extend the route from Gibraltar to Malta the squadron also operated the Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle.

This would have been Kempton's transport to the Middle East. He arrived at N0. 5 Middle East Torpedo Training School (M.E.T.S) on October 24th, 1942.



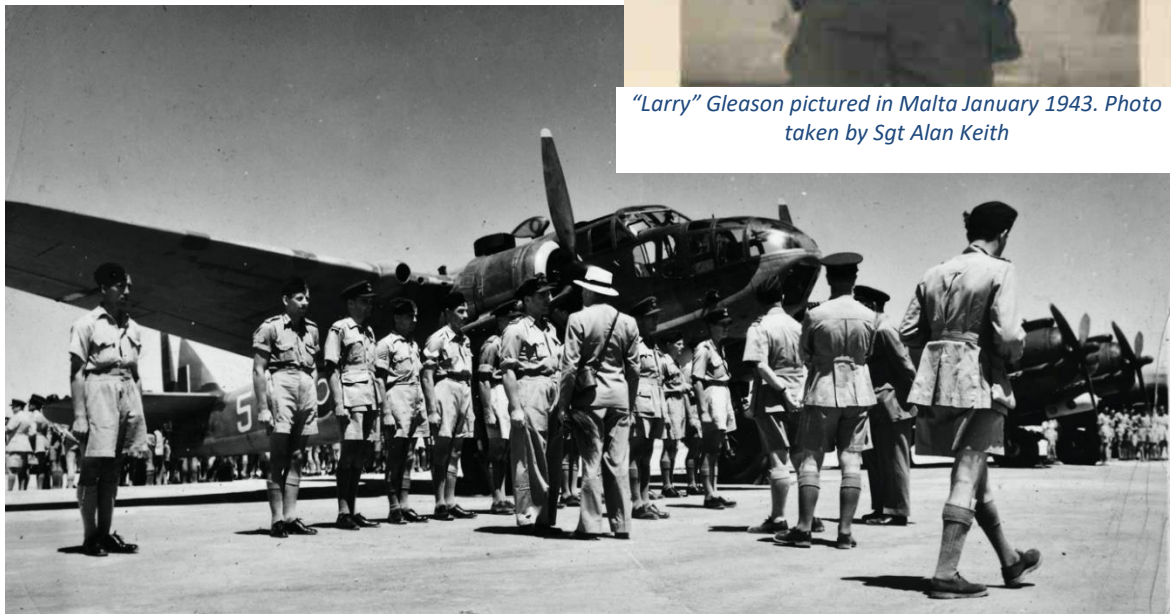
Shallufa at the southern end of the Suez in Egypt has a number of 458th connections. 458th RAAF itself was stationed there September 1942- March 1943. RAF Squadron 38 was there from 1940 to 1943. It was in No. 38 Squadron that Gleason was posted when he arrived and finally No. 221 Squadron RAF which had been in Limavady and was there until March 1943. They were also operating out of Malta with 458th RAAF at the same time and indeed sometimes sharing crews and aircraft with 458th. During this period Kempton was also struck down with a bout of malaria.

So where did Kempton fit into this mix of connected squadrons, men and aircraft and how did he end up crewing with Gleason and the others in 458th for that fateful night? Unfortunately, we lose track of Kempton. The next entry on his records is the recording of his death with 458th Squadron on February 13th, 1943. We know he was part of the crew piloted by Gleason that crashed into the quarry on return to Luqua with engine trouble.

We have found no records of Kempton or Gleason at No. 5 METS or 38 Squadron respectively and the dates of training of each do not seem to coincide until they start flying together with 69 Squadron RAF in Malta. And flying they did. Starting in January 1943 in that one month they flew 11 missions together. Gleason flew one more in a familiarization flight on the night of January 2nd, 1943.



"Larry" Gleason pictured in Malta January 1943. Photo taken by Sgt Alan Keith



Source: WorldWarPhotos.

Together and with Harold Stanley RCAF, Wendell Drew RCAF and Peter Brown RCAF (our honour roll highlight of the December 2024 issue) They flew maritime patrols, Shipping searches, Torpedo strikes and shipping strikes. They come under severe fire on at least two occasions. All the flights were at night, many in extremely poor weather conditions and visibility approaching zero. The flights must have been exhausting, with most lasting 10-15 hours and some even longer. So it was, that this quite experienced crew of Canadians with

one “Brit” (Second Pilot Eric Brown), joined 458th squadron on February 1st, 1943.

As documented in our December issue, this fine Canadian crew flew two missions as members of the 458th family. On the second they crash landed at Luqa following a return to base with engine trouble. As per the Squadron ORB Summary:

“On the night of the 12th/13th February 1943, three aircraft (Captains F/Sgt Coombes, Sgt King (see December 2024 Issue) and F/Sgt Gleason) carried out a search for enemy shipping in the Cape Son/Maritimo/Pelermo area. There were no sightings. Wellington “O” (F/Sgt Gleason) in landing at Luqa at high speed, overshot the runway. It was either on fire before landing or caught fire immediately afterwards. It crashed into the quarry at the end of the runway in flames. The crew comprised F/Sgt Gleason (1st pilot), Sgt E.A. Brown (2nd pilot), P/O M. Kempton (Navigator), Sgt H.E. Stanley (W/optr) Sgt P.E. E. Brown (S.E./Optr) (see December 2024 Issue) and Sgt W. Drew (Rear Gunner), who was the only survivor”

Flying Officer Maurice McAllister Kempton, Observer/Navigator was 29 when he died in the crash. Pilot Officer Lawrence Harry Gleason, Pilot was 25. The crew are buried Malta at the (Capuccini) Navy Cemetery. Prot. Sec. (Men's). Plot F. Coll. grave 104. The Cemetery is about 2 km south-east of Rinella, a bay and hamlet opposite Valletta across the mouth of the Grand Harbour and on the southern outskirts of the village of Kalkara. Just before entering Kalkara on the main bus route, the Cemetery is signposted along the road “Triq Santa Liberta” to the street of “Triq San Leonarda” and “Triq Santa Rokku” where the Cemetery is located. On Google Maps, the cemetery is indicated as Kalkara Military Cemetery.

We will visit and pay respects in October 2025

Died For His Country



FLT. SGT. L. GLEASON

son of Mr. and Mrs. H. Gleason of Canora, who was killed on active service on Saturday, February 13, while flying in the Mediterranean war theatre. He last wrote to his parents from Malta.

Flight Sgt. L. Gleason was born in Canora, March 26, 1918, and attended the Canora Public and High Schools. He enlisted in the R.C.A.F. September 1, 1940, and went to Brandon in the spring of 1941, to take his initial training. He took elementary training at High River, Alta., and then went to Macleod, Alta., where he received his wings in November, 1941. From there he went to Charlottetown, P.E.I., to take a navigation course, and to Debert, N.S., for operational training. He was then posted to Dorval, Que., and attached to the R.A.F. Later he flew a bomber across to England, arriving early in May of last year.

Flight Sergeant Gleason took further training in England, and was transferred to Cairo, Egypt, arriving there November 1, 1942. He was later sent to Malta, from where he cabled home on December 29, 1942.

Flight Sergeant Gleason prior to donning the uniform took an active part in local sports activities, chiefly hockey and curling. He was employed in the local post office, and was widely known in the town and district. His cheerful disposition and neighborliness won for him many friends, and those who knew him intimately share with the members of the family a deep sense of loss.



KILLED: FO Maurice McAllister Kempton, 28, son of Clifford F. Kempton, town clerk of Carlyle, Sask., has been reported killed in action in the middle east. A brother, Eric, 28, a sergeant with the K.O.R.C., was killed last April. Both died on the 13th. A navigator, Maurice took several Wellingtons over the Atlantic and then to Egypt. He was promoted to flying officer at Malta last December. FO. Kempton was born at Carlyle. Mr. Kempton is a recruiting officer at Carlyle and was recruiting for the Royal Flying Corps during the last war. He has a nephew and a brother, Lt.-Col. H. T. Kempton, overseas. A nephew, Lieut. Leonard Kempton, was killed at Dieppe.

F.O. M. Kempton Killed in Action

W.S. TIMES HERALD
FEB. 16, 1943
Mr. and Mrs. C. F. Kempton, 632 Oxford Street West, have received notification that their son, FO. Maurice McAllister Kempton, R.C.A.F., has been killed in action overseas.

The deceased was educated at King George public school, Central collegiate institute and the University of Saskatchewan. Later he entered the services of the British American Oil Company at Moose Jaw, relinquishing his position in March, 1941, to join the air force. He trained at Regina, Dafoe, Rivers, Debert and Charlottetown, taking navigation at the last named station. Subsequently he was on the ferry command. He saw service in Egypt at the time the 8th army was pushing Rommel westward through Libya. In November last he was taken ill with malaria, but had recovered sufficiently by Christmas to be posted to duty on the much-bombed island of Malta.

Flying Officer Kempton was a brother of the late Eric Kempton, an employee of the National Light and Power Company, who was killed in a truck accident on No. 1 highway west of the city, in June, 1942. His father is the municipal secretary-treasurer at Carlyle Lake, Sask.

... — STAMPS! — ...



Victoria Flight Report by Roland Orchard

First and foremost a very happy 100th birthday to our 458 Veteran Bert O'Leary. Bert's birthday was in January and a family and friends celebration was held at the Vasey RSL Care, Frankston, Victoria. Also attended by the RAAF.

More on this wonderful day in Chris Orchard's article on Bert's 100th.

ANZAC Day, 2025. Melbourne CBD.

This year our form up location is on Flinders Street (north) on the eastern side of Swanston Street. RSL Victoria has requested form up time by 9:45am. Look out for the 458 Squadron Banner.

Click on links below for full information about form up times and the AD event map.

[official-order-of-march-anzac-day-2025-v2.pdf](#)

[ANZAC Day 2025 Map](#)

Keep an eye on our website for our AGM venue and post march luncheon. Most probably be the same place near the Observatory to the east of The Shrine of Remembrance.

[Anzac Day | 458 RAAF Squadron](#)

Our Co-President, Bert O'Leary's 100th Birthday Celebration. Article by Chris Orchard

What a thrill and unique experience it is to celebrate and be present to honour the life (still going strong) of a Centenarian, let alone that of our honorary Co-President, from the "*greatest generation*", in Warrant Officer John ("**Bert**") Herbert O'Leary, RAAF service number 430574, Wireless Operator Air Gunner. Pause for a second and ask yourself ...*when was the last time I was at the birthday of someone turning one hundred?*

Family, friends, two current-serving RAAF Officers, and 458 second-generationers gathered on Sunday the 2nd of February at Bert's residential care facility, the Vasey RSL Care, Frankston South, Victoria (about 1.25 hrs south of the Melbourne city). Bert turned 100 on the

14th of January, 2025, but availability was such that all could only be present a few weeks after.

One and all were eagerly gathered and chatting in the facility's meeting room when Bert and his full-time Carer Kay, entered, and I have to say he was in fine form, smiling and greeting everyone. With all seated, proceedings were started by Bert's son, Paul, at the lectern, then followed speeches from his son, Mark, then from the Commanding Officer of No. 21 Squadron RAAF, Wing Commander Nikki Clements (ably accompanied by her Base Warrant Officer, Neil Crawley). Bert then, not wanting to be left out, proceeded to stand at the lectern, but realising this was a mission not to be pursued, remained seated and delivered reflections of a long life, his war service, personal philosophies, and finished with his thanks for the ongoing love and support of so many over such a long period.

A most suitable finale to the day was a birthday cake, and the presenting of letters of congratulation from the King and Queen, the Prime Minister, the RAAF, the Governor General, and both the Governor and Premier of Victoria. Well deserved, Bert! Thank you for service to 458 and to King & country in what were desperate & anxious times.

Further to the experience of a wonderful day, there is so much more to Bert's story:

- Please read (and listen to) the News stories dated **Jan 14** and **Feb 02** on the 458 website (<https://www.458raafsquadron.org/newsevents>);
- Military Historian, and PhD student, Jiri Kluc, from the Czech Republic met with Bert on the 11th of March, and according to his son, Mark, *"Jiri was fantastic and very respectful – also good company as I drove him to his next appointment. The work he is doing around the world is very impressive and it would be terrific to have him back in Australia. Jiri filmed a very good 20-minute interview with dad ..."*. More details about Jiri are on his website, <https://localhistoriantours.com/>



Experience the memory of a lifetime on a History or WWII tour!

Meet your Prague guide

My name is **Jiri Kluc**. Born and raised in the Czech Republic, I am a **passionate historian** with a profound interest in the intricacies of 20th-century history, particularly the events surrounding **World War II**. My literary contributions have been recognized with numerous **national awards**, showcasing my commitment to delving into the past.

Having graduated from Charles University Prague, I am currently pursuing my Ph.D., focusing my academic journey on the **history of Czechoslovakia** and Central Europe during the 20th century. In my research, I am eager about preserving the **stories of Holocaust survivors** and **War Veterans**, with the goal of safeguarding their testimonies for future generations.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Photos from the day:



Family and friends



WGCDR Clements, Bert, BWOFF Crawley



Bert's carer Kay, Bert, and son, Paul.



Bert's carer Kay, Neil, Bert, Nikki





Bert and son Mark



A Visit to Catania – June 2024

By Barry Hodder

After much planning, my wife and I went on a six-week holiday in June 2024. We travelled to Paris for a few days and then we flew to Catania in Sicily, Italy. One of the reasons to go to Catania was to visit the war grave of my great uncle, Leonard Laver who is buried at the Commonwealth War Graves on the outskirts of Catania along with his fellow crew members. Len and crew were part of RAAF 458 Squadron and were flying from RAF Luqa in Malta when they were lost on 8 January 1943.

Leonard Laver was my maternal Grandfather's brother and I had always heard about him from my mother as my grandfather passed away when I was very young. My mother was born in 1939 and her knowledge of her Uncle Len was from her parents and her aunts (Len's sisters).

Len Laver trained as an Architect and I was able to locate a biography of Len written by Western Australian Architect, Dr John Taylor AM <https://www.taylorarchitects.com.au/index.html>.

Dr Taylor has written an extensive list of biographies of Western Australian Architects and they are listed on his Links section of the website.

A summary of the biography is included and my gratitude is extended to Dr Taylor for his work.

Leonard Courtney Laver (1917-1943) was born 17 February 1917 at Midland Junction to parents Charles William (1863–1937) and Edith Beatrice nee Attewell Laver (1885–1951). 'Len' Laver had siblings Arthur John b.1905, Sheila Eugenie b.1907, Jack Charles b.1910, Elizabeth Patricia b.1911, and Frank Major b.1915. (Arthur John was my Grandfather and was an Electrical Engineer and was a Captain in the Army (Record Number V504125)).

Len commenced his education at the Kalgoorlie Infants School, moving through the State system into the Kalgoorlie Central School, and then Eastern Goldfields High School from 1930 to 1934, where he attained his Junior and Leaving Certificates. In 1934 he was as school prefect and captain of the school.

Len was admitted as a student member of the Royal Institute of Architects of Western Australia (RIAWA) in May 1935 having become an articulated student under the elderly Alfred Wright (1861-1939) at the T&G Building in St George's Terrace Perth in March 1935.

Armed with excellent references from prominent members of the WA architectural profession, Len moved to Victoria and enrolled at Melbourne University in the first year of the Diploma of Architecture course in 1939, whilst working for the architect D.F. Cowell Ham at 190 Bourke Street in Melbourne.

With the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945), Len made an application to join air crew in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in December 1939. His elder brother Jack, a doctor, also joined the RAAF. (Len's brother Jack (Service Number 251199) held the rank of Wing Commander).

Len formally enlisted for Second World War service at Melbourne in February 1940. In July 1940 he commenced training at the No.2 Initial Training School (ITS) at Bradfield Park in Sydney. The No. 2 ITS was formed as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. New recruits were posted to an Initial Training School to learn the basics of military life. They were also taught subjects such as mathematics, navigation and aerodynamics. He then progressed to flying training at the No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School, Narromine, NSW.

On 29 November 1940 Len embarked from Sydney for further training in Canada. He graduated from the Flying Training Course at Calgary, Alberta in April 1941, and was transferred to Great Britain in May 1941. Illustrating the perilous life of aircrew in England, in May 1942 Len was piloting a Wellington bomber taking-off at 11.30 at night when a tyre burst and the plane swerved, hitting another Wellington, which burst into flames. The fire spread quickly to Len's plane, and despite a 'marvellous escape' of all the crew, he was badly injured, spending some time in hospital, and then a convalescent home near Liverpool.

Len was posted with the RAAF in the Middle East from October 1942, and died in action on 8 January 1943. A post-war newspaper report provides some details of the loss: Details have recently been received

by his family of the death of Warrant-Officer Leonard Courtney Laver, pilot of a Wellington bomber, 458 Squadron, who lost his life in air operations from Malta on January 8, 1943.

He is now known to be buried in the British cemetery at Catania, Sicily.



Figure 1 Len Laver in flying kit (<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/635828>)

As part of my research for the trip to the cemetery, I was able to locate the details in Table 1 of Len and the crew on the Commonwealth War Grave Commission website

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/> .

Table 1 HX471 Crew

RankSort by Rank	Name, Number, Trade & DetailsSort by Last Name	DateCurrently Sorted by Date	UnitSort by Unit	CountrySort by Country	Cemetery/Memorial & Loc Ref
Flight Lieutenant	John FRANCOMBE (83117) Radio Opera Wellington HX471 RAF	1943-01-08	69 Sqdn AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : II. G. 6.

RankSort by Rank	Name, Number, Trade & DetailsSort by Last Name	DateCurrently Sorted by Date	UnitSort by Unit	CountrySort by Country	Cemetery/Memorial & Loc Ref
Pilot Officer	Allan Thomas GELL (402440) Wellington HX471 RAAF	1943-01-08	458 Sqdn RAAF AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : I. F. 7.
Warrant Officer	Leonard Courtney LAVER (400228) Wellington HX471 RAAF	1943-01-08	458 Sqdn RAAF AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : Coll. grave II. G. 7-10.
Flight Sergeant	Eric Frank SAGGERS (404425) Wellington HX471 RAAF	1943-01-08	458 Sqdn RAAF AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : Coll. grave II. G. 7-10.
Sergeant	Benjamin Watson SHEARER (407255) Wellington HX471 RAAF	1943-01-08	458 Sqdn RAAF AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : Coll. grave II. G. 7-10.
Flight Sergeant	David Alexander SMITH (404414) Wellington HX471 RAAF	1943-01-08	458 Sqdn RAAF AIR27	Italy	Catania War Cemetery, SicilyRef : Coll. grave II. G. 7-10.

Another two sources of information are below.

<https://www.rafcommands.com/database/serials/details.php?uniq=HX471>

<https://aircrewremembered.com/mcguiness-raaf-archive-ww2-458-sqd-wellingtons.html>

The internet has certainly made researching this information a much easier task.

From research, the aircraft designation was HX471 and was a Wellington Mark VIII bomber. The Wellington Bomber was a mainstay of Bomber Command with over 11,000 aircraft manufactured by Vickers-Armstrongs. Of note, the structure of the aircraft was a geodetic structure developed by Barnes Wallis of the Dambusters fame. The geodetic structure is a metal lattice structure manufactured from aluminium. A feature of this structure is that it could suffer extensive battle damage and still return home.

Unfortunately, an image of HX471 has not been able to be located however Figure 2 and Figure 3 provide some images of a Mark VIII Wellington Bomber.



Figure 2 458 Squadron Wellington Mk VIII HX654 G Kabrit c 1943 - <http://www.adf-serials.com.au/wellington.htm>



*Figure 3 Rickard, J (9 August 2008), Vickers Wellington GR Mk VIII Torpedo Bomber ,
http://www.historyofwar.org/Pictures/pictures_vickers_wellington_VIII_torpedo.html*

Further details of HX471 are available at

<https://aircrewremembered.com/mcguinness-raaf-archive-ww2-458-sqd-wellingtons.html>

On 06 Jan 1943, HX471 was detached to operate with RAF 69 Squadron at RAF Luqa, Malta.

On 08 Jan 1943, WOFF L.C. Laver and crew departed RAF Luqa, Malta at 0620 to carry out a shipping strike. The aircraft failed to return and was declared as Missing In Action.

The Catania Commonwealth War Graves are located about one kilometre west of the Cantania International Airport and is close to the airport flight path.



Figure 4 Catania Commonwealth War Graves Memorial Cross



Figure 5 Catania Commonwealth War Graves on Airport Flight Path

We visited the cemetery on the morning of 21 June 2024 on a very hot day and paid our respects to my Great-Uncle and his fellow crew members. The graves of FLT LT John FRANCOMBE, WOFF Leonard Courtney LAVER, FSGT Eric Frank SAGGERS, SGT Benjamin Watson SHEARER and FSGT David Alexander SMITH are located together (see Figure 6) and PLTOFF Allan Thomas GELL located separately (see Figure 7).





Figure 6 Graves of FLTLT John FRANCOMBE, WOFF Leonard Courtney LAVER, FSGT Eric Frank SAGGERS, SGT Benjamin Watson SHEARER and FSGT David Alexander SMITH (Left to Right)





Figure 7 Grave of PLTOFF Allan Thomas GELL (Centre)


In honour of the memory of the crew members I have researched various sources and gathered as much information as I could locate for interested people and descendants that may not have had the opportunity to visit Catania.

	<p>Flight Sergeant Eric Frank SAGGERS (Wireless Air Gunner)</p>
 <p>A photograph of a light-colored stone gravestone for Flight Sergeant Eric Frank Sagggers. The stone is rectangular with a curved top. At the top is a circular emblem featuring a crown and wings. Below the emblem, the inscription reads: "404425 FLIGHT SERGEANT E. F. SAGGERS ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE 8TH JANUARY 1916 AGE 27". In the center is a large cross. At the bottom, it says "ALWAYS REMEMBERED".</p>	<p>Service Number – 404425 Date of birth - 03 Feb 1916 (Age:27) Place of birth - LONDON ENGLAND Place of enlistment – BRISBANE</p>  <p>A black and white group photograph of seven men in military uniforms standing in a row in front of a hangar. The man on the far left is identified as Eric Frank Sagggers. The photo is labeled "AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL" and "SUK10138" at the bottom.</p> <p>Yorkshire, England. C. 1942-02. Group portrait of some of the members of Wellington aircraft "T for Tommy" of No. 458 Squadron RAAF based at an RAF station, Holme-on-Spalding Moor. Left to right: 404425 Sergeant (Sgt, [later Flight Sergeant]) Eric Frank Sagggers (lost on operations over the Middle East on 8 January 1943); 407524 Sgt R. J. Burns, front gunner; 400497 Sgt N. G. Stewart; 402473 Sgt P. J. Toohey, Wireless operator/Air gunner; 406094 Sgt L. W. Bown, front gunner; Flight Sergeant (F Sgt) W. L. Darling, New Zealand member of another crew. Other members, not in photo are: 400228 F Sgt L. C. Laver, captain; 404241 F Sgt K. W. Gale, Observer. https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C270103</p>

 <p>A light-colored stone gravestone for Sergeant Benjamin Watson Shearer. At the top is a circular emblem featuring a crown and wings. Below it, the inscription reads: "407255 SERGEANT B. W. SHEARER ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE 3TH JANUARY 1915 AGE 27". A large cross is carved into the center of the stone. At the bottom, it says "LOVED SON MR. AND MRS. MURRAY SHEARER STANFORD SOUTH AUSTRALIA". The stone is surrounded by green grass and yellow flowers.</p>	<p>Sergeant Benjamin Watson SHEARER (2nd Pilot)</p> <p>Service Number – 407255 Date of birth - 06 Sep 1915 (Age: 27) Place of birth - ADELAIDE SA Place of enlistment – ADELAIDE</p>  <p>A black and white portrait of a young man, Sergeant Benjamin Watson Shearer, smiling. He is wearing a military uniform with a collared shirt and a jacket.</p> <p>https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/515682</p>
 <p>A light-colored stone gravestone for Flight Lieutenant John Francombe. At the top is a circular emblem featuring a crown and wings. Below it, the inscription reads: "FLIGHT LIEUTENANT J. FRANCOMBE RADIO OPERATOR (AIR) ROYAL AIR FORCE 8TH JANUARY 1915". A large cross is carved into the center of the stone. The stone is surrounded by green grass and yellow flowers.</p>	<p>Flight Lieutenant John FRANCOMBE (Radio Operator)</p> <p>Service Number – 83117 Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve No photo or other details located</p>

	Flight Sergeant David Alexander SMITH (Wireless Air Gunner)
 <p>A light-colored stone gravestone with a curved top. At the top is a circular emblem featuring a crown and wings. Below the emblem, the inscription reads: "404414 FLIGHT SERGEANT D. A. SMITH ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE 3TH JANUARY 1916 AGE 26". A large cross is carved into the center of the stone.</p>	<p>Service Number – 404414 Date of birth - 29 Oct 1916 (Age 26) Place of birth - GLASGOW SCOTLAND Place of enlistment – BRISBANE No photo located.</p>

	Pilot Officer Allan Thomas GELL (Observer)
 <p>A light-colored stone gravestone with a curved top. At the top is a circular emblem featuring a crown and wings. Below the emblem, the inscription reads: "PILOT OFFICER A. T. GELL ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE 3TH JANUARY 1917 AGE 33". A large cross is carved into the center of the stone. At the bottom, it says "HIS DUTY NOBLY DONE FOR US ALL".</p>	<p>Service Number – 402440 Date of birth – 08 Jan 1910 (Age: 33) Place of birth – BONDI NSW Place of enlistment – SYDNEY No photo located.</p>

	<p>Warrant Officer Leonard Courtney LAVER (Pilot)</p> <p>Service Number – 400228</p> <p>Date of birth - 29 Mar 1917 (Age: 25)</p> <p>Place of birth - MIDLAND JUNCTION WA</p> <p>Place of enlistment - MELBOURNE</p>
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Below is a photo of myself with my Great Uncles's headstone. It was a very sobering morning visiting the cemetery and I am very pleased and fortunate that we were able to travel to Catania and visit and pay our respects to my Great Uncle and his crew.



Figure 8

Taylor, Dr John J., 'Leonard Courtney Laver (1917-1943)', Western Australian Architect Biographies, <http://www.taylorarchitects.com.au/Biographies.html> accessed 09 March 2025.