

Honour set in stone



BADGE OF HONOUR: Chaplain of St Clement Danes WgCDR Adrian Gatrill leads a service to dedicate 11 WWII RAAF squadron badges. Photo: Adam Elliott

By Andrew Stackpool

DESPERATE battles, absent friends and days long gone were remembered and friendships renewed when 28 veterans of 11 WWII RAAF squadrons joined other veterans living in the UK to dedicate their squadron badges.

The event was held on March 26 at the RAF chapel, St Clement Danes Church, London.

All 11 squadrons – 3, 450, 451, 452, 454, 457, 458, 459, 462, 464 and 466 – had flown with the RAF in the

European, North African and Middle East/Mediterranean theatres.

Hand-made in slate, the badges joined those of RAF, Commonwealth and other RAAF badges that had been previously dedicated and laid in the church. Veterans of each squadron designed them and Air Force paid for their manufacture.

GPCAPT Peter Norford, Air Force Adviser at the Australian High Commission in London, said that the ceremony proved more successful than was expected.

“Approximately 170 guests, includ-

ing veterans, family and friends attended,” he said.

Guests included Marshal of the RAF Sir Michael Beetham, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff AVM ‘Timo’ Anderson and Paul Wehrle who carved the 12 plaques. DCAF AVM Geoff Brown led the Australian contingent.

Former Spitfire pilot FLTLT Ted Sly stressed the importance of the occasion for the veterans.

“To see the badges go into church was very important to me,” he said.

“I’m very conscious of the tremendous contribution of these five fighter

and six bomber squadrons to the RAF in the fight for freedom, and that this is recognised by the RAF.”

He said he was always struck by the scale of casualties suffered by the RAAF during the war.

While no definitive figures are easily obtained, the total RAAF casualties in the European Theatre alone were 5397, with more than 1500 wounded in action.

This figure does not include those killed or injured through other means.

“Of those who flew with Bomber Command, 45 per cent were casual-

ties,” he said. “And, of course, Fighter Command suffered heavily before that.

“The public must realise that we have our freedoms – but at what cost? We must never forget that.”

After the ceremony, Head Australian Defence Staff and Defence Advisor (London) AIRCDRE Steve Martin, hosted a reception at the Australia House, during which 450SQN’s former SGT pilot Colin Morton presented a framed print depicting Operation Bowler, a raid on the docks of Venice by 450SQN and 3SQN, in March 1945. SGT Morton had flown in the raid.

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Future of past glories

WAGGA’s Air Force Heritage Centre took an important step closer to fruition on May 21 when a public forum in the city endorsed the project and provided 27 volunteers to assist in its setting-to-work and operation.

The aim of the forum was to lay the foundation for a long-term partnership between Air Force and the local community to establish and manage a Heritage Centre in the guardhouse building at the entrance to the base.

Air Force Director of Heritage GPCAPT Dave Richardson said the meeting was better than had been anticipated with more than 70 people attending.

Air Commander Australia AVM Mark Skidmore, who attended the meeting along with members of the Museum Reference Group (MRG), said Air Force had about 70 years of history at Wagga Wagga, dating back to WWII and thousands of airmen had started their careers there.

He said that the new centre at Wagga was the first of a number, with others scheduled to open over the next few years, including at RAAF Base Amberley.

“Air Force recognised the need



TOWN MEETING: The RAAF Heritage Centre meeting at the Old Council Chambers in Wagga Wagga. Photo: Courtesy Wagga Daily Advertiser

to engage with local communities to develop the agreed way ahead for these centres and the MRG is a result of that process, as well as the creation of the new Director of Air Force Heritage position,” he said.

“We recently revised our museum policy to specifically include regional heritage centres that will focus on celebrating the strong ties between their bases and the community.

“However, the repository for Air Force’s heritage collection will still be the RAAF Museum at Point Cook.”

During the meeting in Wagga, WgCDR Karen Wood-Meyer, chair of the MRG, briefed attendees on the group’s proposed way ahead, while SQNLDR Terry Pridham explained the work being undertaken to catalogue the collection and match individual exhibit items to their owners.

Defence has spent \$75,000 to upgrade the former guardhouse and will spend \$130,000 to outfit it for

display purposes. Air Force will also cover the costs of using the building and fund a local Air Force reservist to be the first point of contact on matters relating to the centre, and to supervise a volunteer program.

Volunteers will be trained at Wagga TAFE to Certificate 2 in Museum Practice, and Air Force will provide more selective training in aviation-specific exhibits.

The volunteers will staff the centre during opening hours and act as guides. They will not be required to undertake restoration or conservation tasks.

Members of the public can inspect of the heritage centre during RAAF Base Wagga’s open day in October. A formal opening will be held in 2010.

Anyone interested in volunteering should contact WgCDR John Herlihy on (02) 6937 4100, or e-mail john.herlihy@defence.gov.au

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