



# BOMBER COMMAND COMMEMORATIVE ASSOCIATION VICTORIA (INC)

NEWSLETTER

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## **2016 BCCAV BOMBER COMMAND CEREMONY THE BIGGEST YET**

Twelve veterans of Bomber Command were among more than 160 people who attended the fifth annual Bomber Command Commemorative Day service at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne on Sunday afternoon, 5 June 2016. Despite dreadful weather it was the biggest turnout yet for this ceremony with standing room only in the Shrine's Auditorium.

The crowd was officially welcomed to the venue by Shrine Governor Major Maggie More RFD. Bomber Command Commemorative Association Victoria Chairman, Paul Dipnall, then explained the significance of the occasion, emphasising the unique qualities of life in Bomber Command: the youth of aircrew, the stringent selection process and the knowledge that, over a tour of 30 operations, death was a more likely



outcome than survival. "Today we all honour the courage of these great men and the memory of 3,486 Australian airmen who sacrificed their life for our peace," he said. "The relative peace we enjoy today is their legacy to us." The text of Paul's speech can be downloaded [on our website](http://bombercommand.org.au).



The Royal Australian Air Force's Air Commodore Geoffrey Harland, Commander of the Air Force Training Group, was the guest speaker. In an excellent address (also available for [download on our website](http://bombercommand.org.au)), Air Commodore Harland highlighted some of the statistics of life in Bomber Command: 125,000 aircrew served, of which 55,573 were killed: Britons, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and others from Poland, Free France, the USA, Norway and India.

1,479 ground crew lost their lives during the war, along with 91 members of the Womens Auxiliary Air Force on duty with Bomber Command. Almost 11,000 bomber aircrew became prisoners of war.

"It is crucial that we remember the sacrifice these numbers represent," Air Commodore Harland said. "As a modern aviator I marvel at the bravery of these young men... the example they set for us in terms of commitment, valour and sacrifice is instructive to us all and, I would argue, sets an unmoveable foundation for the values we hold so dear in our modern Air Force."

"To forget is not an option."



(Continued on following page)

## **BCCAV 2016 Bomber Command Ceremony The Biggest Yet**

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A wreath-laying ceremony followed the Air Commodore's address.

For the formal commemorative part of the ceremony, Carey Baptist Grammar Middle School Co-Captain Sophie Westcott read the Ode (right). It was the first time that a student from Bomber Command Commemorative Association Victoria's Partner School has carried out an official role at this service and it was well-received.

The weather had closed in by the end of the ceremony so that, sadly, conditions were too dangerous for the planned flypast. The Royal Victorian Aero Club contingent were consequently grounded at Moorabbin, and though the Mustang actually got airborne at Tyabb, it was unable to safely navigate around the cloud and the

pilot made a prudent decision to return to base. This disappointed the crowd and two television news camera crews who had set up on the Shrine forecourt in anticipation, but the poor weather ensured that many stayed in the foyer outside the auditorium after the service to enjoy conversation with light refreshments.

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## **Save the Dates!**

Bomber Command Commemorative Association Victoria have great pleasure in announcing dates for our Cocktail Party and Bomber Command Commemorative Day Ceremony in 2017

**Cocktail Party at the Toorak RSL ('Heroes Club'):**

**Saturday 4 March 2017**

**Bomber Command Commemorative Day Ceremony:**

At the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne

**Saturday 27 May 2017**

Further details to follow....



## What Bomber Command airfields look like today

A UK man named Bryan Wilcockson contacted us earlier this year with some interesting photos. He lives in Burn, Yorkshire, which during the war hosted a Bomber Command airfield—RAF Burn, the home of 578 (Halifax) Squadron. Close by is Snaith, where 51 Squadron was stationed. Bryan shared these photographs with us. Like most wartime airfields in the UK, there's now not much left of either of them, but perhaps these photos might bring back some memories for our veterans.



Above: Wartime buildings at Burn Airfield



Above: Burn's Runway 25 remains active for glider operations.



Above: The Wheatsheaf, a pub in Burn that is probably well-known to 578 Squadron aircrew. The airfield is right behind it.



Above: Wartime buildings on Snaith airfield



Above: The 51 Squadron memorial on Snaith airfield



Above: A Halifax adorns one of the beer taps at Snaith's pub

## Collecting the Stories of our Veterans

*Adam Purcell has been interviewing veterans for the International Bomber Command Centre's new Digital Archive. Here, he writes about his experiences.*

Over the last few months I've been privileged to speak, in detail, with 23 Bomber Command veterans about their war-time stories. They were pilots, navigators, gunners and bomb aimers. They flew Halifaxes, Lancasters, Liberators, Mosquitos and Wellingtons. There's even been a WAAF. Over the course of the interviews I've covered more than 4000km by car, motorbike, taxi, aeroplane and on foot, in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and Adelaide. I've recorded more than 35 hours of audio and scanned well over 1,000 pages of logbooks, photographs and other documents. And I've heard 23 outstanding stories.

Like the navigator who went through all the training only to be shot down on his first trip—by another Lancaster. Or the pilot who went to the UK expecting to go to Bomber Command, but was instead posted to India where he flew a distinguished tour on Liberators. Then there was the pilot who flew for a Special Duties squadron whose operations were so secret he still doesn't know exactly what he was doing. The Mosquito nightfighter navigator who chased doodlebugs through the skies of south-eastern England. The man who went from Flight Sergeant to Squadron Leader in six weeks because of the casualties on his squadron, and who flew 68 operations – all before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. The wireless operator who was shot down over France and spent three months with the Resistance before being rescued by Patton's tanks. The bomb aimer who was the only survivor from both crews involved in a mid-air collision over Stuttgart. The gunner who still thinks – every day – about his pilot, the only member of his crew who died when they were shot down over Germany.

They have, without exception, been fascinating. Time may have dulled some of the recollections, but as we've gone deeper into the interviews, minds have been unlocked and memories have brought forth more details. In many cases I've heard stories that even their closest families never knew. But time is running out: at least one of the veterans I've interviewed has since died.

The interview recordings and scans will be sent to the UK for inclusion in the International Bomber Command Centre's Digital Archive. It's a significant project: at last count the Archive contained over 300 interviews and more than 35,000 individual pages of scanned documents. It aims to become the biggest single source of original Bomber Command material anywhere in the world, and it's been wonderful to play a part in its creation. Scans, transcripts and the original recordings are expected to be available online towards the end of 2017.

*If you or someone you know might be interested, please get in touch with us at [info@bombercommand.org.au](mailto:info@bombercommand.org.au).*



## Looking for information about Bomber Command?

Would you like to know more about a Bomber Command airman?

Using easily available (and free) online resources it's usually possible to find basic information that can be a stepping stone to further detail. We are more than happy to assist with research requests. Just get in touch:

**[info@bombercommand.org.au](mailto:info@bombercommand.org.au) or our Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/BomberCommandVic/>**

Send us an email with as much detail as you know, and we'll see what we can do.



## This is why we do it

Bomber Command Commemorative Association Victoria exists to ensure, in perpetuity, the continuance of the memory of those Australians, and particularly the Victorians, who served in RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War. Part of this mission is to ensure that veterans of Bomber Command get the recognition and support that they deserve. So it was extremely gratifying to hear this lovely story after our Ceremony in June. A few weeks before the day, we were contacted by a reporter from the *Mornington News* who had heard about the ceremony but was looking for a local angle. We



Adam Purcell 2016

Jean Smith following an interview earlier this year

facilitated contact with Jean Smith, a 94-year-old veteran of the Womens Auxiliary Air Force who lives on the Peninsula, and were pleased to read the resulting coverage in the *News*.

There was a lovely sequel to this story. Jean told us that she had told the reporter she was so keen to attend the ceremony that she was saving her pennies to pay for a taxi to the city, a journey of an hour and a half each way. "It was a throwaway line really," she said – but the reporter printed it. Within days, no fewer than three members of the public had separately contacted the newspaper offering to drive Jean to Melbourne for the ceremony.

And so on the morning of the ceremony, Jean arrived at the Shrine of Remembrance driven by a friendly member of the general public. It was the embodiment of Air Commodore Harland's words during his keynote address:

"We must take pause to remember the collective sacrifice of this group, we must remember those who perished and cherish those who survived and those who are still with us and say 'thank you' and know that that will never be enough."

See the story that was printed in the *Mornington news* at <http://mpnews.com.au/2016/05/23/shrines-aerial-ceremonies-revive-memories/>

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