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*From Wagga to Waddington: Australians in Bomber
Command*

Hank Nelson

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From Wagga to Waddington: Australians in Bomber Command¹

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The main train line from Sydney to Melbourne runs from Central Station south through the Southern Highlands and crosses the high bleak grazing lands of the Great Dividing Range just west of Goulburn. From there, the creeks are draining into the Lachlan and the Murrumbidgee, and — like the train line — the rivers are making their way west. At Junee the train line branches with the Melbourne line going south through Wagga and the Hay line curving away to the west, a straight line alongside the twists and loops of the bed and billabongs of the Murrumbidgee. Just west of Junee at Marrar the country opens out: the south west slopes become the western plains — ‘the sunlit plains extended’.² The first of the towns on the Hay line, Coolamon, Ganmain, Matong and Grong Grong squat in rich, red,

¹ This paper was the keynote address at the Eleventh Australian dialogue, Lincoln, 26-28 May 2000. I am grateful to Vic Brill and Bob Curtis who corrected some errors and gave advice.

² A.B. Paterson, ‘Clancy of the Overflow’, first published 1889, and in *The Man from Snowy River and other Verses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1895.

gently undulating farm land. Spreading box gums and neat white cypress pines line the fences. Creeks such as Smoky, Dead Horse, Boggy and Frying Pan — names that recur across the Australian landscape — follow wandering depressions south and west towards the river. Wagga, twenty-five miles from Coolamon, is the dominant town of the eastern Riverina.

When Arthur Doubleday was just old enough to be a useful wood-and-water joey, he went with the horse-team and wagon carting wheat to Ganmain. ‘Anglia’, the Doubleday’s home block, named after the area that Arthur’s father had left as a child, was thirteen miles out of Ganmain, and it was midday before the ten-horse team brought the wagon around the football oval, through the trees along Boggy Creek and joined the queue of carters waiting to dump their bagged wheat on the lumpers building the giant stacks at the railway siding. There was only one tough pull for the Doubleday team on that thirteen miles, a sharp rise on the Dulah road that tested the trace chains and the couplings, but it was a long way to cart, and on their return journey the Doubledays camped in a paddock, and came home the next morning. They could not afford to exhaust the team because they had three months’ carting to do, and then the team had to be fresh for the cropping.

Arthur Doubleday, born in 1912, the second son in a family of five girls and three boys, went by horse and sulky or rode to the one-teacher Methul school, five miles northwest of ‘Anglia’. Having completed his primary schooling, he went as a boarder to the new Yanco Agricultural High School. With its long drive

bordered on one side by river red gums and on the other by lush irrigation country, Yanco Agricultural High occupied the imposing two-storey red brick homestead built by Samuel McCaughy, the man who had once controlled over 3,000,000 acres and who then owned more sheep than anyone else in Australia. Those familiar with Yanco's exposed timber interiors, the 'cathedral size stained glass windows', the artificial lake and orchard, were not likely to be intimidated when they entered the most affluent RAF officers' mess.³ In his three years at Yanco, Arthur Doubleday responded to the work in the paddocks, sheds and classrooms, and 'loved' the cricket and football.⁴

Just after Arthur Doubleday left school to work on the family farm, William Brill, another boy from the red soil of the eastern Riverina, went to board at Yanco Agricultural High. 'Clearview', the Brill farm just south of the Ganmain-Matong road, was well named. From their home at the top of a gently curving slope, the Brills could see the wheat silos nearly three miles away in Matong. The seven Brill children walked downhill to the weatherboard school of Derrain, and although there was twenty years from oldest to youngest, they all had the same teacher, Charles Banfield. He ruled, Fay Brill said, not with a rod of iron, but with a 'switch of the pepper tree'. And when Vic, who was younger than Bill, went on to Wagga Wagga High, Mr Banfield had taught him so well that he learnt no new maths for the first three years. Bill Brill left Yanco

³ Bill Gammage, *Narrandera Shire*, Narrandera Shire Council, Narrandera, 1986, p.80.

⁴ Arthur Doubleday, interview, 7 Jan. 2000.

in 1930 with his Intermediate Certificate: he had failed Geography and passed with honours in Agricultural Chemistry and Botany.⁵

On 3 September 1939 the Doubledays had all gathered for shearing, and they were sitting around a roaring fire when they heard on the wireless that Australia was at war. They decided that Harry, who was the oldest and had a crook back, would stay home and run the farm, and Arthur and the youngest boy, Jim, would go to war. There was, Arthur said, a ‘lot of the Mother Country attitude’ in him, and he thought he was going ‘home to fight’.⁶ By 1939 the Doubledays were farming the home block and two others, ‘Dulah’ and ‘Hopewell’. The horse teams were gone, and the Doubledays had tractors and their wheat went down the road in a cloud of dust — the Doubledays owned the first semi-trailer in the district. The Brills too had switched to tractors in the early 1930s, and Ken the oldest boy had married and taken up his own block at Landervale on the Grong Grong-Ardlethan road. Bill went north to work with Ken, and while there he met and courted Ilma Kitto who was the head (and only) teacher at Landervale.

‘Anglia’ was less than twenty miles from ‘Clearview’, and Arthur Doubleday and Bill Brill knew one another, in the way that country people knew about each other. They sometimes saw each other, or heard talk when they were at dances, or sheep sales, or waiting at the wheat silos. And the people of Coolamon and Matong were

⁵ Fay Jones (née Brill), Ilma Brill, Vic Brill, Bill Gammage and Joyce Dennis provided information on the area and the Brill and Doubleday families.

⁶ Doubleday, transcript.

brought together by one of the few significant cultural forces that divide white Australians by place: they were within the northeast frontier of Australian Rules Football that stretched south through Victoria to Tasmania and west to the Indian Ocean. Bill played in the black and white of Matong and Arthur in the green of Methul. Matong and Methul were in different leagues, but Arthur and Bill could read about each other in the *Coolamon-Ganmain Farmers' Review*, and they would certainly read about Ken Brill, one of the stars in the strong South Western District League.⁷ By 1939 Arthur no longer ran onto the clearing in the trees that served as the Methul oval: a damaged knee had ended his football days. On the mechanised farm, Arthur had retained his interest in horses — he did some horse-breaking around the district and rode in buck jumping shows. Bill, too, was still interested in horses. He had joined the local militia unit, the 21st Light Horse, and he was proud of his mount, Peanut.

On 19 April 1940 Brill was tested to see if he was a suitable candidate for aircrew training. The men on the interviewing panel pencilled in their impressions: 'rather slow chap but is intelligent', 'neat and respectful', and 'not striking. Quiet country chap'.⁸ They noted that he was a 'grade' footballer and was interested in cricket

⁷ Brill also played for other clubs such as Grong Grong, Ganmain and Walleroobie, and Walleroobie was in the Arian Park League, but that may have been after Doubleday stopped playing. Brill RAAF autobiographical file, AWM65, Australian War Memorial.

⁸ National Archives of Australia, A9300/, RAAF service dossier of William Brill includes the form completed by the interviewing panel. Service dossier of Doubleday also consulted.

and swimming. They thought he would not be commissioned, but decided he might make a wireless operator/air gunner and put him in the Air Force reserve. About the middle of 1940 Arthur Doubleday was also passed medically fit, satisfied his interrogators and he too joined the Air Force reserve. Bill and Arthur both said that they were Methodists, Bill said he was a farmer and farm labourer, and Arthur located himself a shade higher on the rural ladder — he was, he said, a ‘farmer and grazier’. Bill was twenty-four and Arthur twenty-eight. Both were of medium height with Bill at five-feet-ten inches slightly taller and more barrel-chested. Bill was, Arthur said, ‘strong as a Mallee bull’.⁹ As they waited for their call-up, the air force supplied them with exercises in trigonometry, mechanics, theory of flight and Morse code. Bill was eager to show Irma his work when he solved a difficult equation, and ready for private tuition when the answer was elusive.

Bill and Arthur were called up for service in November — and the farm calendar helped Arthur recall the time — it was, he said, just before the 1940 harvest. When Arthur got on the train at Coolamon on Armistice Day, 11 November, Bill Brill was already on board. He had bloodshot eyes and Arthur was suffering from pains in the stomach. Arthur said that if the Germans could see them they would think they didn’t have much to worry about. Bill and Arthur stayed together on the train to Sydney, and on the bus to Bradfield Park Initial Training School. Bill Brill became Leading Aircraftsman 402933, and Arthur Doubleday 402945, just a dozen

⁹ Doubleday, interview.

numbers separating them. When they left Bradfield Park both had been selected for pilot training, and both were sent to do their elementary flying at Narrandera, just a few miles from Yanco Agricultural High, and less than twenty miles by Tiger Moth from Landervale. Arthur and Bill could check their navigation by glancing out of the cockpit and seeing how Ken and Harry were getting on with the harvest. From the end of January and into February the novice pilots tested themselves with side slips, steep turns, instrument flying, forced landings and aerobatics.¹⁰ After just two months both Brill and Doubleday left Narrandera, both having satisfied their instructors that they should continue to train as pilots. Brill had gone solo after just seven hours of dual instruction, and he had logged twenty-five hours as a single pilot in the Riverina's summer turbulence.¹¹

By age, education, occupation and background Brill and Doubleday were different from most of the Australians selected for aircrew training.

Australians volunteered in thousands to join aircrew. By 30 March 1940 when the air force had the instructors, aeroplanes and airfields to train only a few hundred, there were 11,550 volunteers.¹² There was always a waiting list. They volunteered for the same reasons that men joined the other services. But they

¹⁰ Brill, Log Book, Vol. 1, held by Ilma Brill.

¹¹ Bill Brill, Log Book.

¹² Douglas Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 69.



Flying Officer Hector Harrison of Lismore, NSW, sketched by Stella Bowen, 1944, for the painting of Bomber Crew.
Australian War Memorial ART26252

chose the air force rather than other services because there were too many fathers and uncles to tell them to keep out of the trenches: airmen had warm beds and hot meals, and if they survived they had rank and a skill to take into the postwar. The prestige of airmen was strengthened by the popular accounts of aerial combat of World War I and maintained by the pioneer aviators, such as Hinkler and Kingsford Smith, and the travelling stunt men who gave many fourteen and fifteen-year-olds their first and only prewar experience of flight. And there were the fictional heroes. Captain James Bigglesworth, ex-Royal Flying Corps, flew his Sopwith Camel through the first Biggles volume in 1932, and there were another fourteen Biggles volumes before the start of 1939. Rockfist Rogan of the boys' magazine, *Champion*, was another ex-Flying Corps hero of white empire. Both Biggles and Rockfist Rogan stepped from their wire and fabric planes of World War I into Spitfires to attack the Hun in the sun and defy the Swastika.¹³

Early in World War II the prestige of airmen was at its height with the Battle of Britain in 1940 seen as a triumph of the fighter pilots. Churchill's much-quoted statement confirmed their status: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'. Stories of and by the early heroes of the air war against Hitler's Germany were soon on the market. When serving in Bomber Command, Dan Conway said he often found it hard to sleep when he came back from raids and one of the books that fell to the floor when he finally dozed off was Richard Hillary's *The Last*

¹³ *Biggles defies the Swastika* was published in 1941.

Enemy, that engrossing and disturbing account of a young Australian fighter pilot's private and public battles.¹⁴ By the time Conway was reading *The Last Enemy*, Hillary was already dead.¹⁵ He had faced death — the last enemy implied in his title. Leonard Cheshire's report of a war half fought was called simply *Bomber Pilot*, and it came out in 1943. After the war Cheshire was to write 'I found the dangers of battle exciting and exhilarating, so that war came easily to me', and he communicated something of that in his autobiography.¹⁶ The films came quickly: *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), *Target for Tonight* (1941), *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1941), and *London Can Take It*, a documentary. Peter O'Connor who was seventeen in 1939 spoke of the influence of Bader and Biggles, linking the real and the imagined.¹⁷ Gus Belford, who was just fifteen in 1939, eighteen when he enlisted, and nineteen when he was captain of a Lancaster over Germany, may still have been engrossed in Biggles when Chamberlain signed the Munich agreement.¹⁸

Two factors helped make aircrew different from other recruits to the services: occupation and age. Maurice Dalton was working

¹⁴ Richard Hillary, *The Last Enemy*, Macmillan, London, 1942. Dan Conway, *The Trenches in the Sky*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1995, p.127.

¹⁵ Hillary was killed on 7 Jan. 1943.

¹⁶ Leonard Cheshire, *Bomber Pilot*, Hutchinson, London, 1943. (Foreword written in 1954, Arrow Paperback, p.9.)

¹⁷ Peter O'Connor, Interview, 1989, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, Australian War Memorial, transcript, p.3.

¹⁸ A.C. Belford, *Born to Fly*, privately published, 1995.

in the Bank of New South Wales in Murgon, Queensland, and he and another member of the bank were selected for training as aircrew. Dalton was relieved when he got to Narrandera Elementary Flying Training School to see that his instructor was to be Peter Smith — whom he had known in the Commonwealth Bank in Murgon.¹⁹ It was no accident that a lot of bankers met at training schools. Of the 2750 Commonwealth Bank officers who went into the armed forces in World War II just as many went into the air force as the army, and the air force was a much smaller force. But three times as many Commonwealth Bank officers (232) died in the RAAF as in the army (72).²⁰ When John Herington came to write the official history of the RAAF in Europe there must have been times when he thought he was writing of flying clerks. In his account of a raid on the Ruhr in 1944 he lists an aircrew: H.R. Hagstrom (clerk), T.W. Anthony (clerk), J.T. Rogers (clerk), B.P. Cosgriff (clerk), H.A. Jowett (clerk), P.D. Wilson (clerk), and J.D. Murtha (farmer).²¹ In the late 1930s bankers and clerks were among the best educated, they had obtained positions against strong competition in the post-depression years, they had been pushed by parents into jobs that gave them security when they may have wanted excitement, and the bankers and clerks had the time to complete the preliminary lessons sent to aircrew

¹⁹ Maurice Dalton, *An Adventure of a Lifetime: My service with the R.A.A.F. 1942-1946*, privately published, no date, pp.2 and 9.

²⁰ C.L. Mobbs, comp., *Commonwealth Bank of Australia in the Second World War*, John Sands, Sydney, 1947, appendix.

²¹ John Herington, *Air Power over Europe 1944-1945: Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p.209.

applicants waiting for their call-up. A young bank officer, who had a good school record, who was also playing football, cricket or tennis and so had good hand-eye coordination and who had some record of leadership was likely to be selected to train for aircrew. The clerks joined those others most likely to qualify: the university graduates — John Gorton and Gough Whitlam — and the sporting stars — Keith Miller and Bluey Truscott — in aircrew training.²²

The average age of a 6th Division infantry battalion in December 1940 was twenty-seven.²³ Some battalions in the 8th Division, recruited later, were slightly younger, averaging just over twenty-five.²⁴ Australian airmen were around twenty-four when they died, and those recruited late in the war were more likely to be twenty-two or twenty-three.²⁵ If the airmen were dying two years after they began training (and some died earlier — when they were still in training) then they were three or so years younger than the average Australian in an infantry battalion. In some courses for pilots — navigators were sometimes a little older

²² Miller had played cricket for Victoria and Australian football for St Kilda. Truscott had played Australian football for Melbourne.

²³ Gavin Long, *To Benghazi: Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, p.58, footnote 3.

²⁴ Calculated by taking one in ten from the 2/21st, 2/22nd and 2/40th battalions.

²⁵ Calculated from the figures in Peter Ilbery, *Empire Airmen Strike Back: The Empire Air Training Scheme and 5SFTS, Uranquinty*, Banner Books, Maryborough, 1999, pp.125-59.

— the average age was around twenty or twenty-one. Some, having just turned eighteen, learnt to drive after they learnt to fly.

The youth of aircrew is powerfully documented in the painting ‘Bomber Crew’. In 1944 Stella Bowen, the Australian war artist, made her first sketches of the men of Eric Jarman’s crew of 460 Squadron at Binbrook; but all except the rear gunner, Tom Lynch, were dead by the time she came to transform her pencil sketches and photographs into a group portrait. Both her pencil and paints show most faces that are vulnerable and apprehensive, and young. In a letter to her cousin she referred to the subjects of another painting as the ‘lads’ of a Halifax crew.²⁶

The call for youth and an above average level of education meant that many men went quickly from high school to Initial Training School. On the dark stained wooden shield in the foyer of Canberra High School are the names of forty-three students.²⁷ Twenty-two of them died while serving in the Australian or British air forces. Donald Easton completed his leaving certificate, entered the public service, qualified as a Wireless Operator and Air Gunner, and was killed on a raid on a synthetic oil plant at Bohlen in eastern Germany in March 1945. Easton was twenty years old

²⁶ Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky’s Lunch*, Picador, Sydney, 1999, p.159. Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life: A Memoir*, Picador, Sydney 1999, ‘Introduction’ by her daughter, Julia, pp.XII-XIII. ‘Lancaster Crew’, *As You Were! A Cavalcade of Events with the Australian Services from 1788 to 1946*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1946, p.84.

²⁷ A teacher, Esther Davies, organised students to research the names on the honour roll, and the results are preserved in two albums in the school.



Bomber Crew, painted by Stella Bowen, London 1944, from sketches and photographs. The preliminary sketches of the 460 squadron crew were made in April 1944 at Binbrook, Lincolnshire. Back row, left to right: Sergeant D.G. Champkin, flight engineer (England); Pilot Officer Thomas Lynch, rear gunner (Toowoomba); Flying Officer Hector Harrison, wireless operator (Lismore); Flying Officer Ronald Neal, mid-upper gunner (Grenfell). Front: Flying Officer Marmion Carroll, navigator (Ferntree Gully); Squadron Leader Eric Jarman, pilot (Yeppoon); Flying Officer Francis Jackson, bomb aimer (Lismore). Their Lancaster was shot down near the Swiss border during a raid on Friedrichshafen on 27/28 April 1944. Lynch, the only survivor, became a prisoner of war.
Australian War Memorial ART26265

and on his twenty-fifth operation. That was the pattern of many of the boys on the Canberra High honour roll: having done well at school, they won a place in the public service. Their record at school, the hours they worked in the public service and their location in Canberra where they could join the air force cadets and get access to coaching all helped them when they faced RAAF selection tests.

As applicants were numerous, those selecting aircrew could afford to set high standards. And the instructors could continue to be tough as the trainees went through a succession of schools, each about three months in length: Initial Training School, Elementary Flying Training School and Service Flying School. During every course there was a strong chance of being ‘scrubbed’, of failing and being re-mustered to navigators’, wireless operators’, bomb aimers’ and air gunners’ schools, or to ground duties. The failure rate, for example, at Uranquinty Service Flying Training School for the 74 trainees who entered 26 course in September 1942 was 21 out of the 74 (28 per cent). It was higher later in the war, up to 50 per cent.²⁸ And all who went to Uranquinty had already done about sixty hours on a Tiger Moth — that is, they had passed the initial demanding tests.

Those who qualified as aircrew could believe that they had joined an elite: they were going to do something that continued the traditions of the aces of the Great War, the dare-devil stunt men and pioneer aviators, came close to realizing the lives of

²⁸ Ilbery 1999, pp.125-59.

fictional heroes, and allowed them to appear alongside those who were already honoured and admired. They knew it was going to test to the utmost their skill and courage. In 1941 Pip Beck an eighteen-year-old wireless operator in the Woman's Auxiliary Air Force arrived at Waddington, a Bomber Command airfield near Lincoln. As she went to the Waafery she passed a group of sergeants: 'I knew from the brevets that they wore that these were aircrew — the fabulous beings I admired and hero-worshipped ... they were young gods ... and I blushed for the purple prose of my fancies'.²⁹ And they almost certainly knew how they looked to her.

Brill and Doubleday were about to join that elite, but by age, education and background, they were different from most Australians selected for aircrew training. They were older, they were country boys, and they had completed just three years of high school.

Early in 1941 Ilma Kitto left her school to make a rush trip to Sydney to see her fiancée, but she was too late: Bill Brill, Arthur Doubleday and other Australians had sailed for Canada on 19 March. At No 3 Service Flying Training School at Calgary, Brill and Doubleday learnt to fly the twin-engined Anson, added another fifty hours' solo to their log books, marched in the parade at the Calgary stampede, graduated with almost equal marks, and were awarded their wings and commissioned as pilot officers.³⁰ Arthur Doubleday said 'my whole experience in Canada was

²⁹ Pip Beck, *A WAAF in Bomber Command*, Goodall, London, 1989, p.13.

³⁰ Arthur Doubleday, interview, Keith Murdoch Sound Archives, transcript. Brill, Log Book.

memorable and pleasurable'. The supervising officer, asked to comment whether there were any points in flying or airmanship that Brill should watch, simply wrote 'Nil'.³¹

In August 1941 the Australians sailed in a hundred-ship convoy from Halifax in Nova Scotia, north through thick fog to skirt Greenland and Iceland, and into the Clyde. They came south by train to the Bournemouth Personnel Reception Centre, before being posted to 27 Operational Training Unit at Lichfield. By October 1941 Brill and Doubleday were flying Wellingtons across the English counties; it was less than a year since they had met on the train that took them to Sydney and Initial Training School. At Lichfield Brill and Doubleday selected their crews. Or perhaps their crews selected them. Doubleday says it was a 'roundabout thing'. He met a gunner in the mess, and the gunner knew a wireless operator and the wireless operator knew a navigator. Brill's crew was: Les Shepard, a bank clerk and another Wagga boy, as second pilot; Hugh Thompson, MA, BSc, an English biologist concerned with the human brain, the 'cool, calm navigator'; Dave Wilkinson, a professional golfer from Yorkshire, radio operator; Kevin Light, an aeronautical engineering student from Sydney, rear gunner; and Fred Lofts, a London salesman, the front gunner and bomb aimer. Others who flew at least four operations with them were: Tom O'Donohue, a clerk from Brisbane, Peter Gome,

³¹ Brill, Log Book.

an art student from Birmingham, and Ned Walsh from Gympie in Queensland.³²

Exactly a year after they took their first flights at Narrandera at the height of summer, Brill and Doubleday flew a 460 Squadron Mark IV Wellington on a circuit and landing exercise at Molesworth, just west of Huntingdon. Within days of Brill and Doubleday's arrival at Molesworth, 460 shifted to Brighton in southern Yorkshire. A new airfield, Brighton in January 1942 was mud, snow, Nissen huts, and three intersecting runways on a high, windswept plain. The Australians soon found the compensation of Bubwith, a village within easy walking distance and with two pubs, the Black Swan and the Seven Sisters. Both were known to the Australians as the 'Dirty Duck' and the 'Fourteen Tits' or, slightly more decorously, the 'Fourteen Titties'.³³

Imagine Brighton in January 1942 and the Australians praying for a hard frost so that they might walk on top of the slush and not knee-deep in it.

Imagine the crowded mess and Bill Brill takes a couple of gum leaves from an envelope. We are not sure who sent them to him — perhaps his youngest sister Fay, or perhaps his fiancée, Ilma. He lights them and then walks through the mess leaving behind wisps

³² Brill wrote an account of his first tour while still in England. Copy held by Ilma Brill.

³³ Peter Firkins, *Strike and Return*, Westward Ho, Perth, 1985, p.18. Patrick Otter, *Yorkshire Airfields in the Second World War*, Countryside Books, Newbury, 1998, pp.19-21. *Units of the Australian Air Force, A Concise History: Bomber Units*, Vol 3, Compiled by the RAAF Historical Section, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p.18.



Officer Arthur Doubleday (left) and Pilot Officer Bill Brill, at Molesworth, England, December 1941 or January 1942.
Australian War Memorial SUK10297

of smoke and the sharp, distinctive smell of burning gum leaves. That smoke was sufficiently evocative to transport every Australian — those from city as well as bush — half way around the world.³⁴

By March 1942 460 Squadron was ready to go to war. Brill and Doubleday were among the five crews selected to fly on the first operation. The ‘rest of the crews’ Brill said, ‘were envious’. The waiting crews were briefed four times, increasing the tension, before the weather cleared and there could be no more delays. Brill and Doubleday were keen to fly, but uncertain how they would perform. Doubleday said that before an operation he never felt much different. There was just the increased tension felt by a batsman waiting to walk to the centre, but, he added, the fast bowler always looked more dangerous from the fence than the crease.³⁵ Brill admitted more anxiety. He wrote about his feelings before another early operation:

I wandered around with a feeling of having a half pound of lead in the pit of my stomach ... Perhaps it was fear ... How can I get back from this when others who are better than I'll ever be, have fallen on such targets? Will I funk if I'm in a tight spot? Will I let the rest of the boys down? Who am I to hold the lives of five other men in my hands?³⁶

³⁴ Bob Curtis, Wireless operator and air gunner, in the crew on Brill's second tour, interview, 6 Jan. 2000.

³⁵ Doubleday, transcript, p.52.

³⁶ Brill, account of first tour, writing of a raid on Cologne, 5 April 1942.

From the red-soil paddocks to war in the skies of Europe it had taken Flying Officers Brill and Doubleday sixteen months.

Brill and Doubleday had followed a common pattern of Australian airmen going to war in Europe. Nearly all were part of the Empire Air Training Scheme linking the men of the Dominions to Britain. The first of the Australians to train in Canada had gone in July 1940 so Brill and Doubleday were early, but not pioneers: the traffic of Australians in their bright blue uniforms reached its peak in 1943 and early 1944. Some 10,000 Australians completed their training in Canada, just 647 went to schools in Rhodesia, and most of the total of 27,000 Australian aircrew who served in Britain had their wings before they left Australia. But they too went by sea across the Pacific, crossed North America by train, and then waited for the convoys that took them into the Mersey or the Clyde. Some of the early arrivals took less time from joining the air force to joining battle, especially some air gunners whose training was briefer than that of pilots, navigators and wireless operators. Later, aircrew often took longer from enlistment to first operation. Gus Belford who entered the air force two years after Brill, trained, travelled and waited for another two years from leaving home in Perth until he began flying from Waddington in October 1944.³⁷ Like Brill and Doubleday Australians at operational training units continued to form crews in an unstructured, almost random way; and while most probably preferred to fly with other Australians nearly all of them flew in

³⁷ Belford 1995, p.27.

crews with more than one nationality. There were simply not enough Australians, and almost no flight engineers, in the groups that had to sort themselves into crews to allow many all-Australian crews. Even in 460 Squadron, nominally an RAAF squadron and sometimes thought of as the most Australian squadron, many men were not Australians. By 1944 only half of 460 aircrew were Australian and the maximum number of Australians at any time rarely exceeded sixty per cent.³⁸ A diversity of accents from across the Commonwealth was normal on the intercom — and in moments of crisis threatened Babel.

Most of those who trained as aircrew wanted to go overseas, and most wanted to go to Europe. When the Japanese launched their attack in December 1941 and bombed Darwin in February 1942, some aircrew were determined to stay in Australia, but soon many wanted to continue the traffic across two oceans to Britain. Syd Johnson said that when he was waiting for embarkation orders in Melbourne in 1943 there was a ‘roar of approval’ from those who were told they were on their way to Europe.³⁹ And most of them wanted to fly Spitfires, but Bomber Command needed and consumed more men, and that was where so many of them went. Those who had trained as wireless operators, navigators and gunners knew that they were on the way to multi-engined aircraft.

³⁸ John Herington, *Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939-1943: Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1954, p.16.

³⁹ S. H. Johnson, *It's Never dark Above the Clouds*, privately published, 1994, p.160.

When Eric Silbert, a wireless operator and air gunner, was posted to a unit leading to Bomber Command, he wrote: ‘This was good news ... [bombers] we felt had taken over from fighters, to carry out the most interesting and exciting operations’.⁴⁰

Among pilots Doubleday was an exception: he wanted to fly bombers, ‘the bigger the better’.⁴¹ He had a rational argument — the bomber was the weapon that could hit back — but also his experience with trucks, tractors and harvesters gave him a familiarity with heavy machinery. Brill had the same interest and confidence in machinery. At the start of his reflections on his first tour he wrote of the Wellington with its two eighteen-cylinder, twin-row Wasp engines; its slow cruising speed and high fuel consumption; the trouble they had starting it in cold weather; the fact that when they first arrived at Brighton they did not even have a plug spanner; but that during his time on the squadron there was not one case of a Wellington on operations suffering from engine failure. These were the comments from someone who knew a lot about starting International and Bulldog tractors on frosty mornings at Landervale.⁴²

For Brill and Doubleday the first operation was greater in anticipation than in reality. They flew as second pilots on a short flight to Emden, one of the closest German ports, and they

⁴⁰ Eric Silbert, *Dinkum Mishpochah*, Artlook Publications, Perth, 1981, p.151.

⁴¹ Doubleday, transcript, p.13.

⁴² Vic Brill provided the information on the tractors. It is true that most pilots ended up with affection for their aircraft, but there is a more pragmatic style to Brill’s comments.

bombed through cloud. Bill thought that they might have ‘frightened a cow or two’. On all of his first six operations Brill crossed the North Sea to bomb ports, or to drop leaflets telling the French that ‘La libération n’est plus un espoir. La Libération est en marche’.⁴³ He did not see flak until his third trip and did not fly as first pilot until his fifth. And then it was, as he said, ‘only poor old le Havre, which every crew in Bomber Command has visited as a “fresher”’. But there were moments of danger. On one mission Brill had a ‘torrid time’ in flak, and while he could not remember chewing the gum he had with him, on landing he found that repetitive hard chomping had left his jaw muscles so exhausted he could not open his mouth. Arthur had a more exciting early leaflet raid when he was suddenly ‘grabbed’ by a radar-controlled searchlight, and he desperately tried to remember all he had been told about evasion. He dived and flattened out as low as he dared, but took a ‘hammering’ from the flak. The rear gunner — who quite reasonably thought all the enemy fire was directed at him — yelled advice in his Lancashire accent, and they escaped out to sea.⁴⁴ Through the first six weeks of operations just one crew in 460 Squadron was shot down.

On 5 April 1942 Brill flew to Cologne, his first mission requiring him to cross extensive occupied and enemy territory and attack a defended target. They were given ‘quite a reception’ crossing the coast, and the ‘target itself was an amazing sight’. There was light flak — ‘all colours’ — heavy flak and at least a hundred search

⁴³ Brill pasted copies of leaflets in his account of his first tour.

⁴⁴ Doubleday, transcript, p.50.

lights ‘holding some poor johnny and plastering him with everything they had ... The haze, the flares, the dozens of dummies and dozens of incendiary loads made the whole place bewildering’. Through the rest of April he flew another six times to Germany: to Hamburg, Essen, Dortmund, Hamburg, Rostock and Kiel. Over Essen, Ned Watch, who had flown with Brill as second pilot, went to close the flare chute just as the flak gunners opened up. Brill said ‘The first burst was rather close, and the blast gave the plane such a kick that it tipped old Ned off his feet. From then on, what with flak bursts and evasive action, Ned was rolled around the fuselage like a pea in a whistle’.⁴⁵

By his eleventh operation Brill said that he was ‘beginning to get a little accustomed to being scared’. It was just as well, because Dortmund was a ‘cauldron of flak’:

Never have I worked so hard, or have I done so much evasive action. The poor old kite stood first on one wing, and then on the other, on its tail, and on its nose. The sweat poured off me, half from exertion and half from fright. And still those beams played across us, until I prayed for them to shoot us down and finish it all. Sometimes I wonder if I was a bit mad during part of that show. Can remember looking at times and seeing a big blue beam cutting a track in the sky a few feet above. I screamed laughing ... and cried, ‘Ha! Ha! missed again’.⁴⁶

Brill flew through some thirty miles of ‘candles’, and, short of fuel and holed with shrapnel, landed at Swanton Morely in Norfolk.

⁴⁵ Brill, account of first tour.

⁴⁶ Brill, account of first tour.

On his first tour Brill flew eighteen times to Germany, but a raid on France was probably his most hazardous. In May the crews watched anxiously as the moon waxed and the night shortened leaving little darkness to hide a bomber. These were the conditions that Bomber Command needed to make an attack on the Gnome and Rhône works at Gennevilliers, a suburb of Paris. To prevent civilian casualties, the attacking aircraft had to be able to see their target. Only experienced crews were chosen, and those now included both Brill's and Doubleday's. On 29 May seventy-seven bombers took off into cloud and rain squalls. Brill flew at just 175 feet across the Channel so that he was under the cloud and could see exactly where he crossed the French coast. By the time Brill's apprehensive crew reached Paris the weather was clearing, and as they ran in towards the target they were immediately picked up by searchlights. With the bomb doors open they were hit by flak, shrapnel exploded through the aircraft, and cut the hydraulics. Brill 'put in some pretty hard work at the controls' and brought the Wellington over the centre of Paris at about 1000 feet. They were under constant fire as Brill again came over the target, and released the bombs. Flak put the rear turret out of action, and one 1000-pound did not release. They swung for home, as Brill said, with the bomb doors flapping in the breeze, and with a precarious hold on a 1000-pound bomb. They made an emergency landing at White Waltham near Windsor, a short strip, but it did not matter as a flat tyre slowed them on landing. Of the four Wellingtons that had taken off from Brighton, Brill's was the only one to bomb, and his and Arthur Doubleday's were the only

ones to get back to England. Brill's Wellington was beyond repair.⁴⁷ Brill was given an immediate award of a DFC, the first in 460 Squadron.

When the Wellingtons of 460 Squadron returned from a raid and joined those circling above Brighton waiting for the controller to bring them down, the crews were discouraged from calling each other on the radio. But often they would hear a cheerful Australian voice call, 'How are yer, mate?' And they would know that Brill and Doubleday were checking on each other.⁴⁸

Doubleday finished his tour with a raid on Saarbrücken at the end of July 1942. He was the first in the Squadron to complete a tour, and was awarded a DFC. Brill finished a few days later on 11 August after thirty-one operations. Brill and Doubleday had taken five months to complete their tours. During that time 460 Squadron had lost twenty-two aircraft, more than its total of eighteen when it began operations.⁴⁹ But of course that is the number of aircraft lost on all raids, and is not a measure of their chances of survival. Brill and Doubleday had flown frequently, and that meant that they flew on half of the squadron's operations. Brill had flown on six raids when five per cent or more of aircraft from all squadrons had been destroyed, and on three of those — Essen, Hamburg and Warnemunde — it was seven or more per

⁴⁷ Brill, account of first tour. Firkins 1985, p.30. Herington 1954, p.310.

⁴⁸ Firkins 1985, p.36.

⁴⁹ Twenty was the maximum number of aircraft sent on an operation by the squadron during Brill's tour.



The wedding of Squadron Leader Arthur Doubleday to Phyllis Buckle, 14 August 1943, Kent, England. The others in the photograph are from left: Mrs Isabel Buckle (bride's mother), Miss Joy Turner, Mrs Sylvia Blackman (bride's sister) and Squadron Leader Bill Brill.

Australian War Memorial UK00384

cent. The average loss per raid over the five months had been about three per cent, and that gave a forty per cent chance of survival over a tour. On raids in which Brill had flown, twelve 460 Squadron aircraft had been destroyed.⁵⁰

On 14 August 1943 Brill and Doubleday teamed up in another significant and life-changing event. Doubleday married Phyllis Buckle at Beckenham in Kent and Bill Brill was best man. Arthur had met Phyllis at a dance in Bournemouth on his third day in England, courted her, but not wanting to make a young widow, had not married. Now two years on, and a tour completed, Arthur married, although he knew that he would go back to operations, and he was not confident he would survive. The Doubledays spent their honeymoon at Haweswater in the Lake District. It was, Arthur said, as far as they could get from the war and still be in England.⁵¹

Don Charlwood, a navigator who completed a tour with 103 Squadron and served as an instructor at 27 Operational Training Unit, Lichfield, wrote:

A few outstanding men recognized that the Command needed their leadership and expertise. Their presence on a squadron lifted morale enormously — provided they stayed alive ... Epitomizing such men at Lichfield were two former Riverina farmers, Arthur Doubleday and

⁵⁰ Given that 20 was the highest number of aircraft that the Squadron put up on any one night, that loss of 12 is consistent with a 40 per cent chance of survival.

⁵¹ Doubleday, transcript, pp.29 and 75. AWM photograph of the wedding UK00384.

Bill Brill. They were squadron leaders, each commanding a Lichfield training flight.⁵²

It is a fine tribute, yet a senior officer wrote at Lichfield that Brill was just a 'good steady plodder' and gave him four out of ten for initiative.⁵³ That judgment was in sharp contrast to those who knew Brill as 'charismatic' and a leader of 'outstanding personality'.⁵⁴ Perhaps Brill manifested those qualities of leadership only when they were needed — on an operational squadron — but it seems unlikely. In volunteering for a second tour, Brill and Doubleday had committed themselves to another twenty raids.

After eleven months instructing novice crews Brill and Doubleday went to a conversion unit at Wigsley,⁵⁵ and there they trained on the Halifax and the Lancaster, the four-engined heavy bombers that had been demonstrating their superiority over the Wellingtons by the time that Brill and Doubleday ended their first tours. They had both picked up most of their new crew members while still instructing. Ron Fuller says that they were having a beer in the mess at Lichfield when Brill said he was going back to operations, and he wanted Bob Curtis and Ted Freeman to fly with him. Ron said that he would go with them, but Brill thought there was no chance that he would be allowed to go as he had

⁵² Don Charlwood, *Journeys into Night*, Hudson, Melbourne, 1991, p.243.

⁵³ Brill, Service Dossier, A9300, National Australian Archives.

⁵⁴ Conway 1995, pp.78 and p.221. Brill, Service Dossier, A9300, assessment by Group Captain Bonham-Carter in 1944.

⁵⁵ Just six miles west of Lincoln, but in Nottinghamshire.

already done fifty operations, nearly all in North Africa. Fuller insisted he was going anyway, so Brill asked for his release, and to everyone's surprise it was granted.⁵⁶ When Doubleday arrived at the Conversion Unit, he still did not have a navigator, but Bob Murphy who was a navigation instructor there was already a friend of Arthur's. Bob said that going on a second tour was 'normally a voluntary job, but they asked me and I couldn't knock 'em back'.⁵⁷

No men from Brill's and Doubleday's first crews flew with them on their second tours, although at least one, Gordon Goodwin, Doubleday's first navigator, flew a second tour with the Pathfinders.⁵⁸ Brill's crew was Ron 'Tubby' Fuller (mid-upper gunner) from Booleroo Centre in South Australia, Ted 'Bluey' Freeman (navigator) from Melbourne, Bill McMahon (bomb aimer) from Taree in New South Wales, Bob Curtis (wireless operator and air gunner) from Sydney, Len Smith (flight engineer) from London, and Bill McDonald an Australian rear gunner picked up at Waddington. Curtis had served a first tour in North Africa, Len Smith, Bill McDonald and Bill McMahon were new to battle, and only Brill and Freeman had previously flown a full tour in Bomber Command.

Brill was posted to 463 Squadron, Doubleday to 467 Squadron, both men had the rank of Squadron Leader, both served as flight commanders, and both squadrons were operating from Waddington. As a re-introduction to war, Brill flew as 'second

⁵⁶ Ron Fuller, interview, 30 April 2000.

⁵⁷ Murphy, transcript, pp.54-5.

⁵⁸ Doubleday, interview, 7 Jan. 2000.

dickie' to Stettin on 5 January 1944. On the long nine-hour flight there was much to observe and much of it was disturbing: the density of the bombers in the stream, the use of flares at the turning points, the bombing on coloured marker flares, the efficiency of the German night fighters, the increased use of radio and radar for navigation, the demands for precision in navigation and timing, and the intensity of the light over the target area. It was a contrast with Brill's first tour when he had often nosed his way around the target then selected his own bombing run. He decided he would never cross a track marker — the chance of collision was high and the markers attracted the night fighters.⁵⁹

Imagine the mess at Waddington in the winter of early 1944. Outside the cloud is low, and mist and sleet are scudding across the runways. There had been no operations during the day and the forecast means that there will be no air war in western Europe that night. Suddenly there is a cry among the drinkers, 'Clear the runway! Bill Brill will do the impossible.' An indoor runway is cleared of furniture, a sofa is placed across the far end, and beyond it a fine, leather officer's chair is laid on its back. Brill in his socks runs flat out down the runway, grips the top of the sofa with his hands, somersaults, lands in the chair and his momentum turns it upright, leaving Squadron Leader Brill sitting comfortably in the chair. The act is a challenge to other airmen, especially those misled by drink-induced confidence. Soon the end of the runway

⁵⁹ Brill, account of second tour, held by Mrs Ilma Brill.

is littered by pranged airmen who have crash-dived into the wall and floor. The challengers retire to the bar.⁶⁰

Brill and Doubleday had returned to operations at the height of the Battle of Berlin. During the first three months of 1944 Bomber Command lost 763 four-engined bombers. The loss rate was greater than the rate of replacement: this was a battle that could not be sustained. In those three months both Brill and Doubleday flew on eleven raids, nine of them into Germany, and on those nine raids the average loss rate was 5.5 per cent.⁶¹ At that rate less than one crew in five would complete a full tour.

Brill and his new crew flew their first operation together when they went to Berlin on 20 January, and they went to the ‘big city’ again on 27 January. As flight commander Brill thought he ought to fly ‘R’ for Robert: it was said to be a jinxed aircraft, a ‘chop kite’. On its last flight it had come back with a dead rear gunner — he had died when the oxygen failed. At other times its crew had claimed an engine had lost power, but no faults had shown when the ground staff had tested it. The take-off for the long flight to Berlin was in daylight and Brill flew northeast out over the North Sea and then came south with a tail wind. But one engine did indeed give trouble and Brill was lower and slower than normal. Over Berlin the bomb aimer, Bill McMahon, had just released the bombs when the Lancaster was hit in several places. Brill had been watching gun flashes from below and counting the seconds from

⁶⁰ Curtis, interview. Conway 1995, pp.221-2.

⁶¹ Doubleday actually began his tour on 16 Dec. 1943 with a flight to Berlin. The average loss on Doubleday’s raids was slightly higher.

the flash, ready to exploit the few seconds that he had to take action if he became the target. So Brill thought they had been hit by flak, but in fact another bomber above them had released its incendiaries on them. One had gone straight through the perspex in the nose of the plane, but McMahon had the presence of mind to pick it up and throw it straight back out again. Other incendiaries hit the navigator's table, severed the rudder controls, jammed the rear gunner's escape hatch, and destroyed most of the aircraft's electrical system. As Brill was struggling to regain control, the mid-upper gunner, Tubby Fuller, said there was a plume of flame coming from the port wing, and it was so long it was streaming way past the tail. Brill told the crew to stand-by to bale out, and he put the Lancaster into a dive, a standard way to try and blow a fire out. But he could still see the flames and told the crew to jump. McMahon jettisoned the front hatch and sat with his legs dangling, and the navigator, Bluey Freeman, was next in line to jump, but neither was eager to plunge into the inferno of Berlin. Fuller, unable to open the rear door, kicked a hole in it, put his hand through and opened it from the outside, but before he jumped he pulled the emergency hatch in the roof to release the dinghy so that he could have a last look outside. He too decided to stick with the plane, but the wind gripped him and almost sucked him out. The rear gunner, Bill McDonald, said he could not open the rear turret, and so he had no choice: if the plane went down he went with it.

Then Bob Curtis, who had gone up into the astro dome said that the fire was nearly out. As Brill had levelled off and almost

had the plane under control he told Len Smith, the Flight Engineer, to go around and tell the crew not to jump. On his way back to his turret Tubby Fuller pressed past Curtis whose parachute released, and yards of silk 'spewed out'. Knowing that at any moment his life might depend on his parachute, Curtis tried to stuff silk and cords back into its pack. By this time 'R' for Robert was down to 14,000 feet and no one was sure where they were or where they were heading. Holding a torch in his teeth, Freeman worked out their position and gave Brill a course. With limited control, freezing wind streaming in hatches and bomb holes, and bits of aeroplane threatening to tear in the wind, they set off for home. Brill climbed in spite of the cold, and in spite of the fact that Smith passed out because of a lack of oxygen and Curtis was vomiting. Curtis kept working on the electrical system, and had some of it repaired before they got back to Waddington. They landed after a nine-hour flight, the second last home. Thirty-three other Lancasters did not get back from the raid, that was 241 airmen. In Berlin about 700 people were killed, and 20,000 had their homes destroyed. When Brill's crew inspected their plane on the ground they found that seven or eight incendiary bombs had hit them, and the fire in the wing, just missing the fuel tanks, had been caused by a bomb penetrating the wing, burning its way through and falling out.

In a letter home written on the day that they got back to Waddington, Curtis began: 'Dear Dad, Phew! Have I got some news for you ...' And he ended: 'Every time I tell this story in the

mess or nearby pubs I get a couple of free drinks'.⁶² Brill wrote: 'it was not my idea of an evening's entertainment'. They flew again to Berlin three nights later. The Waddington squadrons lost six Lancasters, three from each squadron, that night.

On his second tour Brill faced extreme danger on two other raids, and both Brill and Doubleday flew on the Nuremberg raid in March, Bomber Command's most costly attack. Nuremberg, Brill said, was the most frightening. He flew through the fragments of a Lancaster that exploded in front of him. One engine was put out of action, another stopped briefly and the rear gunner reported that his turret was not working. Again Brill told the crew to get their parachutes handy, and again they kept flying, and arrived at Waddington an hour after the other crews.⁶³ By then the weather was closing in, and landing was dangerous. Arthur Doubleday, who was waiting for Bill, said, 'He always caused me some anxiety'.⁶⁴ Brill agreed. He told a reporter, 'I am always getting into tight spots'.⁶⁵

As flight leaders Brill and Doubleday deserve much praise for sustaining the morale and efficiency of the two Waddington

⁶² Sep Owen, ed., *10-Course WAGS*, privately published, pp.25-6. Brill, account of second tour. Fuller, interview. Herington 1954, p.645.

⁶³ Brill, account of second tour.

⁶⁴ H.M. Blundell, *They Flew from Waddington! 463-467 Lancaster Squadrons, Royal Australian Air Force*, Tour Committee of 463-467 Squadrons, NSW, Sydney, 1975, p.18.

⁶⁵ Bill Brill, RAAF Biographical File, AWM 65, includes press release No.507.

squadrons through those bleak nights of long flights and high losses during the Battle of Berlin.

From April 1944 Bomber Command switched much of its destructive power from Berlin and other major German cities, to preparations for the Normandy landings. The operations against gun emplacements, ammunition dumps, marshalling yards and ports, took half the time of the flights to eastern Germany and losses were lighter. Brill flew as deputy controller on the raid to Sable-Sur-Sarthe on 6 May, and saw the bombs turn the ammunition dump into a ‘bubbling boiling mass’. The cascades of sparks and the explosions were, Brill said, better than the fireworks he had seen at the Calgary Stampede three years before. No attacking aircraft was lost and a ‘good time was had by all’.⁶⁶ Arthur Doubleday flew twice on D-Day, 6 June, attacking coastal guns and returning to bomb the railways at Argentan. At the end of his second tour, Doubleday flew twelve successive raids on targets in France.

Brill and Doubleday flew as deputy controllers, and then as controllers.⁶⁷ That meant that they had to arrive early, check that the marker flares were correctly located, calculate the wind speed and direction over the target, and redirect those aircraft bombing in the wrong place. Having to stay a longer time in the target area was not always appreciated by the crews. Before a raid on Cherbourg, Bob Curtis wrote on his route map ‘Controller again —

⁶⁶ Brill, account of second tour.

⁶⁷ Doubleday usually says ‘Deputy Master’ or ‘Master’ Bomber.

what a bastard'.⁶⁸ As controller Brill also felt an increased obligation to bomb accurately. On 8 May over Brest all the defences were alerted and other aircraft were turning for home by the time Brill came in to bomb. He was picked up early by the searchlights but he was determined to hold the plane steady and he refused to look away from his instruments. The Lancaster was 'plastered', but he did not dive and twist until after the bombs were dropped and the confirming photograph taken. As they came away the rear gunner warned that 'odd pieces' were falling off the starboard elevator, and one engine stopped, but they made it home with 140 holes in the fuselage.⁶⁹

On 11 May 1944 J.R. (Sam) Balmer, commander of 467 Squadron, was killed in action, and Brill was named as his replacement, and he and his crew transferred to the sister squadron at Waddington. It was as Wing Commander that Brill completed his second tour on 4 July 1944. Bob Curtis, the wireless operator and gunner, had actually finished his tour one trip earlier, but volunteered to go on one extra raid so that the crew could stay together. McDonald was not with them. He had filled in with another crew and been killed. Len Smith and Bill McMahon, both on their first tour, had more trips to do after 4 July. Both survived, Bill as a prisoner of war. He had parachuted out over Germany and landed on the roof of a farm house.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Curtis wrote a typescript account of his tour and included documents. Copy held by Mrs Brill.

⁶⁹ Brill, account of second tour.

⁷⁰ Curtis, typescript.

Arthur Doubleday was also promoted, but he went to command 61 Squadron, an RAF squadron at Skellingthorpe.⁷¹ He was, he said, the only Australian who had enlisted during the war, and who had acquired his skills through the Empire Air Training Scheme, to command an RAF squadron.⁷² Given short warning of his appointment, Doubleday and his crew arrived at Skellingthorpe to find that 61 Squadron had suffered high losses over Berlin, and had just had three aircraft shot down on the Nuremberg raid and another two damaged in crashes.⁷³ Bob Murphy, Doubleday's navigator said that they walked into the mess, and 'you could hear a pin drop'. On their second night at Skellingthorpe Doubleday's crew tried to lift morale:

we decided to put on a party ... Got the beer flowing, blackened a few bottoms and put the impressions on the ceiling of the mess — generally livened the place up and within a few weeks we had a tremendous spirit going in the squadron ...⁷⁴

Doubleday, who brought a quieter, more deliberate style of leadership to the mess, saved his flamboyance for the air where he flew his aircraft to the extremes of its capacities. Later, Doubleday

⁷¹ Doubleday was promoted in April 1944, about a fortnight before Brill. Doubleday RAAF biographical file, AWM65, Australian War Memorial.

⁷² Doubleday, transcript, p.96.

⁷³ Sir Ralph Cochrane wrote twenty years later that he sent Doubleday to a nearby station where a squadron was 'in trouble' and he 'quickly restored morale' (Blundell, 1975, p. IX).

⁷⁴ Murphy, transcript, p.56.

said that his six months with 61 Squadron were the most satisfying of his air force career.⁷⁵

Both Brill and Doubleday continued to fly after they had completed their second tours. Normally they flew with new crews, or crews that they thought needed guidance and encouragement. Doubleday ended up flying fifty-five missions, and Brill fifty-eight.⁷⁶ To fly with strangers whose behaviour in air battle was untested added to the risks. On one flight Doubleday heard his bomb aimer say in a matter of fact voice, 'Flack on the port skipper'. It was the sort of statement that normally warned of distant danger, but suddenly shrapnel hit between the inner and outer port engines and Doubleday learnt that he had an unflappable bomb aimer whose voice showed not the slightest trace of excitement even when flak was about to explode a few feet from his nose.⁷⁷ On 31 May the crews of 467 were selected for an attack on the railway junction at Saumur in France, but the weather was so bad with pouring rain and blinding flashes of lightning that Brill told a 'sprog' crew to stay home and he and his crew took their place.⁷⁸ A month later a new pilot flying 'second dickie' was killed, and the members of the now headless crew faced being sent back to training and again going through crewing-

⁷⁵ Doubleday, transcript, p.94.

⁷⁶ Doubleday's operations from his RAAF biographical file, AWM 65, Australian War Memorial 65. Brill's from his log book. Doubleday's fifty-five operations include a sea search mission flown in between his tours.

⁷⁷ Doubleday transcript, p.35.

⁷⁸ Brill, account of second tour.

up. Brill took over as pilot and took them on an attack on the railway yards at Limoges in France. Brill said the ‘excitement and enthusiasm expressed by the crew members repaid my small effort’.⁷⁹ The excitement was understandable: they nearly collided with another Lancaster on the way in to bomb and had to make another circuit. Below them they could see the opposing armies ‘blazing away’ at each other. Having been twice briefed to go to Königsberg, but never having made the long flight to the Baltic port, Brill made a special application to the base commander and was allowed to take a new crew there on 26 August 1944. With the novice pilot acting as flight engineer, they flew the long leg along the Swedish coast looking at the lighted towns below, and the Swedish flak coming up a considerate time after they had gone. It was all, Brill said, ‘uncommonly pleasant’.

Brill’s crew also say that one night the bombers were moving around the peri-track waiting their turn to take-off when one plane stopped. Brill, who was not flying, drove down to see what was causing the delay. Expecting to be told about a mechanical or electrical fault, he found a traumatised pilot who said he was not in a fit state to fly and, if he did, he would simply kill the rest of the crew. Brill said, ‘I will bring you home’. He got his flying kit, and piloted the aircraft. Later he arranged for the pilot to be sent to Hugh Thompson, his navigator on the first tour. Thompson,

⁷⁹ Brill, account of second tour.

then living in Surrey, provided rest and advice, and the pilot returned to the squadron.⁸⁰

When asked about Brill and Doubleday, a fellow Riverina airman, Reg Bain said, 'They were mad. They would turn around and have a look.' And it was true that where most crews wanted to get in and get out of the target area as fast as possible, both Brill and Doubleday several times made more than one bombing run, and sometimes chose to have a look at what they and others had done. It was not simply a result of responsibilities as flight or squadron commanders or as master bombers. On the twentieth raid of his first tour Brill bombed Emden, went out to sea and then:

I turned the kite around to have a look at the show. It was an unforgettable sight. Must have been seventy or more flares hanging over the centre of the town, with the usual searchlight cones and more than the usual amount of coloured light flak weaving its way up. Fires and gun flashes on the ground and flak bursts in the sky made the picture complete. And the whole issue was reflected in the water.⁸¹

At other times he wrote of circling low over the target to have a 'looksee'.⁸² When the bomb aimer had difficulty locating the target in a raid on Hamburg, Brill said on the intercom that he would 'stooge into the centre of the flak' and see what they could find,

⁸⁰ This is neither proved nor disproved in Brill's log. Ilma Brill says that squadron members told the story to her.

⁸¹ Brill, account of second tour.

⁸² Raid on aircraft factory at Marignane on 9 March 1944.

but ‘The suggestion was promptly greeted by “Drop the damn things, and go home” from every corner of the kite’.⁸³

Even in his terse comments in his log, Brill expressed a fascination with what he saw. After a raid on Hamburg on 26 July 1942 he wrote, ‘Marvellous vis. Town well alight.’ Brill and Doubleday were imbued with the Bomber Command spirit to ‘press on regardless’ and bomb accurately, but in Brill there was a consciousness that he was taking part in great and horrendous events. Where others limited their exposure, Brill wanted a record of the experience — he was a determined spectator of aerial warfare and in his unpractised hand wrote about what he had seen. Doubleday was different. Less extrovert, he was much more deliberate and calculating. One of his conclusions was that he would not survive. Having accepted that, then the seduction of hope, the increasing and accumulating tension before raids, and the chances of acting ignobly when in fear of death were all diminished. But, as Don Charlwood asked, ‘I wonder how many men were really able to surrender hope’.⁸⁴ And Doubleday’s acceptance of the probability of death did not mean that he believed he could do nothing to avoid dying. In fact he did everything he could to ensure that his crew and those in his flight and squadron increased their chances of surviving.

By rank, achievement, numbers of missions and recognition Brill and Doubleday were not representative of Australians who flew in Bomber Command. And they survived when the odds were

⁸³ Raid on Hamburg 17 April 1942. Brill, account of first tour.

⁸⁴ Charlwood 1991, p.243.

strongly against survival. But their story illuminates much of the common experience of Australians in Bomber Command. What they were called on to do depended on Bomber Command policy, the season, the weather, the changes in the machines of war, the balance between the technologies of aircraft offence and defence, and developments in the war on land and at sea. On their second tours Brill and Doubleday went back to war when the nights were long and Bomber Command was making its assault on Berlin and other cities. At the end of their second tours they were flying in support of the Normandy landings. Then they flew frequently, a mission lasting more like four rather than eight hours, and losses were low. Pilot Officer Ronald Lawton, who flew all the missions of his second tour in three months beginning in December 1943, went to Berlin twelve times and every flight was to a city in Germany.⁸⁵ But had he flown that tour three months later then he might have flown to a distant German city only three or four times, and two or three times as many of the crews that flew alongside him would have survived.⁸⁶ Eric Silbert who began his fifty operations not long before D-Day flew just once to Berlin.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ 460 Squadron - Decorations and Awards, 401/1/Pt 1, Pt 3, A11270, National Archives of Australia. Dan Conway began his first tour with 467 Squadron at almost the same time as Brill and Doubleday began their second. His first 14 raids beginning on 16 Dec. 1943 were to Germany and he went 22 times to Germany. On 4 of his raids to France there were no losses (*Trenches in the Sky*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1995, pp.168-9).

⁸⁶ Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book 1939-1945*, Midland Publishing, Leicester, 1996, provide statistics on raids. The other detailed

The Australians were great travellers in the British Isles. Hunting for seats on crowded trains, standing in corridors and peering at nameless, blacked-out stations to find out where they were, were all common experiences. But many Australians bought cars and with the cooperation of ground crews ran them on aviation fuel. Eric Silbert said that he and his crew had ‘three cars and a motorbike among us’.⁸⁸ Sadly, many cars and motor and push-bikes were destined to have a succession of owners. Like many other Australians Doubleday changed into civilian clothes and had a few days in Ireland.⁸⁹ Murphy and a Canadian friend saw the village of Beer on a map, and thought they would like a few days in Beer. And they went down to the south coast, found one small pub in the village and spent their time in Beer. Brill and Doubleday stayed in private homes, and so did nearly all Australian aircrew. It intensified the contrast between the violence of war and peaceful domesticity, and strengthened the sentimental connections between Australian airmen and the British Isles. Both Arthur Doubleday and his navigator, Bob Murphy, married English women, and so did 2000 other Australian airmen in England. That proximity to women, and a range of intimate relations with them, also characterised the war of the men in Bomber Command.

compilation of statistics is: W.R. Chorley, *Royal Air Force Bomber Command Losses of the Second World War*, Vol. 1 1939-40 – Vol. 6 1945, Midland Counties Publications, Leicester, 1992-8.

⁸⁷ Silbert 1981, p.183.

⁸⁸ Silbert 1981, p.161.

⁸⁹ Doubleday, transcript, p.49.

Historians, or all concerned with human behaviour, need to ask why it was that some men who were aware of the casualty rates volunteered to fly a second tour, or to fly in the extended tours required in Pathfinder squadrons. The equation that measured life against death was inescapable: the chances of completing a tour of thirty missions, when the loss per raid was three per cent, was forty per cent — less than an even break. As one said, ‘we all knew, we were “juggling with Jesus”’.⁹⁰ By the time Brill and Doubleday went back to operations there was not a shortage of aircrew — in fact there was a waiting list.⁹¹ The fact that both were to serve as flight and squadron commanders was no comfort: six of the 463 and 467 Squadron commanders were killed in action, and Rollo Kingsford-Smith and Brill were the only commanders to survive the tough years before the D-Day landings. Yet forces within some men compelled them to go back again. They were uncomfortable about instructing young men to do what they had learnt to do and could do better. Those who survived the trauma of operations often suffered depression, and one way of lifting that depression was to go back into the cycle of the build-up, the

⁹⁰ John Nedwich was with 467 Squadron and then volunteered to fly with Pathfinders (Blundell 1975, p.13).

⁹¹ Charlwood 1991, p.242 makes this point. The figures are given in the official histories. Herington writes of ‘the floodtide of aircrew towards Bomber Command’ and ‘personnel depots teeming with aircrew’ from early 1944 (Herington 1963, p.279). But Rollo Kingsford-Smith at 463 Squadron has strongly condemned what he saw as a lack of spare crews and the diversion of Australian replacements to RAF squadrons (Kingsford-Smith 1999, pp.73-5).

intensity of the raid, and the exhaustion of post-operation. Adrenalin, Kingsford-Smith says, ‘was God’s gift to aircrew’.⁹² But adrenalin could come at the cost of dependency and depression. A high-minded sense of duty, guilt, the boredom of instruction, a rational belief that those who were best at operations ought to do them, the lure of the intensity and sense of purpose in life on an operational squadron, and escape from post-trauma depression led men back to operations.

The techniques that men adopted — or had forced on them — so that they could survive the periodic immersion in horrific danger varied from the fascination of Brill to the acceptance of death of Doubleday. Syd Gooding, an Australian pilot with the RAF 101 Squadron at Ludford Magna, said that he was calm before operations simply because it all seemed to be happening to someone else: ‘I felt I was observing myself. I seemed to be detached from myself’.⁹³ Others got drunk. The mayhem of indoor rugby scrums, the riding of motor bikes and the firing of flares in the mess, briefly obliterated memories and expectations, and increased group strength. Those Australians who so often led the wild parties could claim they were being good nationalists and acting in the best interests of morale and efficiency. It sounds like the perfect rationalisation for frequent drunkenness and irresponsibility. But Brill and Doubleday, who themselves did not drink much, thought occasional uproar and alcohol essential.⁹⁴

⁹² Kingsford-Smith, 1999, p.54.

⁹³ Syd Gooding, interview, 13 Feb. 2000.

⁹⁴ Rollo Kingsford-Smith and Bob Murphy agreed.

Another puzzle of behaviour is why Australian aircrew were prepared to fight in a war so far from home, even after Australia was in its own war in the Pacific. But the images that had lured many into the air force — from Biggles to the Battle of Britain — were centred in Europe. There was a belief among Australians that the great events of the world had their genesis and their resolution in Europe and so to fight in Europe was to be at the determining point of Australia's fate. It was also true that the most advanced aircraft and the best material conditions for aircrew were in England. As Ivan Pellas said, he didn't want to be sent to the back end of nowhere, living in a tent without grog and girls.⁹⁵ And Australians now presume a distinction that most Australians did not make in 1939 or 1944: Australians then were both Australian and British. They could be aggressively Australian and critical of much that saw in England, and still be proudly British. To be absorbed into an Empire Scheme and dispersed into British squadrons was not in conflict with their personal sense of identity — as young Australians might now presume.⁹⁶ Generally airmen do not regret the combination of policy and chance that took them from Wagga to Waddington — or Bendigo to Brighton. And into an RAF rather than an RAAF squadron.

⁹⁵ Ivan Pellas, interview, 17 April 1999.

⁹⁶ The questions of the responsibility of the Australian government for Australian personnel overseas and the most appropriate use of trained servicemen are other matters, and they have been explored elsewhere — e.g. John McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire: Australian aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988.

The prestige of airmen that had attracted so many young men into the air force was sustained in the postwar. The public reception of Guy Gibson's posthumous *Enemy Coast Ahead* (1946) and Paul Brickhill's, *The Dam Busters* (1951) confirmed their status. The *Dam Busters* has since been proclaimed 'Britain's biggest selling war book', and the 1954 film with its stirring 'Dam Busters March' helped retain interest through the decade. But the aircrew of Bomber Command, so admired during the war, so clearly a select group, are not now so well remembered and honoured in Australia as some other ex-servicemen. In 2000 almost no young Australians know of Micky Martin and David Shannon who flew on the dam buster and other raids. We can suggest some reasons for this decline in public knowledge. First, there is no obvious battle site. The men in Bomber Command fought across a vast area of sky — from England to the Baltic ports on the Polish border, south to northern Italy, across to the Bay of Biscay and another 1000 miles back to the bomber fields of eastern England. Some of the old bomber airfields have been developed as museums, such as Elvington in Yorkshire, and there are guide books and conducted tours of airfields, but Waddington, one of the fields most important to Australians, is still a functioning RAF station, and Skellingthorpe has disappeared under a housing estate.⁹⁷ The air

⁹⁷ There are several guides to the war-time airfields, e.g. Patrick Otter, *Lincolnshire Airfields in the Second World War*, Countryside Books, Newbury, 1999 (and others for other counties); and T.N. Hancock, *Bomber County: A History of the Royal Air Force in Lincolnshire*, Lincolnshire Library Service, Lincoln, 1996.

museums at Duxford and Hendon are not specific to Bomber Command or to Australia, and those places, such as Lincoln Cathedral and the Air Forces memorial at Runnymede that both list the names of over 1000 Australians, are little known to Australians without close knowledge of Bomber Command. The scattering of many of the dead of Bomber Command through English and Continental graveyards increases the problem of finding a particular place on which to centre memory.

Secondly, the battles fought by Australians at Singapore, Kokoda and Timor hold a relevance for contemporary Australians attempting to define a relationship with Asia and the Pacific. References to bombing raids on Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Essen and Mannheim evoke no sharp connections between then and now.

Thirdly, the Australians had almost no impact on policy and many were dispersed through RAF squadrons. A common experience for Australians in Bomber Command was to be just two or three among a seven-man crew assembled from across the Commonwealth. When he wrote the official histories John Herington found it difficult to isolate Australian experience from that of Bomber Command in general.

Fourthly, ex-aircrew associations have not been as effective in keeping alive the achievements of their members as have the army unit associations. The battalion associations of a thousand members who trained and fought together through four or five years of war do not have equivalents for many airmen. Most bomber aircrew spent only four or five months in an operating squadron, and if they returned to operations they often served in

another squadron. And while the major Australian bomber squadrons, such as 460, have vigorous associations, many of the Australians in Bomber Command were, of course, serving in British (or other Dominion) squadrons. There are no comprehensive squadron histories of some of the nominally Australian squadrons such as 463, 466 and 467.⁹⁸ It is highly unlikely that an infantry battalion with similar experiences and casualties would be so unacknowledged.

And, finally, it is difficult to praise what the men of Bomber Command did without raising questions about the policy that they were required to carry out. Historians would certainly want to applaud Bomber Command for the destruction of German communications and oil production, and for its support of the D-Day invasion; some would say that the destruction of Hamburg was justified, perhaps also the costly attacks on Berlin; but many would have doubts about the late destruction of towns such as Dresden. Bomber Command made a significant contribution to shortening and winning the war, and the Australians in aircrews had no influence over the selection of targets, but repetition of those two simple facts is not sufficient to establish a clear distinction between the deeds of the men who did the flying and those of the men who wrote and implemented the Directives to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command.

Australian Prime Ministers make speeches and leave wreaths at Bomana and Kokoda and Lae in Papua New Guinea, at Hellfire

⁹⁸ But H.M.Blundell has provided useful material, Blundell 1999.

Pass in Thailand, and at Kranji in Singapore. They visit the battle sites and the cemeteries of Gallipoli and the Western Front. They do not leave wreaths at Runnymede, or Lincoln Minster or Waddington.⁹⁹

In the Australian casualty lists of World War II, two figures stand out: the 8000 who died as prisoners of the Japanese and the 4000 who died in Bomber Command. In 1945 and through into the early 1950s both ex-prisoners and aircrew were accorded national recognition, but by the 1970s both groups had declined in public consciousness. From the early 1980s the ex-prisoners were rediscovered, and Changi, the Burma-Thailand Railway and the Sandakan death march re-entered Australian popular history. The men of Bomber Command have remained in relative decline. They have in part been victims of Australian history serving Australia's present.

Arthur Doubleday's brother Jim, who was four years younger and who had done a technical course in Sydney, followed Arthur into the RAAF, and ended up in England in Coastal Command. Vic Brill, five years younger than Bill, who had trained as a school

⁹⁹ One result of Prime Minister John Howard's visit to London to mark the 100th anniversary of the passing of the Australian Constitution Bill was an agreement to establish a 'proper and fitting memorial' to Australian servicemen and women in England. As a result, the RAAF may have a significant – if shared – memorial (*Canberra Times*, 8 July 2000, p.1). Another recent monument, which includes the RAAF, the Bondi rock which has become the Anzac memorial in Battersea Park, London, is interesting, but unlikely to be well-known to Australian travellers (*Australian*, 6 April 2000, p.5)

teacher, began aircrew training in 1941, qualified as a navigator and went into Bomber Command. Vic and Bill were both flying in 463 Squadron from Waddington in early 1944, but Vic was not in Bill's flight. Vic Brill and Jim Doubleday both survived the war.

When Brill and Doubleday caught that train on Armistice Day 1940 they left behind their identities as farmers and men of the Riverina — and it is probably generally true that service in Bomber Command was more likely to transform careers and identities than service in the army. A loose generalisation is that the army disrupted lives, Bomber Command disrupted and transformed them.

While neither Arthur Doubleday nor Bill Brill was a national hero when they came home in 1945 there were stories about them in the press, and Arthur was offered preselection for two safe seats in Parliament. But when Arthur brought his young English bride back to the farm at Coolamon, there had been prolonged droughts, and the light red soils were on the move. Storms left the house and everything in it veiled in fine dust. Farming and parliament did not seem attractive, and he went into civil aviation, was appointed Regional Director for Queensland in the Department of Civil Aviation, shifted back to New South Wales as Regional Director, and then became Director of the Department of Transport in New South Wales until retiring in 1977. As I write, he is still alive, living in Sydney. Bill Brill came home, and married his fiancée school teacher in the Ganmain Methodist church, and stayed in the RAAF. Group Captain Brill died of a heart attack in 1964 when he was just forty-eight years old. Was the officer who in

1940 said he would not make an officer or a pilot at his funeral? Outside their old comrades from Bomber Command, few Australians now know about Brill and Doubleday, the flying farmers from the Riverina. The train journey on Armistice Day 1940 had taken Brill and Doubleday away from farming and away from the Riverina, the two factors that had been so significant in their identities.

At the end of his second tour of operations Brill was asked to fill out a form. One section required him to comment on outstanding sorties or incidents. Wing Commander Bill Brill DSO DFC and Bar wrote: 'No outstanding incidents'.¹⁰⁰ Bureaucracy and the filling out of forms did not come easily to Bill Brill; the touch of flamboyance and the capacity to fly and to lead are hard to detect on the forms.

¹⁰⁰ RAAF Biographical file, AWM65.