

Squadron Leader JAMES 'JIM' CATANACH, DFC



Squadron Leader James 'Jim' Catanach was executed by the Germans as an escaped POW on March 29, 1944. He was aged 22.

Jim was the youngest son of Mr William Mercer Catanach, Jeweller, (who had attended Brighton Grammar School 1895-1896) and Mrs Ruby Catanach. Jim was at Brighton Grammar School from 1929 until 1931. He then went on to Geelong Grammar School where he had three years in the Cadet Corps. Prior to his enlistment into the RAAF, he was a Salesman.

In January, 1940 at the age of 18 he enlisted in the RAAF. After preliminary training at Somers and Narrandera he was posted to Canada. He became an accomplished pilot gaining his Wings and commission in June 1941. In June 1942 he was promoted to Squadron Leader at the age of 21, the youngest ever. He was with No.455 Squadron when he was shot down over Germany on March 24, 1944. He was captured, and sent to Stalag 111. He was fluent in German and learned Norwegian in the POW camp.

Jim was one of the key figures in the 'Great Escape' from Stalag Luft 111. In all, seventy-five prisoners had escaped. Hitler, in his fury, had sent extra troops to take part in the search and ordered that 50 of those recaptured be executed to set an example. Jim and a fellow escapee had actually reached Berlin, but were caught on the Danish border at Flensburg. Jim was interrogated intensely and a few days later, on March 29, 1944, he was driven to open country outside Kiel and shot through the heart.⁴⁰ He had completed nine operational sorties with the RAF squadron. On three occasions, despite severe damage to his aircraft, he returned to base safely. He had made successful attacks on Hamburg, Essen, Cologne, Lorient and Lubeck. He never lived to receive the DFC he had been awarded.

Cemetery/Memorial: Posen Old Garrison Cemetery, Poland.

40 Gill, S. *The Great Escape: the Full Dramatic Story with Contributions from Survivors and their families*. London: Granada/Media, 2002. p. 162, 204, 224, 250-251.