

Bomber Command

'Aircrew knew – or could know – what the losses were. They were quickly broadcast on the BBC and printed in newspapers. The only losses omitted were those unknown to the enemy – those “operational crashes” that took place in or close to England. In any case, the losses on an operating station were only too obvious to other crews as they waited in hope for friends late to land, and then saw the quick work of the Committee of Adjustment removing the possessions of those “missing as a result of air operations” so the rooms could be occupied quickly by a new crew. Before setting off on a raid experienced crew could make a quick assessment of the key factors – length of the flight, strength of the defences, the weather, the moon, and what had happened on previous raids to that target – and make a fairly accurate guess about how many were “for the chop”. So here was a strange situation where men going into battle could make a fairly accurate assessment of the likely losses.

For the men who did think about the odds they faced, a 3 percent chance of dying on any one raid might seem reasonable. But they had to do this 30 times, and any air man could do the simple calculation that 30 times 3 percent was 90 percent. A 90 percent chance of being among the missing was near enough to a certainty. If the tour was in the tough times of the Battle of Berlin, then the average loss on a raid was more like 4 percent, and 30 times 4 percent was 120 percent. That was no chance. In fact, that simple multiplication does not give the odds of survival. A 3 percent chance repeated 30 times gives a 40 percent of completing a tour, still less than half but a lot better than 90 percent. If the average loss rate was 5 percent, then 21.5 percent would complete a tour. Crews asked to fly a tour faced the probability of death, and all could know this.

The loss rate can be looked at another way. If a squadron was able to put into the air an average of twenty bombers on operating nights, and that was often the case with 460 Squadron, then over five operating nights it had to expect to lose three aircraft. In just three months (December 1943, and January and February 1944) 460 Squadron lost twenty aircraft, equal to its average fighting force. In the entire war 460 Squadron lost 1,083 aircrew. No Australian army battalion in the Second World War had anything like those battle losses, and the fighting force of a battalion is four or five times that of a bomber squadron.

In summary, the Australians who served in Bomber Command were:

- subjected to the most stringent selection and most demanding and dangerous training of any large group of servicemen to leave Australia;
- young compared with the men in other services and with those of equivalent rank;
- equipped with the most advanced technology then available and they used it in ways that were unknown even three years into the war;
- trained in a highly structured sequence of schools where others decided what they did and where they went, but they themselves chose who went into battle with them;
- sent into battle in crews that operated alone, were mutually dependent, and

responsible for decisions that could kill themselves or large numbers of others;

- required to go into action when the odds of survival were known and consistent;
- committed to a tour of thirty operations when the cumulative losses over a tour meant that death was more likely than survival;
- engaged in the longest and most closely contested battles of the Second World War;
- from their training days were often in situations of extreme danger, and all who survived knew many close colleagues who were killed in accidents and air battles;
- shifted sharply between peace and war;
- in closer and more numerous associations with women than any other large group of servicemen in action in the Second World War;
- in units that suffered the greatest battle losses of any Australian units in the Second World War, and whose total losses made up over 20 percent of all Australian battle deaths;
- dispersed widely through RAF training and operating squadrons;
- directed to implement policies subjected to greater scrutiny for their morality and effectiveness than those of any other major Allied force; and
- appropriately remembered in the immediate postwar period, but since then have been given slight official and popular recognition.

The sum of all those points confirms that those in Bomber Command had a different war: it had no precedent and it will not recur. The disjunction lies between the last point and all those that go before it. A nation that asked so much of its citizens should remember them.'

Source: *Chased by the Sun*, Hank Nelson, ABC Books, Sydney, 2002, p 10