

# The Danish connection: eight decades of honouring unknown Aussie airmen



JUSTINE WALPOLE

Judge Peter Tree, the nephew of WWII pilot John Tree, below left; pilot Alan McCormack, below middle; Lancaster pilot Norman Cooper, below right

## EXCLUSIVE

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It's a story untold for 80 years – how Australian airmen who lost their lives fighting the Nazis in the skies over Denmark have been honoured and memorialised by strangers who knew only their names.

Now a determined Australian family is seeking to unite descendants of those brave Allied airmen with the Danish citizens who have kept their memory alive for eight decades.

On Saturday, The Weekend Australian Magazine launches a special feature bringing to life the stories of a group of Australian men from Bomber Command who died in the skies over Denmark, but who have been largely overlooked in the telling of World War II history. The feature, 66 minutes of hell: an untold story of Australia at war, is told through print and online at [www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au) and on The Australian's app.

Using audio, video and animation, The Weekend Australian Magazine looks at the night of January 28-29, 1944, when five Australians were killed in a 66-minute period of intense fighting over the Danish archipelago.

It is a small yet astonishing snapshot of the Australian aviators' courage, steadfastness and smarts in a theatre of war that was one of the most dangerous in Europe. At least 146 Australians are buried in Denmark after being



shot out of the sky in the air war to defeat the Nazis. They are honoured with humble memorials – plaques and rocks and trees on the sides of roads and in fields – which have been maintained by Danish citizens to honour their sacrifice.

The Danes are now planning to build a more formal memorial to the lost men of the Bomber Command, and an Australian family is seeking to find British descendants of the men who flew in one of the downed aircraft.

John Tree was a teenager from Brisbane when he enlisted in the RAAF. He was seconded to the Bomber Command in Britain and killed when his plane, JB 412, was shot down one fateful night. While he was able to don a parachute and leap from the burning Lancaster, he fell into the frozen ocean, and fishermen were unable to find him in the fog.

His nephew, Federal Circuit and Family Court judge Peter Tree, and his niece, US-based Lorette Friden, have visited the Danes to thank them for honour-



ing the memory of their uncle, whose death was so sorely felt his family never mentioned his name.

"The Danes are planning on building a memorial to the flight," Justice Tree said. "The memorial will be to all of those airmen who were shot down that night.

**'It's a great story of connection ... between people (with) a common view of the heroism of the Allied serviceman'**

PETER TREE

"The irony is that the Danes don't have contact with the family members other than myself and my cousin and it seems unfortunate if there's going to be a memorial opened that the family of those who were killed or survived don't have an opportunity to



come along and pay respects."

Three Australian planes went down in a little over an hour that winter's night, although some crew members survived.

The pilot of the second plane, Alan McCormack, a Victorian real estate agent, ended up carrying a hidden silk map of Denmark and other supplies into the Stalag Luft III prisoner-of-war camp, items that went with the 76 prisoners who escaped in what has become famously known as The Great Escape and was made into a film with Steve McQueen.

Everyone on board a third plane, piloted by Perth's Norman Cooper, who first joined the military to play in the band, was killed in a fiery crash. For 30 years, his family in Perth has sent flowers from Australia to be placed on his grave, a task carried out without fail by the Danes.

"I find it hard to believe that for a country with no real connection to these people ... that they've taken them to heart," Justice Tree said. "And they have – these are

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important people to the Danes.

"They've built over the years some really low-key and very respectful memorials to the aircrews and each year they conduct commemorative services there. The irony is that there's no family members of the airmen there and their lives are strangely being celebrated by people who never knew them and have no real blood connection with them.

"That's why I think it would be great if we could find relatives and have them involved. If I didn't know, I can't imagine many other Australians would know.

"And it's a great story of connection ... between people that have a common view of the heroism of the Allied serviceman."

Anyone with information about the whereabouts of families of those on the planes JB 412, HX 294 and HK 537, shot down on January 28-29, 1944, is asked to contact The Australian's European correspondent Jacquelin Magnay, [magnayj@theaustralian.com.au](mailto:magnayj@theaustralian.com.au)