

in a crater of its own, with the fuselage lying on a nearby ridge in two parts. Inside the gun turret they could see a destroyed machine gun and lots of ammunition.

“The tail was lying by itself some distance from the fuselage,” Hans recalled. “It was filled with thin strips of tinfoil. We knew they were used to jam German radar. There was no trace of the crew.” Hans said he was later told the airmen had bailed out with their parachutes, but from a height that was too low, and none of the seven crew had survived. The rumour was untrue. While navigator John Martin and flight engineer Thomas McCash from Glasgow (who had only joined the crew that month) had indeed been killed on landing, four others – wireless operator Bill Livesey, bomb aimer Ronald Pilgrim, pilot Willy Simpson and rear gunner John Fell – survived.

The Australian flight sergeant, John Tree, was missing.

**An 18-year-old sheet-metal worker from Mitchelton in Brisbane when World War II broke out, Tree had signed up as a reservist in 1941, and a year later officially joined the RAAF. After several months’ training in Australia, he boarded a ship to Canada then made his way to the UK in April 1943, where he served on attachment to the Royal Air Force.**

Like many aviators from across the empire, he was assigned to Bomber Command, the bomber force put together by British military leaders who were desperate to avoid the bloodshed seen in the trenches of the Great War just two decades earlier. Tree’s diary, carefully preserved by his niece Lorelle Friden, records his movements and his observations.

He was posted to Wyton RAF base as part of 83 Squadron, and assigned to the Lancaster heavy bomber with the serial number JB412 and the call sign B for Baker. The six other men of his crew would become his best mates. He wrote home shortly after receiving his assignment, enthusiastically describing them as a “great mob of chaps”.

*They are all Englishmen and all sergeants, he wrote to his parents, Rachel and Arthur, back home in Brisbane. I have had a few trips with them on the plane and have great confidence with them all, especially the pilot who is a redhead and talks with a real Lancashire accent. The officer who gave him the test said he looked as rough as a diamond but was as firm as a rock and would*



**Honoured:** memorial stones in Denmark for foreign airmen

## The German pilots fought like they had nothing to lose

*make a very good pilot. Their names are [Willy] Simpson the pilot with a mop of uncombed red hair always sticking out from under his hat. Ron Pilgrim who is tall and dark and is classed as a very good bomb aimer. John Martin the Navigator who is always running late but always manages to get the correct course to get us back home. Bill Livesey the Wireless Operator is a little chap with a partly bald head of fair hair and a funny little giggle, we call him Willie the Wop. Then there is Cliff Reid, the Rear Gunner who is 19 and he is the one from Wales. (Reid’s usual spot would be taken by John Fell on the flight that was shot down over Denmark). So now you have it all and they really are a great mob. Of course I am the Mid Upper Gunner.*

On days off, Tree went to the pictures, or to see the sights, visiting Windsor Castle and Ascot races, where he marvelled at the Eton College boys in their top hats.

It was a strange life, with his days off spent wondering when the next mission would come, and if he would make it home for breakfast of bacon and eggs. This was a real treat in heavily-rationed England, and well-earned by the men

fighting in the most dangerous theatre of World War II – the skies above Europe.

British prime minister Winston Churchill had earlier halted the bombing campaign on Berlin for several months due to the unacceptably high number of Allied planes that were being lost. But the development of a Mark III version of the radar system known as H2S or “Home Sweet Home”, which enabled German targets to be identified at night and in all weathers, made the prime minister think again. Tree’s plane, Lancaster JB412, was one of only six test planes that had this advanced radar.

Tree’s diary shows a matter-of-fact approach to the dangers of his job. “Tonight we raided Leipzig got hit with flak over target then got shot up by night fighter over coast,” he wrote after a particularly difficult mission on October 20, 1943. “Made crash landing at Newmarket with one wheel flat, no flaps, bomb doors open, no brakes. 3 engines.”

No brakes, no worries.

Airmen in Bomber Command were required to fly 30 missions but Pathfinders – elite aviators who had the unenviable job of leading the way and marking the target with flares – were required to fly 45 missions, significantly upping their chances of becoming a casualty of war. Those who weren’t killed on raids often died in accidents, or were taken prisoner of war. The Imperial War Museum in London says only 24 per cent of those in Bomber Command were unharmed by the end of the war.

The Pathfinders attracted significant heat from Nachtjagdgeschwader 3 – the group of German night fighters based close to the German-Danish border. The night fighters considered these missions *Himmelfahrtskommando* or “a trip to heaven” and fought like they had nothing to lose.

The Pathfinders were led by the brilliant Air Vice Marshal Don Bennett, an Australian from Toowoomba, who is rated by some as the country’s most unheralded war-time leader.

John Tree was a Pathfinder.

**At 2.26am, six minutes after Tree’s plane was hit from behind by the Junkers piloted by Gerhard Raht, a nearby plane from 463 Squadron RAAF – a Lancaster with the serial number HK537 – was also in trouble. West Australian Norman Percival Cooper, an experienced pilot, had already turned the plane around and was heading back to base with engine problems.**