

The two other Aussies on board Lancaster HK537 were Perth man Lewis Havelock Christmass, 26, the bomb aimer – a most important job given the 4000-pound (1800kg) blockbuster bomb they were carrying – and George Jeffreys Kerr, a school teacher from Springvale in Victoria, who was the navigator. A Canadian and three Brits rounded out the seven-man crew.

All on board were killed when a plane broke up above them and they were hit. They crashed in a huge ball of fire in a pig farmer's fields on the Danish island of Als. Eyewitness Sigurd Sørensen, now 86, described how the windows of the family farmhouse were blown out from the pressure of the explosion as HK537 came down. "My heart was pounding," he told *The Weekend Australian Magazine*.

Sørensen's parents would later bury a body they found in the field, a young man's whose mortal remains were overlooked when the Germans came by to gather up the dead.

His father engraved a propeller with the words: "An English airman here rests with honour far from his home and his loved ones. 29 January 1944." His mother Kate planted a tree over the grave to give it shade, but German supporters heard of the family's Allied sympathies and poisoned the tree. It appeared to die, until a few months later, when three small saplings emerged, undefeated, from the trunk.

"We didn't know who he was, although a dog tag had been found in the wreckage [in the name of] Francis C.W Bull and so that's what we referred to him as," Sørensen said.

After the war the family organised a proper burial with a priest for the airman, but a year later English officials exhumed the body and buried it with the rest of the crew in the military section of the local cemetery in Aabranaa.

"My father was never convinced that the airman was Bull because the dog tag wasn't on him," Sørensen recalled. "It was just in the field along with all the bits and pieces of the plane. We thought everyone on the plane were Englishers. Only later we learned there were Australians." The identity of the airman was never fully confirmed.

Every Saturday, Sørensen and his family undertake a small ritual in the field where the airman died. They hold a short service and lay fresh flowers near the propeller.

They are still finding bits of wreckage 80 years on. He pulled out a bag filled with mangled metal. "This is from the last year," he said.



**Heroic:** the crew of Halifax HK294 (pilot Alan McCormack on the far left, Jack Tylor third from the left)

## "We were hit in the belly while the bomb doors were open"

**Unlike the Lancasters JB412 and HK537, the Halifax bomber with the serial number HK294, piloted by young Queensland real estate agent Alan McCormack, reached its target in Berlin. It dropped its bomb load: two 1000-pounders and two 500-pound bombs, as well as some cluster bombs. But disaster struck in German skies as the plane turned for home and was hit by flak from below. "We were hit in the belly while the bomb doors were open," McCormack later recounted.**

At 3.26am, the Halifax went down. Six of the plane's crew survived – the sole casualty was a natural sportsman and experienced swimmer named Jack Tylor, from Katanning in Western Australia, who would die after landing in water.

McCormack became a prisoner of war in the Stalag Luft III camp in Sagan, where his senior rank ensured he quickly met Roger Bushell, the architect of the Great Escape plans, made famous by the Steve McQueen film of the same name. The prisoners, all airmen, dug three tunnels in porous sandy soils, going down more than eight metres before making headway under the prison perimeter more than 100m

away in an effort to get 200 men out. The plans were well advanced when McCormack came into the camp in early February 1944. He said he joined the escape committee but didn't take part because he hadn't contributed to the extent others had for many months. However, McCormack's secretly hidden supplies – a silk map, two button compasses and a comb with hidden needles – did make it out of the camp with one of the 76 who escaped. Nearly all were rounded up in the following weeks in a massive manhunt, and 50 would be brutally executed on the orders of a furious Hitler.

McCormack would survive through months of the perilous death marches, and was liberated after the war ended in 1945. He would end up back in Australia flying VIPs through atomic tests at Maralinga.

**In the days after Lancaster JB412 went down,** a cable was sent to John Tree's parents, Arthur and Rachel, advising them the plane had failed to return from a mission and their son was officially missing.

Wireless officer Bill Livesey landed safely on