

message word for word as we received it Ann I think it will be better that way.

“Here it is: *The RAF & Dominions Missing Research & Enquiry Service have discovered that the body of F/S [Flight Sergeant John] Tree was washed ashore on the 19th of June 1944, near Ballebro Lighthouse, Avnbol, and was buried on the 22nd of June 1944, in grave no. 23 in the Cemetery at Aabenraa, Denmark.*”

She then added: “Well, Ann, there is nothing I can say about that statement. We can only pray for you all. I can’t write any more now Ann, so Goodnight and God Bless You All.”

It was a crushing blow for Arthur and Rachel, and the three surviving children – oldest sister Annie, younger sister Hazel, and Arthur.

“Up until then the family had kept hope above hope that with no body, he might still be alive,” said Tree’s nephew, Federal Circuit and Family Court Judge Peter Tree. “But that came crashing down when the body came up and the Red Cross figured out who it was.”

Justice Tree’s father was Arthur, the youngest son, who wasn’t even in his teens when his beloved brother John was killed.

“It’s all pretty grim,” Justice Tree tells *The Weekend Australian Magazine* of his uncle’s final minutes. “As I understand it, he exited the plane successfully, parachuted successfully, but had the bad luck to fall into the North Sea.

“Middle of winter ... the reality is he wouldn’t have lasted more than 10 or 15 minutes before hypothermia would have killed him.

“It must have been foggy I assume and the Danes that were pro-Allied would have been worried about their own safety if they’re looking for and finding Allied airmen.”

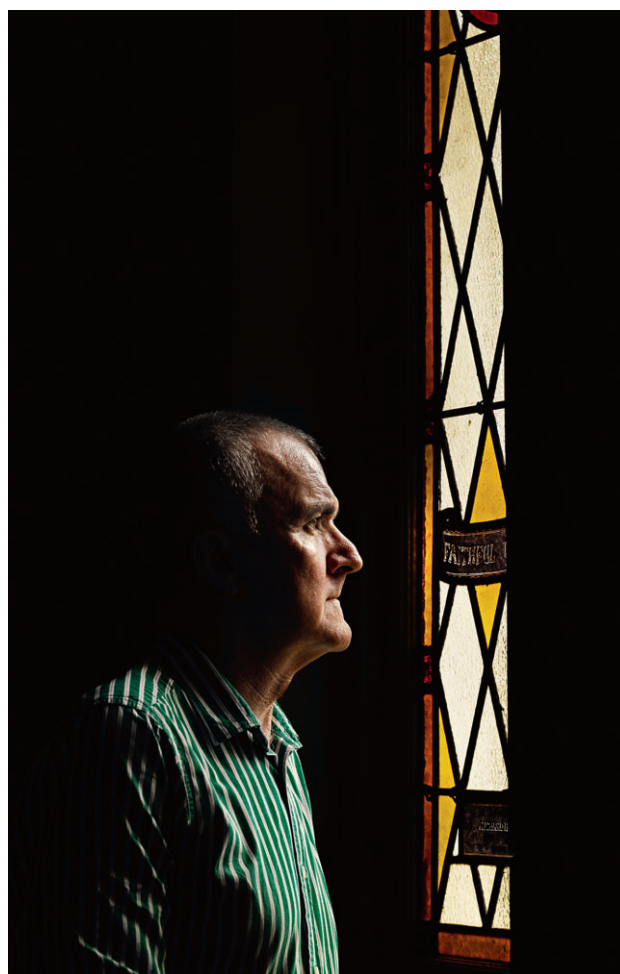
John Tree landed in the sea off the Danish island of Als. His niece Lorelle Friden travelled to Denmark from her home in the US decades later, and spoke to Danes who remembered fishermen saying they’d heard someone calling out for help into the foggy darkness.

“But they couldn’t find him, they couldn’t get a direction towards his voice,” Justice Tree said.

Alone in the darkness, he died.

In June 1944, Tree’s body washed up ashore near the Ballebro lighthouse. The Red Cross and Australian and British war offices had continued to make inquiries about him. The Danes collected his body, and buried him in a local cemetery.

Devastated to learn of their son’s death, Arthur and Rachel placed the photograph of



“I don’t think the family ever dealt with his death in a healthy way”



Legacy: Justice Peter Tree; above right, Lorelle Friden; John Tree with his mother Rachel

John in his RAAF uniform, his forage cap sporting the white flash insert which indicated he was a volunteer in training, above the kitchen table in their dining room.

“It’s difficult to actually explain the full impact on his family. I would put it as catastrophic,” Justice Tree explains. “I don’t think they ever really dealt with it in a healthy way. I never had a conversation with my father about his dead brother, and I think that’s because my father couldn’t bring himself to speak about it.”

The family donated some lights to the church on the hill close to their home where the Trees had worshipped for generations, St Matthews Anglican Church at Grovely. The Art Deco-style pendant lights hang to this day in front of the roll of honour – which includes John Tree’s namesake uncle, John Robert Tree, who’d given his life in the Great War years earlier.

In 2018, reading the eulogy at his father Arthur’s funeral, Justice Tree referenced a letter written by Arthur in response to a book detailing John Tree’s life, written by the unofficial family historian, Lorelle Friden.

“It brought a lot of memories back, and to be honest, I spent most of the morning crying,” Arthur wrote. “As a child I think my grief was overlooked. Adults had important grief but what was mine? Actually, I was already plotting my revenge but the war ended, and there were no enemies left.”

John Tree was the silent guest at every family gathering, looking on from that sepia-toned photograph on the wall of his parents’ Queensland home, so deeply mourned his name was never uttered aloud.

Today, 80 years after Tree’s death, the role that Australians played in Bomber Command