

in World War II remains largely overlooked compared with the fame and glory attached to other military campaigns – although a major new exhibition at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra in 2025 will go some way to redressing that imbalance. Around 4100 Australians were killed serving in Bomber Command in World War II; the War Memorial notes that more than one in three members of the RAAF who served in Bomber Command were killed.

While Bomber Command's more lauded exploits include the "bouncing bomb" Dam-busters raid of May 1943, the force's participation in the devastating attack on the city of Dresden in February 1945 cast a stain on its reputation. A memorial was not erected until 2005 in Canberra, while in London, it took until 2012 for authorities to build a dedicated monument to their sacrifice.

Of more than 400 Allied planes shot down over Denmark, 82 were crewed in part by Australians. A total of 146 known Australian servicemen lie in Danish cemeteries, their legacy kept alive by Danes who never forgot their sacrifice.

The people of Denmark, neutral in the war but occupied by Germany, have since the 1940s honoured the sacrifice of the foreign airmen who fell onto their islands and farms, and will mark the 80 years since their deaths with a permanent memorial and a commemoration.

Danish historian Anders Baadsgaard Straarup says local villagers had formed many small associations to erect and look after 74 memorial stones across the country. "One day normal people take care of their daily lives and suddenly an aircraft comes down and they have the war on their doorstep," he says. "They had to do something, they could do that in a number of ways, [which included ensuring that the airmen] had a decent funeral... another was to remember them."

"We have our history, the crews of these bombers are also part of this history."

In Denmark, officials have arranged a commemoration service on January 29 at the memorial stone for Lancaster HK537, as the loss of so many Allied lives still resonates deeply. Later in the year the community is planning to unveil a sculpture representing the airmen who crashed throughout all of the war, and to host an exhibition with all relatives – as well as Denmark's newly crowned Australia-



Veteran: Bill Purdy with a 1944 photo of himself

## "Pack up your stuff, write the last letter – and that was that"

lian-born Queen Mary – invited. Lorelle Friden and Justice Peter Tree are now trying to find the families of those who flew with their uncle, and introduce them to the Danes who have honoured his memory for eight decades.

Says Justice Tree: "They have very much taken the flight crews to heart because they were a physical manifestation of defiance to the Germans. I actually find it hard to believe that for a country that had no real connection to these people – other than they got shot down over their country – they've taken them to heart. And they have, these are 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 of course 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. It would be great if we could get a family representative of each of the crew members at the opening of the memorial."

**Bill Purdy was a pilot with 463 Squadron RAAF, operating out of RAF base Waddington in Lincolnshire, one of the 10,000 Australians**

who served in Bomber Command. Now 100 years young and spending his time golfing and playing bowls in suburban Sydney, he vividly recalled that the worst times of each mission were when the aircraft were still on the ground, shortly before they took to the skies and headed out over Denmark into German territory.

"The hardest part always was when you found out in the morning that you were going to operate that night. Then you went out and tested your aircraft and made sure everything was working," he recalled.

"Then you had a briefing round about dusk and then you found out where you were going.

"And that couple of hours between finding out where you were operating that night and getting into the aircraft was about the hardest I could ever remember.

"You went back to your room and packed everything up so that it wouldn't be too much trouble to send it back to Mum.

"Write the last letter and that was that."

British Bomber Command veteran Dick Raymond's last thought was always the same, as he lifted his boot off the tarmac and onto the ladder into his plane. *Would it be the last time he set foot on English soil?*

"On every operation I had that very thought as I got in the plane," 99-year-old Raymond, a Pathfinder flight engineer, recalled to *The Weekend Australian Magazine* from his home in North Wales. "All I can say to anyone who asks what it was like, I can only tell you that you had to be there."

John Tree, too, packed his belongings before he climbed for the last time into his usual place inside the Lancaster's mid upper gunner turret on what would be his 28th and final sortie.

His personal items, including a few letters and postcards, would eventually be sent home in a box to his family in Brisbane. Lorelle Friden and Peter Tree have carefully stored his belongings, and his other letters home.

On December 24, 1943, their uncle wrote to his family in Brisbane.

"Well here it is, Christmas Eve once again, or as I work it out, it has just turned Christmas Day in Australia," he wrote.

"So to let you see I haven't forgotten you all, I will say a merry Christmas to everyone at home and a very happy new year. I'm sure we will be together again by next Christmas.

"Lots of love and kisses, John." ●