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BOOK REVIEW

Four years to remember with RAF Bomber Command: memories of an Australian pilot during WWII

by Flight Lieutenant George M Burcher, DFC, DFM (Ret'd)

Privately published by Beverlie and Michael Burcher: Nelson Bay, New South Wales; 2009;

222 pp.; ISBN 798 0 646 46898 3; RRP \$30.00 (paperback)²;

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This is the autobiography of a young man who volunteered for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) during World War II, completed pilot training and travelled to Britain to fly eventually with the Royal Air Force's (RAF) No. 10 Squadron, Bomber Command, on operations over Europe.

George Burcher grew up in Sydney. At the war's outbreak, he was a clerk in the New South Wales Public Service. Although volunteering almost immediately, he was not called up for RAAF service until November 1941. Starting at Bradfield Park, he began a journey which would lead him to Narromine in western New South Wales, then via the Panama Canal to Yorkton in Canada, and eventually to Melbourne in Yorkshire, where he flew with Bomber Command. After the war he became an architect in Sydney, waiting until the new millennium before recording his story.

The book, with a foreword by retired RAAF Air Marshal Errol McCormack, AO, differs in several ways from others in the genre recently published. Firstly, Burcher did not fly Lancasters but Halifaxes, or 'Halibags' as those crews flying them affectionately nicknamed that bomber. This affection was unusual, as the Mark II Halifax became notorious in Bomber Command for having, in certain conditions of wind and weather, a vicious (and for its crews frequently lethal) rudder stall. So much so that it had its own ironic song, sung to the tune of "As Time Goes By" and beginning "The Halifax Two will be the death of you, on that you can rely ...". Burcher flew the Mark II for most of his 8-month operational tour, changing towards the end to the improved Mark III in which the problem was largely corrected.

Secondly, Burcher began his tour of operations during the Battle for Berlin, fought from September 1943 to March 1944. This period was, from the perspective of losses versus numbers flying, the most lethal for aircrews of the entire four-year strategic bombing campaign and Burcher's squadron lost 37 aircraft and crews in that period. With a squadron complement of just 20, that amounted to almost 200 per cent casualties. Of the 29 graduating members of Burcher's Yorkton course, all of whom went to the United Kingdom, only a handful survived the war.

This attrition was caused by the worst winter of the century over Europe and the increasing deployment by the

German Luftwaffe of the deadly *shräge Muzic* weapon. This armament enabled German night fighter pilots to take advantage of a known blind spot to rise beneath a bomber and fire into its wing tanks, setting them ablaze with catastrophic consequence. Halifaxes also suffered from being assigned the lower levels of the bomber stream, where they received more than usual attention from flak and night fighters, while on occasions being hit by bombs dropped by the higher flying Lancasters.

Yet, at war's end, this incredible sacrifice by Bomber Command went virtually unrecognized. Senior British politicians distanced themselves from the bombing campaign, the Command's chief was snubbed in post-war honours, and, to this day, no campaign medal has been authorized to recognize the nearly 80,000 casualties suffered by Bomber Command, 55,000 of them deaths. This opprobrium led men like Burcher to remain silent about their wartime experiences until sufficient distance from the air war occurred and a more honest historical assessment of it could take place.

George Burcher was twice decorated during his tour for feats of flying involving bringing his crippled aircraft home. Honours and awards were a controversial subject in Bomber Command. Australians considered RAF squadron hierarchies too parsimonious with them, while the RAF considered Australian squadrons as being too liberal. For Burcher to have received two in one tour, and in a RAF squadron at that, is a fair indication that both were really earned.

Having completed his first tour, Burcher was posted for instructional duty to No. 27 Operational Training Unit (OTU), near Lichfield in Staffordshire. After serving both there and at No. 21 OTU, he expected to return to operations over Europe, only to be told he was being repatriated. After returning to Australia, he saw the Pacific war out flying Liberators.

By today's standards, the author's writing style is a little fulsome, but he pays close attention to accuracy and detail and uses footnotes well to elucidate and cross-reference facts. Appendices describe the operational experiences of three colleagues, which contrasted to his own. George Burcher died in 2007, having brought the book to the point of publication. It was subsequently privately published by his widow and son.

This book is an authentic, honest, amusing and occasionally harrowing account by a man who flew skilfully and was lucky to have survived. Involving Halifax operations, it will be of much interest to aviation buffs and those researching the strategic bombing campaign over Europe during World War II. It is a jolly good read.

Tony Mumford

¹The annual Bomber Command commemoration will be held at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, on 4-5 June 2011 – for details, phone Annette Guterres (02) 9743 5794.

²This book may be purchased direct from the late author's family – e-mail: bandgbur@nelsonbay.com