

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *High in the sunlight silence: the story of fifty trainee pilots, RAAF Narromine NSW, December 1941*

by Commander Tony Vine RANR

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This is a different style of book. It is the story of 50 young men who came together at No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School at Narromine, New South Wales, in December 1941 to undergo pilot training. Narromine was one of many such flying schools around Australia. While many trainees were aspiring fighter pilots, most were destined to join the killing machine of Royal Air Force Bomber Command in the bloody night skies over Europe.

The majority of the graduates formed part of the Empire Air Training Scheme that was fed by Australians, Canadians and South Africans who had graduated from their own training schools. They completed their final training in Canada on multi-engine aircraft before commencing operational conversions onto aircraft such as Wellington, Lancaster and Halifax bombers in the United Kingdom. For the reader unfamiliar with the flying training activities in World War II, there is a very good explanation of the Empire Air Training Scheme, its history and the need for such a scheme for nations that found themselves unprepared for the war that confronted them.

Tony Vine's uncle, Bill Gunning, was one of those young men who marched into Narromine in December 1941. Bill and his crew were killed on the night of 14 July 1943 when a German *Bf-110* night fighter shot down their Wellington bomber over Aachen.

This book is Tony's tribute to his uncle and to those men who trained at Narromine on No. 20 Pilots' Course. Tony's research has been meticulous, citing family backgrounds from which the Royal Australian Air Force drew their trainees, their successes or otherwise within the training machine, and their subsequent employment on operations. The families of each member are not only identified, but their military commitments are footnoted and serve to reinforce the enormous impact that World War II had on Australian families.

There is certainly an element of repetition as each man's enlistment and training details are recalled. While this could have been avoided, it enables the reader to pick up the book and read any of the 50 stories and receive a complete understanding of the individual's experiences and ordeals. It is, indeed, a tribute to each of the men who trained together at Narromine. The reader will quickly come to realise this and perhaps read past this detail. I certainly did not think that it detracted from the quality of the book and the stories quickly move on to the individual's experiences on operations.

While it is not the sort of book that one can read from front to back, it would also appeal to the casual reader. I found myself thinking that, after reading many of the stories, I had had enough; however, I also found myself returning to the book to read the next story – and the next.

Eighteen of the 50 young men who embarked on No. 20 Pilots' Course were subsequently killed-in-action or in flying accidents. The highest attrition rate was in Bomber Command, which claimed 17 of the casualties.

The stories are touching and told with dignity, although the wilder exploits of many young men are not overlooked. There are men such as Frank Morris, who flew Lancaster bombers on No. 460 Squadron. He survived the war and was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross; however, the Squadron lost 760 personnel, including 284 Australians. Harry Caswell, a grazier from Brewarrina, who failed pilot training but went on to become a bomb aimer, was killed over France when a night fighter shot down his aircraft. Buzz Benson, who sank two U-boats and was awarded a Distinguished Flying Medal, subsequently became a prisoner-of-war. Several flew with distinction in other theatres of war in the South-West Pacific and in India and Burma. All served proudly and with dedication and some with sacrifice.

After reading each of these stories, I felt a strong pride in these our fellow Australians, but I also had a feeling of sadness and loss.

The author, Commander Tony Vine, is a private pilot. He has had a lifelong love of aviation and is a keen student of naval and military history. He enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy in 1971 as a 15-year-old engine-room artificer apprentice. Over the next four decades, he served in a range of ships and submarines, including four of the six Australian *Oberon*-class submarines. He transferred to the Royal Australian Naval Reserve in 2010 after 39 years' service. His attention to detail and painstaking research, combined with his knowledge of the Services, has produced a very credible and an out-of-the-ordinary book.

*High in the Sunlit Silence* is an interesting and rewarding read. It is a remarkable tribute to a small group of ordinary Australians confronted by extraordinary challenges in dangerous skies and in turn is more widely a tribute to all Australian airmen who flew and fought in World War II.

**Bob Treloar**