

Relentless skies: The most efficient Airman (1910 - 1942)

by Ian Campbell

Leschenault Press, Western Australia; 2024; 370 pp.; ISBN 978-1-923-0-20450 (soft cover); RRP \$34.95



Don Bennett is best known as Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett CB, CBE, DSO, FRAeS, Commander of RAF (Royal Air Force) Bomber Command Path Finder Force. Previous books tend to concentrate on his command of the Path Finder Force, only briefly addressing his early life and his exploits as an aviation pioneer flying air routes across the world. In *Relentless Skies (Volume 1)*, Ian Campbell presents an in-depth consideration of Don Bennett, the man. He refers to him as 'Don', not 'Bennett' to focus on the man behind the activities and achievements. Nevertheless, the book centres on Don's aviation life, not his life as a whole.

The author, Ian Campbell, has had a lifelong interest in military history. He has a Bachelor of Arts in History from the Australian National University and is the Curator of the Bennett Archive at the Queensland Air Museum. His first book, *Thinks He's a Bird*, about Australian Path Finder and Lancaster pilot was released in 2022.

Don was born in Toowoomba, Queensland, on 14 September 1910, the youngest of four brothers who successfully pursued careers in medicine and law; however, Don fell short and was characterised as 'somewhat of a loafer' and after leaving school, worked as a jackaroo on the family property for a short while. Developing a mechanical interest in motor vehicles, he helped a neighbour in Brisbane rebuild a Maurice Farman biplane. This, along with accounts of early aviation pioneering exploits sparked his interest in flying.

He joined the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) in 1930 when just 19 years of age. There was a paucity of places for pilots in the Air Force, and a condition of his enlistment was that he agree to a short service commission in the RAF on gaining his wings. He topped flying during pilot training at Point Cook and was only one of two to graduate with a 'Pass with Special Distinction'. He had discovered a career that strongly motivated him and the author's description of the notes made by Don while on course reveal an intensity and drive for knowledge that was to be a focus for the rest of his life.

Initially posted to a fighter squadron in the RAF, Don quickly tired of the routine and looking for a new challenge, turned to flying boats. It was here that he discovered the challenges of navigation, long range flight and the demands of landing on the sea. The four years in the RAF proved to be a stepping stone for Don where he excelled at flying a variety of aircraft while qualifying for the first-class navigator's licence, the wireless operator's licence, three different ground engineer licences, a commercial pilot licence, and a flying instructor's certificate.

Finding the Air Force environment restrictive, he

entered the civil world as it appeared to be more innovative and offered greater challenges. Joining Imperial Airways provided Don with the opportunity to hone his navigation skills. He set several long-distance records across the Atlantic Ocean, from Scotland to South Africa by flying established air routes in a single hop, where previous flights made refuelling stops along the way in a period that was arguably the golden age of civil aviation. His skills as a navigator and his detailed mechanical knowledge of aircraft systems were fundamental to his success.

In the early stages of World War II, Don played an important role establishing the organisation to ferry aircraft manufactured in the United States to war-torn United Kingdom. His leadership and technical skills ensured the success of the operation under almost impossible flying conditions and in a challenging political environment. The operation became Atlantic Ferry Command, a lifesaving umbilical line for the British war effort.

He rejoined the RAF in late 1941, and after a brief period was appointed to command a medium bomber squadron. During this time, he observed the shortfalls of a bombing campaign that was failing, in part, due to inadequate navigation training for aircrews. In April 1942, he was shot down while leading his squadron on a bombing raid against the German battleship *Tirpitz* in a Norwegian fjord. Volume 1 ends with his escape and return to England.

Don was a brilliant navigator and outstanding pilot, but a restless and impatient person with no tolerance for red-tape or bureaucracy. Always striving to find better ways to accomplish tasks, he was difficult to work for and would not countenance contrary opinions. That said, he was an outstanding leader and while he may not have been loved, he would be respected.

With access to the Bennett archive, Ian Campbell has completed extensive research on Don Bennett, providing a detailed account of the man and his early achievements. There are comprehensive and informative end-notes, detailed separate indexes for people, places, Air Force, aircraft and a general section, along with an extensive bibliography and chronology of Don's achievements.

This is the story of an Australian who was one of the world's greatest aviators, and examines his character, his relationships and his approach to leadership. A thoroughly enjoyable read and highly recommended to those with an interest in aviation history. Volume 2 will review Don's career as Commander of the Path Finder Force and his aviation life after the war.

Bob Treloar