

## Rex Arthur Glasson by Tyla Peters



Pilot Officer Rex Arthur Glasson in his dress uniform

Over numerous conflicts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many South Australian service men and women have made remarkable sacrifices for their country. Rex Arthur Glasson made the ultimate sacrifice for the love of his country. Rex Arthur Glasson was born in Kadina on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1919 and died on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1944, aged 25 years, in the sea off the coast of Belgium after participating in a bombing raid on Frankfurt. Rex was a Pilot Officer in the RAF (Royal Air Force) and a member of the 166 squadron. He was stationed at RAF base Kirmington, which is now Humberside Airport. Rex was an officer with the RAAF but transferred to the RAF in order to contribute more directly to the wartime air effort. He undertook additional pilot training to become command qualified as a Lancaster Bomber pilot.

Rex Arthur Glasson enlisted in the <sup>1</sup>Royal Australian Air Force on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1942 and was a member of the No 166 Squadron (Royal Air Force). His service number was 417300 and his final rank was Pilot Officer. Rex enlisted for service in the RAAF 2 years into World War Two and flew in bombing campaigns of key German cities designed to disrupt the war effort of the enemy. Rex was killed during active service on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1944 in waters off the coast of Belgium.

Rex Arthur Glasson was born in Kadina, a rural town in South Australia, but he grew up in Peterhead, a suburb in Adelaide South Australia. His parents were Arthur John Glasson and Olive Helena Glasson and he had a younger sister Verna Glasson (my great grandmother). Rex attended Primary school at LeFevre Primary School and then a High School in the Semaphore area. Rex always had an interest in technology and his first job was as a <sup>2</sup>projectionist at the Semaphore Odeon working for SA Theatres Ltd. Whilst working he studied to become a pilot and eventually secured a job with a commercial airline in South Australia. Rex joined the RAAF Reserve just before he married Yvonne Collins on <sup>3</sup>3<sup>rd</sup> November 1941. On 24<sup>th</sup> March 1942 Rex enlisted in the RAAF and departed to join the war efforts in England via ship in March 1943. Rex's young wife Yvonne was pregnant with their first child when he left for Europe. Yvonne gave birth to their son, Jeffrey, whilst Rex was serving with the RAF and consequently Rex never had the opportunity to meet his son.



Rex and Yvonne Glasson

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aircrewremembered.com/RAAFEuropeanDatabase/?q=glasson>

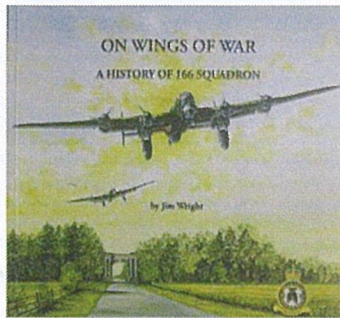
<sup>2</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/result?q=rex+glasson>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/131970424?searchTerm=rex%20glasson%20yvonne%20collins&searchLimits=>



Rex Arthur Glasson took part in World War 2, 1939-1945, as a Lancaster bomber pilot for 166 squadron based in Kermington (now Humberside Airport). There were 14 squadrons and 166 was the largest with a strength of 38 Lancasters. <sup>4</sup>The squadron took part in 1000 bombing raids over the heavily defended cities of Berlin, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Frankfurt and many other German targets within a three-month period. The purpose of the bombing missions into Germany was to destroy German infrastructure, military establishments and war equipment. Strategic bombing involved employing bombers to strike directly at key industrial, economic

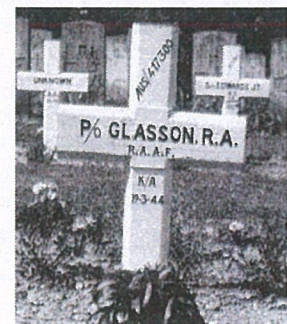


The Lancaster Bomber  
flown by Rex

or political targets within an enemy's country which may affect its capacity to wage war, rather than attacking their armed forces. The concept was first developed by the Germans during the First World War and Britain responded by creating the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a strategic bombing service. During the Second World War Britain did not unleash its bombers for fear of provoking German attacks on British cities until 1940 as defeat in Europe loomed. Strategic bombing by Britain then continued without respite for the rest of the war. The Lancaster bombers were large, long-range aircraft designed to carry high bomb loads. This made

them relatively slow and therefore vulnerable to enemy fighter planes and ground-based anti-aircraft guns which meant that the British bombed by night. The attacks were designed to destroy the German war economy and also the spirit of the German people hoping to undermine the Nazi Government. <sup>5</sup>The strategic bombing raids cost the Allies approximately 100,000 aircrew, including the life of Rex Arthur Glasson, and up to one million German fatalities. After training and preparing for deployment, the average life expectancy of aircrew was very short at about <sup>6</sup>6 weeks given the high risks entailed in their missions. This statistic was well understood and accepted by the crew, demonstrating the extreme level of bravery and sacrifice involved in this theatre of war.

On the night of 18 March 1944 Rex's Squadron was tasked with a raid on Frankfurt involving 846 aircraft. 25 aircraft were detailed from Kirmington and the rest from many other squadrons. <sup>7</sup>21 aircraft attacked the primary target and two bombed last resort targets owing to instrument failures. One aircraft abandoned the mission due to engine failure and one aircraft was missing of which Rex Arthur Glasson, co-pilot, was aboard. The Lancaster ND705 took off from RAF Kirmington at 1910 hours on the night of 18 March 1944, detailed to bomb Frankfurt, Germany. Nothing was heard from the aircraft after take off and it failed to return to base. <sup>8</sup>From the figure of 846, 22 aircraft were lost including the one from Kirmington, Lancaster ND705 AS (F). Rex's aircraft came down in the sea, no location shown on records, and six of the eight crew members bodies were found. Rex's body was the first to be found washed ashore on the Belgium coast. Rex is buried in the Military cemetery in Coxyde in Flemish, Belgium, Plot IV Row N Grave 10 with the inscription "Resting".



Rex's resting place

<sup>4</sup> Maureen Emson, letter to Verna Adams, 5/11/97 (sourced from Trevor Adams family member)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84668>

<sup>6</sup> Maureen Emson, letter to Verna Adams, 5/11/97 (sourced from Trevor Adams family member)

<sup>7</sup> Public Record Office Air 27/1089 page no 2

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Emson, letter to Verna Adams, 5/11/97 (sourced from Trevor Adams family member)



What caused Rex's aircraft to find its final resting place in the sea is not known. One theory is that the aircraft was shot down by a Messerschmitt bf 109, before eventually crashing into the sea along the Belgium/French coast.<sup>9</sup> A Messerschmitt bf 109 is a German World War Two fighter aircraft that was the backbone of the Luftwaffe's fighter force. The other theory is that the aircraft crashed into the sea due to a mechanical malfunction. No matter what the cause, it was a tragic end to such a young life. Rex had so much to look forward to with a young wife who loved him dearly and a newborn son destined to grow up never knowing his father other than through stories from family.

Lest we forget Pilot Officer Rex Arthur Glasson.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/9-iconic-aircraft-from-the-battle-of-britain>



The essence of the ANZAC spirit can be encapsulated in four words; courage, perseverance, mateship and resourcefulness. Courage is the ability to do something that frightens one, perseverance is persistence in doing something despite difficulty in achieving success, mateship is companionship or friendship especially between individuals and resourcefulness is the ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties. These qualities were in abundance in Australian service men and women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were clearly evident in the remarkable sacrifices made. Rex Arthur Glasson was but one of many who made the ultimate sacrifice for his country under conditions hard to imagine today.



The emblem of 166 Squadron

Rex showed true courage to enlist for war to defend his country whilst leaving behind a young wife who was pregnant with their first child. Rex signed up for the RAAF knowing the dire circumstances and was motivated to fight against the Nazi regime and was committed to a greater cause, service to his country. Being newly married and having a child on the way Rex had everything to lose. Rex managed to stay positive throughout the whole experience evidenced by the last letter he wrote to his mother, father and sister saying at the end <sup>10</sup>“don’t worry and keep smiling”. Rex tried to reassure his family that everything would be fine to quell the anxiety that families left behind struggled with.

Rex showed true courage as he signed up as a Pilot Officer flying a 16,740kg Lancaster aircraft in the skies over war-torn Germany. The Lancaster was a slow heavy plane which was an easy target for the German fighter planes that were much smaller and faster. Being a bomber pilot was one of the most dangerous roles in World War 2 with <sup>11</sup> only 24% surviving the war unscathed and a death rate of 63%.

Nowhere in the theatre of war would mateship and trust be more important than among the aircrew in the confined space of a Lancaster Bomber. The bombing missions were long and arduous and the environmental conditions tough. With a bomb-laden aircraft, with no friendly fighter protection for most of the journey, and with the prospect of persistent enemy attack from hostile fighters and ground-based anti-aircraft fire, the stress on the aircrew would have been extreme. Every crew member had an important role to perform and each depended on the others for survival. The stress would have been even more real because of the poor survival rates of aircrew and a realisation that even if successful this mission would surely not be the last.



A portrait of Rex sketched by a ‘mate’ from squadron 166

<sup>10</sup> Rex Arthur Glasson, letter to mum, dad and Verna, 8/3/43 (sourced from Trevor Adams family member)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/life-and-death-in-bomber-command>



Copies of original  
sources.

At Sea

Nov. 8/3/43

Dear Mom, Dad & Tom,

Well we're on our way at last although as far as I was concerned it was by no means "without regrets." This business of getting around & seeing the world is O.K. for the single chaps but I must confess that I won't at all keen on leaving Yvonne, especially in her present condition. I hope you'll sort of keep an eye on her for me. But anyway I guess it's ~~the~~ no good growling, the sooner this business is over the better & the next time I come home at least it will be for good.

— "I'm beginning to get my 'sea legs'." I haven't had any inclination to be sea sick yet, but several other chaps have.

The sea has been comparatively smooth so far so I don't know how I'll fare when we strike heavier seas. Yvonne sent me a parcel of books to read on the way over, but unfortunately they didn't arrive



before we left, so I don't know when they  
got them now. There is quite a good concern  
aboard and every thing is pretty cheap - no duties.

Two 9. packets of tobacco are only 8<sup>cts</sup>. Cigarettes are 20 for 6<sup>cts</sup>  
and we can buy many boxes by the dozen boxes. We can  
also get all the tropical fruit & biscuits we want,  
which is just as well because the marks have been  
brought to date.

Well, about \_\_\_\_\_

it sure is an

eye opener after a quiet old spot like Adelaide. That  
would be in his glory those just standing back & watching  
the people - there seems to be millions there although  
that would probably be an exaggeration. I suppose  
there would be about as many people in the streets in  
at about 1 or 2 p.m. as you'd see in Adelaide

on a Friday night at the height of the shopping period.

The way they pack the tams would make you, too,  
you very rarely get a seat, and they pack just as many  
on as can possibly get a grip with their coats & umbrellas  
five riders around two deep on the outside & steps  
with my toes on the steps & just hanging on to a rail



or windows. Now can even ride on the bumper business  
around the back of museum doesn't beat you to it.  
There are a hell of a lot of theatres in  
London, we went to the Regent one night & saw  
"But Above in My Favorite Blonde", there is an orchestra  
in orchestra during interval & before the show. The orchestra  
is on a moving stage which comes up like an elevator  
when the show finishes.  
Theatres are plentiful in the suburbs too, and we  
went to a suburban theatre the night before we left.  
I went to a "Grand of Harmonie" the ~~same~~ night  
and the ~~same~~ district but her way was simply  
beautiful. The houses were all different designs and  
the gardens were marvelous. The plants were made with  
trees and there were gardens along the footpaths outside  
the houses. It was up a down hill all the time  
for ( ) and this seemed to improve  
it all the more. It certainly has the edge on  
anything I've seen in suburbs. Of course there are  
other suburbs not so good & some I'll consider inferior  
even to Bowdon, but the latter class ones are



(4)

really something. When it's all sorted down though you can give me oblaids any time, and I'll be damned glad to get back to it.

It's a pity you didn't give me Phyllis's address, I might have had an opportunity to look her up. However I've put my name down for some arrangements they have for providing us with addresses of private people at different places we call etc.

We've lost on our last payday (Friday) we were paid in other currency & only received

There is a concert on board tonight to provide us with some amusements. The boys hadn't been aboard long before the sailors were initiating them into the secrets of "brown & scholar" a game which seems to be designed to make one rich at the expense of many. Well I guess that's all for now, you should get this letter reasonably soon, but I expect it will be some time, perhaps months before you receive another so don't worry & keep smiling,

Love  
W. S. Cotton  
Ret.



5/11/97

Cheshire  
England

Dear Verna,

Thank you for your reply. The photo is perfect - a good looking lad. The letter from Belgium was interesting, confirming our findings that the crew were returning to base bombs discharged, because Rex was unmarked.

He was with No1 Group Bomber Command in which there were 14 Squadrons and 166 was the largest with a strength of 38 Lancasters. The base was RAF Kirmington which is now Humberside Airport, but the village with Church and Pub is still there. The district is now South Humberside. I mention this just in case you may want to look at a map of England to place it. The crew took part in 1000 bomber raids over the main heavily defended cities of Berlin, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Frankfurt and many other German targets all within a three month period. We have learned that the average aircrew in 1944 after training lasted only six weeks and they knew it too. The youth of today would not do it!. Rex had been training with other crews also, he had qualified as Pilot Officer and because of his ascending rank was with this crew on this occasion for experience only in the capacity of Flight Commander being 2nd Pilot to the Squadron Leader.

On the night of 18/19 March 1944 the Squadron was tasked with a raid on Frankfurt involving 846 aircraft. 25 aircraft were detailed from Kirmington and the rest from many other squadrons. From the figure of 846, 22 aircraft were lost including just one from Kirmington, Lancaster ND705 AS (F). The aircraft came down in the sea, no location shown on records, and six of the eight crew (two remain missing) were washed ashore at varying points along the Belgian/French coast. The Pilot and his bomb aimer are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial ( for airmen who have no known graves.)

Rex was the first to be found and as you know is buried in the beautiful Military Cemetery in Coxyde (Koksijde) in Flemish, which is how it would read on a Belgian map, beside four of his comrades. Flying Officer Donald Hawken is buried in Dunkirk having been washed ashore in France. I can assure you that their graves are tended with loving care by a young Belgian man as Head Gardener and we are told in Belgium, schoolchildren are encouraged to adopt a grave in the Military cemeteries and they place flowers regularly whilst in school groups. It really is a lovely place and when we next visit hopefully in the new year we will photograph Rex's grave or video it for you.

A book has recently been written called 'On Wings Of War' which is a history of 166 Squadron by Jim Wright who was a squadron leader with 166 at that time, and I have copied the page where Rex is mentioned. There is a Squadron Association and my husband Roy and I are associate members. On the 6th September last we went to our first reunion and dinner at Kirmington where we met many of your brothers contemporaries. There was a couple there from Queenscliffe, who wanted to help with our research but I managed to find you myself! I traced also a nephew of John King in Sale, Victoria but as yet I have had no reply but I now suspect I sent the letter with an incomplete address. I will try again.

It is a great pity that your parents did not know anything of Rex's life and death in England but it was just the same for people here, there was not enough information available then. As yet I have not been able to discover anything about the Pilot. It may well be that he was an only son and if that is the case I will be very unhappy. I will write again as my pool of information grows, meanwhile, any questions? Just ask.

*Yours sincerely*

*Maureen Emson (Mrs)*