



John Anthony Howard Wilkinson

417547

The World War II story of my Great Uncle and it's continuing legacy.

Sadie Schultz

23/3/1924-28/7/1944

Part A

Pre-war life



Fig. 1 John (left) and his siblings when he was roughly 10 years old. 1934, Meegan Family Records.

On the 23rd of March 1924, John Anthony Howard Wilkinson was born, the son of Peter Howard Wilkinson and Eileen Teresa Wilkinson in Adelaide, South Australia. He lived with his six siblings in Dulwich, South Australia. He was the oldest son, living without a father after his parents separated when he was about eight. He carried a lot of responsibilities that came with being the ‘man of the house’ during the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was said to be a quiet but great leader, having more gravitas and natural leadership than the average person. These great qualities didn’t stop him from

having fun with his younger brothers and terrorizing the neighbourhood with all their antics. He completed his schooling at Sacred Heart College, Adelaide before working as at the Elder’s

Trustee and Executor Company. It was in 1942 that he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force.

During War



At 16, John had been part of the air cadets¹, so when he enlisted at age 18 and two months, he enthusiastically joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in Adelaide on the 23rd of May 1942 knowing he would become a pilot due to prior training and his strong determination and confidence in his own abilities. Later, two of his brothers would also enlist into the air force. He successfully completed his flying course on the 5th of March in 1943, passing as a sergeant pilot.



Fig. 2 A picture of John upon enlistment. 1942, National Archives.

After completing three months of training in Australia, John embarked on a journey to the UK on the 3rd of June 1943. John could successfully fly multiple types of aircraft including the Tiger Moth, Wackett Trainer, Anson, Oxford, Lancaster and Wellington. Initially, he was posted to the 51st Base on the 12th of February 1944, but he saw active service in the 463 Squadron in Waddington, UK on the 8th of June 1944. Within the 51st Base he worked in conversion in Group 5. Initially he entered into the 463 Squadron as a Pilot on the 17th of January 1944, he was then

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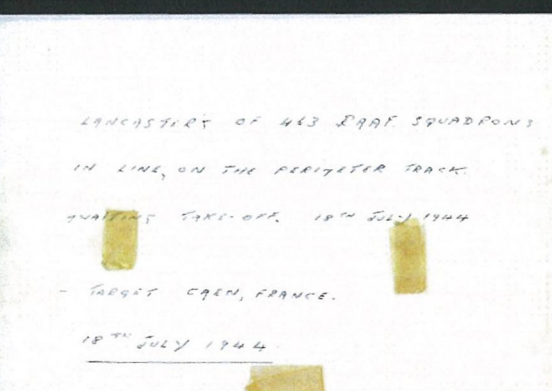


Fig. 6 Lancaster’s of the 463 Squadron awaiting take-off, John would be within this image due to records showing he flew on this date (Fig. 7). International Bomber Command, Roy Chadwick 1944.

¹ (Wilkinson, 2021)

promoted to Acting Flying Officer on the 26th of June 1944 and then was promoted again on the 17th of July as Flying Officer.

John was granted 5 days of special leave whilst in the 51st Base from the 12th – 16th of March 1944, and 9 days of leave while in the 463 Squadron from the 26th of June to the 4th of July 1944 both of these being noted as leaves of privilege. The 463 squadron saw the highest death rate of any Australian squadron within the Second World War, one in two airmen within his squadron died.

18. DAY.	LANC. I. ME. 615.	F/O. WILKINSON, SGT. STARLING, W/O. GELDER, P/S. FISCHER, P/S. REECE, P/S. HARRISON, P/S. ACRES.	BOMBING - CAEN.	04.08	07.23	Sortie completed. No cloud. Good vert. vis. Yellow 1/1 overshoot as ordered. 9, 100ft. 07.42hrs. 11x1000SAP, USA. 4x500GP, BRIT. Good concentration of bombing within the prescribed area. No scatter.
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Fig. 7 Unit Diaries showing that he would have been in one of the Lancaster's shown above (Fig. 6). Australian War Memorial.

Circumstances of death

John had completed fourteen missions successfully but, unfortunately on his fifteenth he was shot down and killed. On the night of the 28th of July 1944, his was one of nineteen Lancaster Bomber's that took part in an attack on Stuttgart, Germany at 10:24pm carrying 1x2000lb bomb and 12x500 'J' Clusters.² After successfully bombing Stuttgart, the plane was shot down by a night fighter whilst flying home over Rohrbach les-Bitche, France, an area of thick forest of Kusterwald near Montbronn and near Germany, and considered occupied France. All seven members of the plane were killed instantly upon impact.



Fig. 3 John standing in his uniform at his mother's house before leaving for duty. 1942-1943 Meegan Family Records.

28/29th July, 1944. RAID ON STUTTGART Nineteen aircraft took part in an attack on Stuttgart. An Me.109 was shot down over the target by Ays. 423226 F/O. K.P. Brady and crew and an Me. 210 is claimed as probably ~~HANAGED~~ destroyed by Aus. 423259 F/O. F.E. Rush and crew. It was seen to roll on to its back and disappear through the clouds. One aircraft failed to return. The missing crew were : - Aus. 417547 F/O. J.A.H. Wilkinson, Sgt. Starling, E.W., Aus. 409401 W/O. N.F. Gelder, Aus. 417826 F/Sgt. Fischer, F.E., Aus. 427106 F/Sgt. Reece, B., Aus. 432668 F/Sgt. Harrison, M.W., and F/Lt. Moorhead, B.C.

Fig. 5 Unit Diary from the 28/29th of July, John was in the aircraft that failed to return. Australian War Memorial.

28/29.	LANC. I. ME. 615.	F/O. WILKINSON, <i>flaw</i> SGT. STARLING, W/O. GELDER, <i>flaw</i> P/S. FISCHER, <i>flaw</i> P/S. REECE, <i>flaw</i> P/S. HARRISON, <i>flaw</i> P/S. ACRES,	BOMBING - STUTTGART.	22.24	-	Aircraft missing. No messages or signals received.
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Fig. 4 Unit Diary from the 28/29th of July, showing the intention, bombing Stuttgart, and that no messages or signals were received from the aircraft upon take-off. Australian War Memorial.

² Storr Alan, "RAAF PERSONNEL SERVING on ATTACHMENT in ROYAL AIR FORCE SQUADRON" (Canberra: Kwik Copy, 2006)
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A year after the war had ended, a note written to confirm the death of all seven crew members as well as the location of the crash site arrived in the letter box of his mother in Dulwich as well as a note written in John's distinguishable handwriting stating, 'John Anthony Howard Wilkinson, Skipper, 417547'³.



Fig. 8 Image of the crash site showing how the imprint of the wings fill up with water over winter. Bob Wilkinson (2013).

would expect from such a place. Upon searching the bodies, Joseph reached into the pocket of John's uniform and found the hand-written note containing his information, without removing any member's official tags so as not to draw suspicion from the Investigation Squad. To this day, the site of the crash fills up with water every winter, and the indentation of the wings, four motors and upper half of the plane's body can be seen, showing that the plane hit the ground vertically. The German Investigation Squad took most parts of the wreckage and all seven bodies were buried in the Choley War Cemetery, France in graves 7-13⁴.

On the night that John's plane was shot down a young couple, Monsieur Joseph Grebil and Madame Irene Grebil, saw his plane come down whilst living in the nearby town of Montbronn and bravely, Grebil decided then and there that he would investigate the downed plane, before the German Investigation Squad could. He travelled to the crash site before dawn, and at risk to his own safety, on his bike and found the wreck in dense forest. Due to the placement of Montbronn and previous history, Germany considered this part of France to be German-owned territory. Therefore, those that lived in the town owed service to Germany, and due to Joseph's age, he would have been expected to enlist and therefore risked his livelihood and family's life by searching the crash site. When he arrived at the crash site, he was met with the horror that you

WILKINSON, Flying Offr. JOHN ANTHONY HOWARD, 417547. R.A.A.F. 29th July, 1944. Age 20. Son of Peter Howard Wilkinson and Eileen Teresa Wilkinson, of Dulwich, South Australia. 1A. B. Coll. grave 7-13.

Fig. 9 Commonwealth War Graves registration. Commonwealth War Graves (1944).

The letter that John's mother received was through the Red Cross in Geneva as the German invasion of France subsided and 6 months after the war had ended and had been sent by Joseph and Irene. Joseph and Irene kept the hand-written note for that year hoping that it would one day make it to the family it concerned. Through language barriers and though it proved quite difficult, both families were able to connect and after the war had ended John's mother was able to send parcels of food packages to them as Europe was affected by famine, solidifying a strong relationship between the families. Eventually John's youngest brother was able to meet the Grebil family in France, and as he knocked on the door to a family who had no idea that he was coming he said, "My brother died near here" and was answered with "Come in, you're one of the family"⁵, which shows the amount of respect that the Grebils had for John and his brother and the extent to which they were grateful that John had died fighting for France's freedom.

³ (Wilkinson, 2021)

⁴ (Commonwealth War Graves, 2021)

⁵ (Wilkinson, 2021)

Anzac Spirit

By enlisting at the age of 18 years and 3 months and participation Air Cadets from age 16 prior to that, John showed his eager attitude and Anzac Spirit in uncertain times. Throughout John's year of training, that he had completed prior becoming a pilot, he showed leadership. From a young age he was in charge of the seven crew members, this shows his maturity, commitment and perseverance as it wouldn't have been easy. He would have had to make some tough decisions within his group affecting his crewmates. The way that the crew members of each plane were selected shows the strong sense of mateship shared between all those who were involved.

The right amount of Bomb Aimers, Navigators, Mid Upper Gunners, Rear Gunners, Wireless Operator Air Gunners, Flight Engineers and Pilots were all put in the same room and told to organise themselves into crew of the planes⁶. The trust put into those selections and working with each other was a surprising show of Anzac Spirit.

As a pilot, John accepted a lot of responsibilities and pressure that came with the high-intensity job. This included working in unfavourable conditions and being forced to persevere for his life and the lives of the six other members he was responsible for. The Anzac Spirit shown of Joseph Grebil is also to be commended, as without his act of bravery, John's family would not have received the closure that helped them recover and understand John's death in action.



Fig. 10 John's six siblings and mother holding images of John after learning of his death. Meegan Family Records (approximately 1945).



Fig. 11 Monument put up in memory of the Lancaster ME-615 crew. Fabrice Loubette (2011)

A memorial for all seven members aboard the Lancaster ME615 has been erected in 2011 close to the crash site and, translated into English it means; 'in tribute to the crew of a Lancaster bomber of the 463rd Squadron shot down on the night of July 28, 1944 John Wilkinson-Pilot, Frank Fisher-Bombardier, Norman Gelder-Navigator, Mervyn Harrison-Gunner, Bernard Reece-Radio, Ernest Starling-Mechanic, Brian Moorehead-Gunner'⁷.

On the grave, 'Dead for Our Freedom' is inscribed, this phrase shows the Anzac Spirit of persevering at all costs and being willing to sacrifice it all for those who you are fighting for.

Part A-Total of 1405 words

⁶ (Wilkinson, 2021)

⁷ (Highgate RSL, 2019)

Part B

I began my research on John by searching his name in the Virtual War Memorial, which then directed me to his service records, where I found some key information such as his squadron, date of death and key information about his qualifications and movements throughout the war. A compilation of RAAF personnel serving on attachment to the RAF meant that I was able to search the serial number of his plane and find immense detail about the mission that was being carried out on the night he was shot down, included the number and mass of bombs that had been dropped on the city of Stuttgart. After looking through his record and searching through available records on the Australian War Memorial website about the 463 Squadron, I was able to find images as well as details about the type of work his squadron was doing. I found that the work he was completing was predominantly bombings. I then searched operations records to find his name and missions he had been on previously, which led me to find specific details about the mission he had been carrying out on the night of his death. I searched the Nominal Record and Commonwealth War Graves to find additional information about his grave and possible honours received. Through the Highgate RSL, I was able to find the seven names of the crewmembers that John had been flying with on the night of his death. Searching the name of his plane as well as the serial number led me to a database which I could then find the specific place that his plane landed.

I was able to find detail about the relationship my family has with the Grebil's as a result of my conversations with relatives and an article that had been written, which had specific details about the nature in which the two families had met up. After my interview with his brother, I was able to add detail to his life before the war as well as his experience in France, where he had been the first person in my family to contact the Grebil's in France as he described the experience of meeting the family as well as visiting the crash site and memorial. The personal stories added through his brother made his story feel very real and no longer as distant as it had been previously. After having a conversation with my family, I decided that it would be important to interview his youngest brother, who had only been ten the last time that he saw his brother. I knew that he would be able to give me personal insights and help me to understand John's character and early life and that he would help make John's story feel more personal.

Part B- Total of 461 words

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