

2021 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize



Sergeant Fredrick Michael Spafford
(16 June 1918- 16 September 1943)

By Ellie Humphrey – Saint Peter's Girls' School

Fredrick Michael Spafford

Part A: Using a range of sources, research the experience of a South Australian service man or woman who served (Navy, Army, Air Force, Nursing, or other service duties) during World War 1 and/or World War 2.



Figure 1: Studio portrait of 407380 Pilot Officer (PO) Frederick Michael Spafford. 1940, Photograph, Australian War Memorial, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/UK0154>>.

Fredrick Michael Spafford (figure 1), a proud South Australian man, served as an air gunner and later air bomber throughout World War II. Spafford was involved in many major operations, most significantly, the bombing of the Moehne, Eder and Scorpe dams in Germany. His remarkable service throughout the war led him to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross, a testament to the determination and courage he showed during his service.

Born on 16 June 1918 in North Adelaide, Fredrick was the only child of James Michael Burke and Vida Muriel, who both passed away during his childhood. In 1929, Frederick was adopted by his maternal grandfather Frederick Blaker Spafford who gave him his surname. Prior to the war, Spafford worked as a fitter. On 14

September 1940, a year into the war, Spafford went to the No.5 Recruitment Centre in Adelaide where he enlisted as an air gunner.¹

After his enlistment, Spafford trained in wireless at Ballarat, where he first learnt how to use gunnery and navigation tools. He then trained at Evans Head Bombing and Gunnery School in New South Wales, one of the best training centres offered by the R.A.A.F. Under the Empire Air Training Scheme, Spafford was then sent to England to begin his work as a sergeant air gunner.²



Figure 3: No.50 Squadron (RAF) 1940, Photograph, Virtual War Memorial, <<https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/979>>.

After completing his training in August 1941, Spafford was sent to No.5 bombing group, R.A.F, in the East Midlands where he was part of several different units. In May 1942, he was moved to No.50 Squadron, R.A.F. As a specialist bomber-aimer, he flew in Manchesters and Lancasters.³The Lancaster bomber had four engines and became one of the principal weapons in Britain's air offensive against Germany at night. Spafford

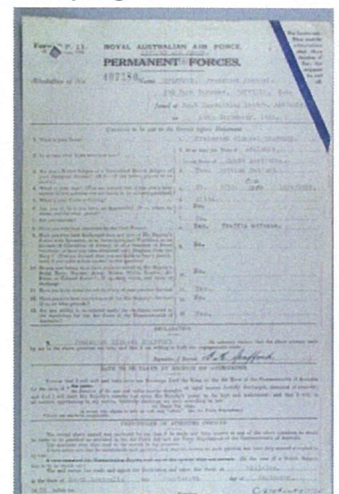


Figure 2: Spafford's enlistment papers 1940, Records, National Archives of Australia, <<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=5240928>>.

¹ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

² (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

³ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

was recognised as a “fine example to all the other air bombers” on 20 October 1942 with a Distinguished Flying Medal. An excerpt from a DFM citation talks of Spafford’s “keenness, efficiency and enthusiasm” during his early war experiences.⁴ This military decoration is awarded to personnel who displayed “exceptional valour, courage or devotion” whilst flying in active operations.⁵



Figure 4: *Bouncing Bomb*, Photograph, Imperial War Museum Duxford, <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30021787>>.

After having survived a tour of thirty operations, Spafford was expecting a respite from combat. Instead, he received an invitation to join the elite and secretive squadron No.617. The British Air Ministry had discovered that Germany relied heavily on water provided by 3 major sources, the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams. By destroying these dams, Britain realised that they would be able to severely damage Germany’s supply system. Sir Barnes Wallis, an English inventor and engineer, invented a new type of ‘bouncing bomb’ (shown in figure 4) which was designed to bounce over defensive torpedo nets to explode against the wall of the dam. This was a completely experimental design, and it took several attempts to perfect the bomb. Right

up to the moment the bombs were released over Germany, no one was completely sure of the bombs ability to break a dam wall. Nevertheless, they devised a team of 133 men who formed 19 crews of 7.⁶ These men were recommended as some of the most elite flyers from all throughout the Commonwealth. None of them were aware of what the mission was until the same day the task was to be performed. For weeks, they undertook training where they were taught to fly at 30 metres or lower over enemy territory. As a bomb-aimer for the squadron, Spafford was trained to target the bomb with extreme precision to make sure that the bomb would meet the dam wall at the right depth and speed.

“The flight engineer was watching the speed. The bomb aimer, using his wooden bomb sight, was directing the pilot ‘left, left’ or ‘right, right’ to line it up with the target. So, the pilot was being controlled by the three other members of the crew. It was a close-knit team effort.”
- Sergeant George Johnson⁷

On the night of 16 May, Spafford, and the team of 19 Lancasters attacked the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams. Spafford flew with the Wing Commander Guy Gibson, who regarded him as “the best bomb-aimer there is.” As shown in figure 5, Spafford was Gibson’s ‘right hand man’ who he deemed as an incredibly



Figure 5: 5 members of the crew led by Commander Guy Gibson; from left to right: Guy Gibson, Fredrick Michael Spafford, Robert Hutchinson, George Deering and Harlo Taerum 1943, Photograph, <<https://dambustersblog.com/2013/04/12/dambuster-of-the-day-no-5-frederick-spafford/>>.

⁴ (Highgate rsl, n.d.)

⁵ (Forces War Records, n.d.)

⁶ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

⁷ (Arthur, 2018)

determined bomb-aimer. The bombs had to be released at night, 18 metres above the water, at a set speed, line, and distance from the wall of the targeted dam; it took an enormous amount of skill and bravery by the crew.⁸ The flight had to be so low that one plane hit the sea, and another flew straight into high voltage electricity cables.⁹ Although there were numerous casualties, the operation was a great success.

In James Holland's novel, 'Dam Busters: The Race to Smash the Dams' he claims that it was "an extraordinary achievement" and that the affects were "absolutely enormous." The Mohne and Eder dams were successfully breached, causing a giant flood in the local area. Every bridge within 30 miles of the Mohne dam was destroyed, in addition to 12 war production factories, thousands of acres of farmland and buildings 40 miles from the dams.¹⁰ Although it is hard to tell how much this operation shortened the war, Germany faced months of strife as a result. The courage of Spafford, Gibson, and the rest of Squadron 617 is a breathtaking example of the limitless possibilities of a crew who works together towards a similar goal.

In acknowledgement of their skill and courage many members of Squadron 617 were awarded at a ceremony held in Buckingham Palace. Most significantly, Wing Commander Guy Gibson was awarded the Victoria Cross for his service. In addition, Spafford received the Distinguished Flying Cross. This prestigious medal has been awarded throughout history to officers for "an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty whilst flying in active operations against the enemy."¹¹

Despite the casualties in the dam raid, No. 617 Squadron remained operating for similar tasks. On 15 September 1943, the squadron was sent to attack the Dortmund-Ems Canal, using similar techniques as before. However, the night was foggy, so the crew had poor visibility. Whilst flying over Holland, the planes were struck by an alert defence where 5 of the 8 aircraft were shot down. Spafford's plane caught on fire, fell from a height of about 200 feet and crashed at Altdorf, Germany; there were no survivors.¹² Figure 6 shows the casualty notification sent after the aircraft did not return to base. Spafford died on September 16, 1943, aged 25 in Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany.¹³

CASUALTY NOTIFICATION FOR "P" FILE	
NAME:	407390 P/O. P.H. SPAFFORD (DFM, DFC) ATT RAB-UK
NATURE OF CASUALTY:	Pres. dead by Air Min. waf. date shown. (P/S)
CASUALTY REPORT NO:	141/44
DATE:	16.9.43
(PD. 19/1944)	

Figure 6: *Presumed dead Casualty Notification* 1943, Records, National Archives of Australia, viewed 16 May 2021, <<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=5240928>>.

⁸ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

⁹ (BBC News, 2013)

¹⁰ (BBC News, 2013)

¹¹ (Forces War Records, n.d.)

¹² (Highgate rsl, n.d.)

¹³ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)



Figure 7: South Australian Dam Busters memorial 2012, Memorial, State Library of South Australia, viewed 16 May 2021, <<https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/B+72935>>.

Fredrick Michael Spafford has been buried at Reichswald Forest War Cemetery, Germany, among 7594 Commonwealth soldiers. His grave is Collective Grave 16, Row B, Grave 13-16. There is also a memorial for Spafford and the two other South Australian airmen who participated in the dam busters raid (shown in figure 7), Squadron Leader David Shannon, and Flight Lieutenant Robert Hay. It is on the Pathway of Honour, running along the northern boundary of Government House.¹⁴ This memorial commemorates the “bravery and heroism” of these South Australian men who fought so far from home. Spafford is also commemorated at the Australian War Memorial wall of honour and the Adelaide World War II wall of remembrance.¹⁵

The legend of ANZAC is a story told throughout generations. Born in the trenches of Gallipoli where ANZAC soldiers spent eight months fighting with no progress, the spirit has shone through every battle fought by an Australian or New Zealand servicemen. To possess the

ANZAC spirit means to be determined, strong willed, passionate, kind, and brave in the face of danger.

Fredrick Michael Spafford had the ANZAC spirit flowing through his veins. Prior to the War he was a fitter from the small city of Adelaide; he died as a hero to the Commonwealth. Among his crewmates he displayed great comradeship all throughout the vigorous training in preparation for the operation. He was a focused and determined member of the crew, making him the best bomb aimer in the whole squadron. His station commander repeatedly spoke of his “keenness”, “efficiency”, “enthusiasm” and “determination” which “materially assisted in the successful conclusion of their [his] task.”¹⁶ Furthermore, his crewmates spoke of his “nonchalance in the face of danger.”¹⁷ Spafford never retired from service. He died fighting for the Commonwealth. True to the ANZAC spirit, it didn’t matter how far away from home the battle was, Spafford fought with determination, courage, and valour.

Spafford has been rewarded for his skill with a Distinguished Flying Medal and Distinguished Flying Cross, but he was worth so much more than his skill as a bomb aimer. He was a supportive comrade, enthusiastic participant, and an inspiring role model for so many of his crew mates. Spafford was not born a talented bomb aimer... he was born Australian. It was and always will be the ANZAC spirit which separates ANZAC soldiers from the rest.

Word count: 1474

¹⁴ (Australian War Memorial, n.d.)

¹⁵ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

¹⁶ (Highgate rsl, n.d.)

¹⁷ (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

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Part B: How did you gather the evidence about your individual in order to tell their story? In your response, explain the process you undertook when researching your individual.

To gather information about Fredrick Michael Spafford, I began by looking on the Virtual War Memorial of Australia. This secondary source was a key tool I used to find the individual I wanted to research as it provided information about a large collection of soldiers who fought in as an ANZAC. As my interest rests primarily in the actions of the Air Force, I confined my research to members of the Air Force from South Australia during World War II.

After reading about many inspirational servicemen, I decided to tell the story of Spafford as it was an incredible story which had been left untold. The Virtual War Memorial is a useful source as it gathers evidence from many other trustworthy sources including the Australian War Memorial, the State Library of South Australia, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Under Spafford's archives, there were several links to a range of primary and secondary sources. This helped broaden my research as it provided trustworthy information to form the foundations of my investigation.

From there, I used other sources to understand the exact details of his story. To properly understand the high technicality of his work, I looked deeply into the work of Squadron 617. As one of the most experimental operations in World War II, the dams raid has several articles and research papers written about it. This helped provide a clearer image of the training and incredible success of the operation. As Squadron 617 included elite members from all throughout the Commonwealth, the War records of the United Kingdom and the Royal Air Force Museum of the United Kingdom were both useful and relevant sources.

I also accessed a range of primary sources which helped me understand Spafford's personal experiences during World War II. The Virtual War Memorial provided a link to Spafford's records from the National Archives of Australia. I used his records to support information provided by secondary sources about his enlistment and the incidents which led to his death. The Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) also provided official quotes from Spafford's team and supervisors. This helped me understand Spafford's relationships with his crew and the attributes he possessed which were admired by his team.

Spafford's experiences were also captured in many images which were crucial so that I could tell his story. The image of Spafford's crew from Squadron 617 illustrated him as Wing Commander Guy Gibson's 'right hand man.' Gibson's personal relationship with Spafford showed Spafford as a man of high honour within the squadron who was well respected by his crew.

Thus, I used a range of primary and secondary sources to tell the story of Fredrick Michael Spafford. With the Virtual War Memorial providing the foundations of my understanding, I deepened my research through other secondary sources, archived records, images, and quotes from his crewmates all talking of the high skill and great determination showed by Spafford throughout his service.

Word Count: 488