

WAR SERVICE RECORD – BRUCE ALLAN CAMPBELL BEER (15 Dec 1941 – 29 Jan 1946)

Allan hardly shared his wartime experiences with his family. This is therefore only a cursory account and is based on his surviving papers and letters and my research of his few war service records held in Canberra. In August 2002, I met Hugh Boardman, Allan's flight engineer while they were stationed at Winthorpe and Waddington, who provided a little additional information.

1. Army

Allan joined Western Command Signals (Army number W19057) in July 1941 as a 20-year-old. He was called up for war service on 15 December 1941, reporting to Western Command Signals, No. 5 Camp at Melville, WA. He was based with 3 Aust. Corp. Sigs. Training Centre between April 1942 and October 1942.

2. RAAF

In June 1942, Allan applied to join the RAAF. Based on test results, he was placed on a waiting list to be called up for training as an air crewman. In the intervening period he was enrolled in the Air Force Reserve as an Aircraftman Class 2 (AC2). As a reservist, he appears to have been offered a position in the RAAF as a driver in motor transport. It is uncertain if he took up this option or remained in the army. His formal date of enlistment was 13 October 1942. Allan's RAAF service number was 427984.

3. Air Crew training in Australia

| UNIT | LOCALITY | DATES | AIRCRAFT |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 4 RD | Busselton | 13/10/42 – 7/11/42 | |
| 4 SFTS | Geraldton | 8/11/42 – 1/1/43 | |
| 5 ITS | Clontarf | 3/1/43 – 9/4/43 | |
| He commenced pilot training April 10, 1943. | | | |
| 9 EFTS | Cunderdin | 9/4/43 – 29/5/43 | DH82A (Tiger Moth- single engine) |
| Allan flew solo on 22 April. He started night flying training May 10. | | | |
| 4 SFTS | Geraldton | 7/6/43 – 24/9/43 | Avro Anson (duel prop) |
| He flew solo in the Anson 13 June. On completion of training Allan was assessed as an average plus pilot and was awarded the Flying Badge and promoted to Sergeant (Temporary). | | | |
| 5 ED | Subiaco | 24/9/43 – ? | |
| 1 ED | Ascot Vale (NSW) | 20/10/43 – 26/10/43 | |
| 2 ED | Bradfield Bark (NSW) | 26/10/43 – 3/11/43 | |
| The last two localities were embarkation depots. Allan embarked for the UK from Sydney, 4 November 1943, travelling to the UK via the Pacific and USA. He disembarked in the UK 10 December 1943. | | | |

4. Training (at RAF bases)

| UNIT | LOCALITY | DATES | AIRCRAFT |
|----------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 11 PDRC | | 11/12/43 – 18/2/44 | |
| 3 EFTS | Shellingford | 18/2/44 – 8/3/44 | DH82A (refresher course) |
| 6 AFU | Windrush | 12/5/44 – 12/6/44 | Oxford |
| 1516 | Pershore | 14/6/44 – 18/6/44 | Oxford |
| 6 AFU | Windrush | 22/5/44 – 21/7/44 | Oxford |
| 29 OTU | Bitteswell | 10/8/44 – 16/9/44 | Wellington |
| 29 OTU | Bruntingthorpe | 16/9/44 – 21/10/44 | Wellington |
| 1661 HCU | Winthorpe | 6/11/44 – 2/1/45 | Stirling |

On 9 December Allan and his crew crashed their Stirling aircraft at Polver Farm near Kings Lynn on the East coast of England. There are one or two accounts of this, the most detailed by Jim Craig (Navigator). One crewmember in particular disagreed with some of the detail, but generally others endorse Craig's account. Interestingly, Allan makes no notation about the crash in his logbook. Why? It appears that the crew was lucky to survive, let alone come through without injury. Some crewmembers were thrown from the aircraft when it broke in two on impact. Today a memorial to the crash is housed in a water pump station building near Polver Farm. The tip of the Stirling propeller is hung on the wall together with a memorial plaque, stating the following.

SHORT STIRLING
EF208
BASED AT RAF WINTHORPE, NEAR NEWARK
(SQUADRON 1661 CONVERSION UNIT)

On 9th December 1944, whilst returning from a mission,
this aircraft developed problems in two of its engines.
Being unable to maintain height on its two remaining
engines, the aircraft hit the roof of the pump house
Before crashing at Wiggenhall St. Peter.
All of the crew survived.

Ironically, Allan's appointment to a commission as Flying Officer was endorsed on 10 December 1944, one day after the crash.

| | | | |
|------|----------|-------------------|-----------|
| 5LFS | Syerston | 10/1/45 – 23/2/45 | Lancaster |
|------|----------|-------------------|-----------|

5. Operations

| UNIT | LOCALITY | DATES | AIRCRAFT |
|--------------|------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 463 RAAF SQN | Waddington | 23/2/45 – 25/5/45 | Lancaster |

Crew members F/S Jim Craig (Navigator), F/S Geoff Gooding (Wireless operator), Sgt Bill Van Ditmar (Bomb aimer), Sgt Hugh Boardman (Flight Engineer), Sgt Norman Baker (Rear Gunner), Sgt John Cunningham (Mid Upper Gunner))

Allan's first taste of action was as 'second dicky' (basically an observer) on a mission piloted by A.C Belford. On this mission, the aircraft was hit by flak and was forced to crash land in Juvincourt France. This incident became the theme for a wartime biography by Belford called 'Born To Fly.'

Allan and his crew completed 7 missions, bombing Harburg, Essen, Lutzendorf, Farge, Hamburg and Tonsberg. Accounts of most of these missions are recorded in 'The Bomber Command War Diaries'. Both Jim Craig and Geoff Gooding compiled separate accounts of the raid over Lutzendorf.

War ended 7 May 1945. Allan made one or two flights to Europe to evacuate POWs back to England. It would appear that his last flight (probably ever) was on May 25 1945.

Allan was discharged from the RAAF 29 January 1946.

6. Conclusion

We can assume that Allan was probably a well-behaved and studious serviceman. There are no entries for instances, of drunkenness or misconduct in his General Service Conduct Sheet. The crash of the Stirling aircraft in training appears to have been beyond his control, so there are no black marks from this incident.

In an account of a wartime mission, crewman Geoff Gooding quoted Allan as telling his crew “that if you abide by the rules, I will defend you right through to the upper echelons of the RAAF, but if you break them I will drop you like a hot potato”. Does this indicate his leadership style? I’m not so sure.

Most of his flying training endorsements indicate he was an ‘average pilot’. In operations, he appears to have been a competent and assertive pilot and well respected by all his crew, with some being very strong in their praise – ‘His courage, leadership, skill and loyalty to his crew and squadron was the main reason we survived’. One crewman mentioned that the ‘pilot was responsible for saving everyone’s lives when the Stirling crashed in training’. On the other side of the coin is this extract from the diary of crewmember Jim Craig.

‘Alan was not good at landing. I don’t think he concentrated enough. He would often kangaroo hop, which I don’t like, and on one occasion at least I asked him “which time should I put down for landing, the first or the last?” Yet when we had bad conditions, Allan was at his best, and usually made good three pointers.’

In my meeting with Hugh Boardman in August 2002, he told me that Allan and brother Don spent a lot of time together while based at Waddington (Don was in 467 Sq). Hugh said they stole aviation fuel to keep their MG running and often drove around the base at night with lights off to avoid being captured. Hugh also said that Allan did not smoke, which is very surprising. He also said that his hand writing skill was well known. Allan made some off the entries in Hugh’s logbook.

He was not commended for any act of bravery but was awarded standard wartime medals, which included.

1939-45 Star*
France and Germany Star*
Defence Medal
War Medal 1939-45
Returned From Active Services Badge*

K. M. Kemp, Allan’s commanding officer, produced the following confidential personal report in August 1945, just prior to embarkation from the UK.

“Carries out all normal duties satisfactory but could show more drive on occasions. Has had little general experience as an officer and may improve in time. Satisfactory operational captain.”

What did Allan do for most of the time between the end of the War and when he was decommissioned? Seven or eight months are a long time to weigh up what to do with your life when you got home. Many RAAF servicemen probably thought about continuing their careers in the air. After reading Kemp’s report Allan may have thought going home to the bank might be a better option. His flying logbook is a very bland record and contains no mention of his exhilaration when he flew solo for the first time and the fear on realisation that he was unable to avoid crashing a Stirling bomber during a training exercise. Not a comment on the terror during the seven bombing raids over Germany or the crash in France and the joy on war ending. There are no spontaneous or considered notes or prose in the logbook or other papers to give us an insight into the wartime mind of Allan Beer

Campbell Beer
15 January 2005.