

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

FLTLT John Napier Bell

Pilot, 10 SQN (RAAF), World War 2

An experienced South Australian airman is first RAAF airman killed in operations



Above: *FLGOFF John Napier Bell on board HMAS Canberra in 1939 (AWM).*

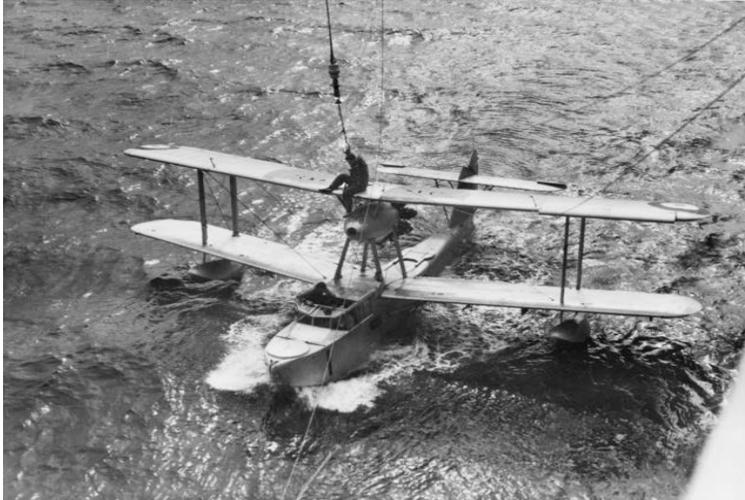
John Napier Bell was born at Largs Bay, Adelaide, on 25 April 1916 to John Henry Bell and Eva Annie Bell. The family moved to Farina, a rural town in the South Australian outback 600 km north of Adelaide, in the 1920's when his father and uncle bought a store which they operated into the 1960's. He was educated at St Peter's College, Adelaide, where he was a member of the school's cadet corps and excelled in football and cricket. After completing his schooling, Bell initially worked in the family store in Farina before enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force as a cadet on 15 July 1935. He received his wings on 16 June 1936 at Point Cook and was commissioned as a Pilot Officer on 1 July 1936.

Bell completed seaplane training and was subsequently posted to No 5 Squadron at RAAF Station Richmond, NSW, in November 1936 and then No 9 Squadron in January 1939. Both squadrons flew the Seagull/Walrus seaplane in support of the Royal Australian Navy on fleet cooperation missions. During the period, Bell was attached to HMAS Hobart, HMAS Voyager and HMAS Canberra and became an experienced seaplane pilot and detachment commander. While serving with the HMAS Canberra he conducted 80 launches from the ship.

In late 1939 he volunteered to go to the United Kingdom as one of the early contingents of RAAF members to be trained on and fly the new and large Sunderland seaplane which was being equipped by No 10 Squadron that had just formed at Point Cook in mid 1939. The Squadron was to return to Australia with the Sunderland's but with the declaration of war in September 1939, it was ordered to remain in England in October.

On 2 February 1940 Bell arrived in the United Kingdom and began converting onto the Sunderland aircraft; the day after 10 Squadron had been made operational by the RAAF. Flying the large Sunderland, Bell was conducting maritime reconnaissance, convoy escort and anti-submarine missions in the North Atlantic approaches to the British Isles.

On the 26 February he flew one such convoy escort mission as second pilot to SQNLDR Bill Garing, who would later become an exceptional commander in the southwest pacific area. Bell qualified as a first pilot on No 10 Squadron Sunderland's on 1 May 1940. As the squadron was lacking qualified pilots, the rate of effort was significant.



Left: FLG OFF John Napier Bell taxiing a Supermarine Seagull (Walrus) aircraft alongside the 'County' Class cruiser HMAS Canberra, for retrieval on completion of a flight following a catapult launch from the ship. (AWM).

On 1 June 1940, while Coastal Command was being increasingly tasked to support the Dunkirk evacuation, Bell flew three missions to transport French troops between Plymouth and Cherbourg. The next day, he flew an anti-submarine mission. For the first nine days of June, the squadron flew 29 missions.

On the evening of 11 June 1940 the Squadron was tasked with an urgent secret mission to fly a Special Operations Executive officer, Captain Hope of the British Army, to the North Coast of Brittany as soon as possible on the 18 June. A RAF Walrus was made available by No 15 Communications Flight, RAF, for the mission and specially fitted with a Sunderland Vickers gun to provide some defensive capability.

FLTLT John Bell, an experienced Walrus pilot, was tasked as the pilot for the secret mission along with SGT Charles Harris as the Flight Engineer. They were joined by RAF Corporal Bernard Nowell as navigator and Captain Hope who was in civilian attire. After Hope briefed only the crew on the mission, the aircraft departed Plymouth at 0255hrs. Nothing more was heard of the aircraft by No 10 Squadron.

On 19 June a search mission was sent via boat from England to try to find the missing aircraft. The search party found the area occupied by Germans. It was not until 16 months later that information was received that the aircraft had crashed in the fog at Ploudaniel, about 18 miles from Brest.



Above: FLG OFF Bell (in cap) alongside a RAAF Supermarine Seagull (Walrus) aircraft at RAAF Richmond 1938. (AWM)

It has since become known that the secret mission was to extricate General De-Gaulle's family from northern France. At approximately 0400 hrs, a Frenchwoman living in a small village near Ploudaniel heard a loud noise overhead. Other villagers reported seeing an aircraft on fire flying very low over the village. Bell evidently attempted to crash-land the aircraft on a flat field in thick fog. Unfortunately, the aircraft hit an embankment and nose-dived breaking into two killing all four crew onboard.

With the remains of the aircraft still burning, French villagers removed the four airmen's bodies and buried them in the grounds of St Yves Church, Ploudaniel. Their graves were maintained by the villagers until permanent headstones were erected in 1946. To this day, the villagers of Ploudaniel acknowledge the sacrifice of the four airmen by holding a service at their graves every year on the 18 June.

The deaths of Bell and Harris were not released until mid July when the RAAF released their first casualty list of World War 2 identifying the men as missing in action while engaged in special operations. It is unknown whether Bell's aircraft was shot down or suffered mechanical problems. However, what is known is that FLTLT John Bell and his colleague, SGT Charles Harris, were the first RAAF members to be killed in active service in World War 2. Indeed, they were the first RAAF airmen to be killed in operations since the RAAF was formed in 1921.

FLTLT John Napier Bell is remembered on the Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour, the Adelaide National War Memorial World War 2 Roll of Honour, and the Farina War Memorial. Ironically, it was later found that de Gaulle's family had actually made their way to Brest separately and managed to catch the last ferry to England.

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