

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILE

FRANCIS "JOHN" LEONARD DOWNING DFC, DFC (US) *WING COMMANDER (Retired)*

The only RAAF pilot to have his aircraft destroyed by a surface-to-air missile (SAM)

Pilot of the first crew to safely eject from a Canberra Bomber.

First to photograph the eye of a cyclone in the Southern Hemisphere.



John Downing while an Air Cadet at the Royal Australian Air Force College circa 1954. Image from John Downing.

Right: John at the RAAF Recruiting Office in Perth, WA, receiving his tickets to go to Point Cook RAAF College in Victoria. (From left to right) John Batchelor, John Downing, Norm Ashworth and Peter Larrard. Recruiting Officer unknown. Image from John Downing.

At RAAF College, training on DH-82 Tiger Moths, John's first solo was on 21 July 1953. After a final test on the DH-82 on 13 October 1953, John commenced training on Wirraways on 20 October 1953, with his first solo in that aircraft type on 18 March 1954.

Francis "John" Leonard Downing DFC, DFC (US) was born at Nedlands, Western Australia on 19 April 1934. He was the middle of three brothers. His parents were Talbot Albert Walls Downing and Mary Francis Downing (Nee Leonard). John's father was a schoolteacher who served in World War II as an Education Officer on Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) courses.

Most of John's schooling was received at Bunbury and Albany, WA, including five years at Albany High School. In his words, he received 'no academic accolades,' but was a prefect at Albany High and 'mad on sport,' football and cricket in particular.

Growing up during WWII, John was always interested in the Air Force and joined the Air Training Corps at the age of thirteen, the youngest possible age to join. When John was sixteen, his father, who was by then an ATC instructor, brought home application paperwork for the RAAF College at Point Cook, Victoria. John's application was successful and began the four-year RAAF College course (No.4 Course) in 1951.



Graduating from the RAAF College as a Pilot Officer (General Duties pilot) on 8 December 1954, an entry in John's flying logbook, made by the then Commandant of the RAAF College:

"Awarded wings – Below average pilot."

Regardless of this assessment, according to John, *'like everyone else, I wanted to be a fighter pilot'*. He got his wish and between February and late June 1955, John was posted to No.2 (Fighter) Operational Training Unit at Williamtown, NSW, where he was trained on the de Havilland Vampire jet fighter, with his first solo in Vampire FB 31 A79-440 on 21 March 1955. John's summing-up of his fighter pilot training was, *'I distinguished myself to a degree that I was then posted on to Dakotas and Lincolns, but at least I had the opportunity.'*



DH-Vampire A79-440, in which John flew his first jet fighter solo. Pictured mounted on a pole at RAAF Amberley circa 1974. Image from ADF Serials.

John's next posting was as a staff pilot at the School of Air Navigation, RAAF East Sale, Victoria, for 18 months commencing July 1955, flying Dakotas and Lincolns. Trainee Navigators in the rear of the aircraft would be performing navigation exercises, including night Astro-navigation. Some of these flights included navigation between East Sale, Victoria, and Oodnadatta in the far north of South Australia at night and flying low level between East Sale and Pearce, WA.

Between January and July 1957, John attended No.17 Flight Instructor Course at Central Flying School, RAAF Base East Sale, where he trained on the CAC Winjeel and refreshed on the Wirraway, Vampire 33 and Lincoln. He graduated as a Qualified Flying Instructor on 28 June 1957.

John was posted to the RAAF College at Point Cook, as a flying instructor, between July 1957 and 19 January 1959, instructing on Winjeel and Wirraway aircraft. On his half yearly return of flying hours, completed on 24 January 1958, the Commanding Officer commented that John was:

'A capable instructor on basic piston engine training aircraft.'



John still wanted to fly jets and a posting to No.1 (B) Operational Conversion Unit in January 1959, where he undertook No.1 Course 1959, saw him qualify to fly Canberra T4, B20 and Mk 21 aircraft. This was the start of his long association with Canberras which was to span approximately 12 years.

Left: *John's conversion course at No.1 (B) Operational Conversion Unit, commencing January 1959. Pictured, from left to right, back row: Peter Kennedy, Barry Prince, John Downing, Tom Thorpe and Frank Murphy. Front row: Allan Pinches, Leo Britt and Norm Herford. Image from John Downing.*

After completing his conversion course, John was posted to No.82 Wing, comprising of No.1 and No.6 Squadrons and No.1 Bomber OCU at RAAF Base Amberley on 11 May 1959. He

remained there until early December 1962, flying Canberras and as an instructor.

An interesting task John conducted while at No.6 (B) Squadron was to photograph the eye of a Queensland cyclone. On 2 March 1960, then Flight Lieutenant John Downing and his navigator, Pilot Officer Greg Sweeting, in Mk 20 Canberra A84-210, took off from Amberley to photograph the eye of a cyclone off the Queensland coast.

Right: Canberra A84-210. The aircraft used by John Downing and Greg Sweeting to photograph the eye of the cyclone on 2 March 1960. Image via Martin Edwards, ADF Serials Image Gallery.



The cyclone was located approximately 250 miles east-northeast of Brisbane and about 120 miles south of its plotted position. As they neared the anticipated centre of the cyclone, they saw the huge concentric circles of cloud more than 100 miles away on the starboard wing. They flew over the 20 mile long 'eye' of the cyclone, but flying into the cyclone at 30,000 feet failed to give a good photographic impression of its huge saucer-shape banks of clockwise-swirling cloud, so John banked the Canberra to allow the photograph to be taken. 'We were pretty lucky to get the picture', said John, explaining that the 180lb camera which took the oblique image was normally used for vertical photography.

In the Queensland Times of 3 March 1960, John was reported as saying, 'We were too interested to find the sight frightening.... At 30,000 feet altitude from which the Canberra viewed the awesome sight, the air was perfectly smooth.'

Approximately three months later, on the night of Friday, 10 June 1960, Greg Sweeting was a passenger on TAA flight 538, a Fokker Friendship VH-TFB, that crashed into the sea off Mackay, Queensland during a night landing approach, killing all 29 on board. This was one of the worst civil aviation crashes in Australian history.

Below: Article from a Sydney newspaper, published on 4 March 1960.



Right: Greg Sweeting (left) and John Downing (right), shown drawing a diagram of the cyclonic 'eye' and 'hub' after their return to Amberley.

RAAF No.2 Squadron Deployed to Butterworth, Malaya

Post World War II, No.2 SQN was the first Australian operational unit to be equipped with the Canberra bomber. On 1 April 1955, the British Government announced the formation of a Commonwealth Strategic Reserve Force, to be based in Malaya. The RAAF contribution was to be two fighter squadrons and a bomber squadron. For the bomber component, nine No.2 SQN Canberras were deployed to Butterworth, Malaya, with the first aircraft arriving on 28 June 1958 and the remainder in early to mid-July. No.2 SQN Canberras primary role was to provide a bombing capability in Southeast Asia, as part of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, and a secondary role of supporting ground forces engaging communist terrorists in the Malayan jungle. Bombing in Malaya used the Target Direction Post (TDP) technique

where a ground-based radar provided a narrow beam passing over the target. Bombers flew down the beam and a signal was received when it was time to drop the bombs. The signal was calculated based on air speed, bomb ballistics, flight altitude, stick length and slant ranges. Aircraft could fly in cloud or at night, there was no need to visually sight the target which was often obscured by jungle, and it provided a complete surprise to enemy ground forces. The Canberra's level bombing and low-level visual attacking capabilities soon proved to be 'deadly accurate' and an advantage over dive bombing fighters which demanded a higher cloud base.

Back in Australia



Nine No.2 Squadron Canberra Bombers at Butterworth. Image ADF Serials Image Gallery.

Following the deployment of No.2 SQN to Butterworth, No.82 Wing was restructured to include a dedicated training unit. No.1 Operational Conversion Unit (No.1 (B) OCU) was an operational training unit of the RAAF, formed in January 1959 at RAAF Base Amberley, Queensland. Its role was to convert pilots and navigators to the English Electric Canberra bombers flown by Nos. 1, 2 and 6 Squadrons.

The unit's complement of Canberras included T.4 and Mk 21 dual-control trainers and Mk 20 bombers. Originally a component of No. 82 Wing, No.1 (B) OCU later became an independent unit at Amberley in April 1968. Its focus then was the provision of operationally ready pilots for service with No.2 SQN in the Vietnam War.

After a spell as ADC to Air Officer Commanding Support Command (Air Vice Marshall C.D. Candy), between 1963 and 1964, John, by now a Squadron Leader, was posted as Flight Commander No.1 (B) OCU, RAAF Amberley between February 1965 and November 1966. During this time John was a flying instructor.

RAAF No.2 Squadron Deployed to South Vietnam

On 22 December 1966, Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt announced No.2 SQN would be moving from Butterworth, Malaysia to South Vietnam, to join RAAF Caribou transport aircraft and Iroquois helicopters already based at Vung Tau. Following deployment of advance parties and maintenance equipment, Eight No.2 SQN Mk 20 Canberras, under the command of Wing Commander Rolf Aronsen, left Butterworth, bound for US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, South Vietnam, on 19 April 1967.



No.2 SQN Canberra aircrews arriving at US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, in April 1967. Image RAAF.



US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang, where No.2 SQN were based 1967 – 1971. Image Lance Halvorson

US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang was on the coast, 260 km north-east of Saigon and was the capital of the Ninh Thuan province. The Base was situated about 13 km from the city and covered more than twenty-seven square kilometres. It was home to the US Air Force 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.



'THE MAGPIES'
No 2 Squadron badge with the motto
CONSILO ET MANU – TO ADVISE AND TO STRIKE

Within four days of leaving Butterworth and flying their first mission on 23 April 1967, No. 2 SQN's eight Canberra bombers and eight crews, known as 'Magpies' from their Squadron crest and radio call signs, began flying an average of eight missions a day, seven days a week, for the next four years. They hit targets from the 'Demilitarized Zone' (the border between North and South Vietnam) to the north, and the Mekong River Delta to the south. Targets included enemy concentrations around Hue, the siege of Khe Sanh in 1968, and the South Vietnamese attack into Laos in 1971. In total, the Squadron flew over 11,900 combat missions and dropped 76,389 bombs, totalling 27,158 tonnes.

No.2 SQN's initial role was 'Combat Skyspot' missions. Flown at night and usually flown at medium altitude (15,000 to 25,000 feet), the missions were generally between 1.5 and 3 hours duration, with the first flight taking off around 8pm. The remainder were spread throughout the night, with the last sortie sometimes not arriving back to base until dawn.

Fitted with transponders, called a 'music box', the bombers were guided to the targets by ground radar while flying at pre-set headings, altitudes and airspeeds. They were given bomb release points calculated from these figures and were generally "releasing blind." John described these missions, which were still being flown when he joined No.2 SQN in late 1970, as "bus driver operations" and "boring."

In September 1967, the Squadron had begun low-level daylight bombing. An initial drop height of 3,000 feet was chosen to avoid ground fire and not for bombing accuracy. The headquarters of the US Seventh Air Force in Saigon liked the low-level results and by November 1967, No.2 SQN was doing four low-level sorties a day, mostly in support of ground troops. They were achieving a circular error of probability of 45 metres, i.e., half their bombs consistently fell within 45 metres of the target. To get better accuracy, the then CO of the Squadron, Wing Commander David Evans, analysed bombing results to determine the cause of errors and the aircraft were calibrated and bomb sight tolerances checked to determine systems errors and allow for compensation. A combination of these changes and flying at 1,000 feet reduced the circular error probability down to 20 metres and resulted in Canberras transitioning from high level bombers with poor accuracy to very accurate low-level tactical bombers in support of ground troops.

Low cloud forced crews to occasionally bomb at even lower altitudes when it was necessary to get below the cloud to provide urgent support to ground troops. Bombs were released from as low as 800 feet, followed by a rapid pull up to a safe height (around 1,900 feet) by the time the bomb exploded, to avoid damage to their own aircraft. The Squadron had conducted similar bombing missions in Malaya but refined its accuracy in Vietnam to such an extent it consistently outperformed all other units of the 35th Tactical Air Wing.

David Evans later wrote:

"It was also noteworthy that while No.2 squadron flew only 4% of the missions flown out of Phan Rang, we were credited with 16% of the bomb damage inflicted on the enemy, including the number of soldiers killed by air (KBA). Perhaps not a thing to boast about 40 years later on, but I felt very strongly at the time that successful missions by No.2 Squadron contributed directly to saving lives of the Allied soldiers down there fighting in a far more threatening environment than we were."

By the middle of June 1970, the Squadron was flying nine missions a day and South Australian pilot Mike Herbert and his navigator, Ron Aitken had dropped bomb number 60,000.

Right: Wearing flying suits and squatting front centre, Mike Herbert (right) and Ron Aitken pose in front of the 60,000th bomb dropped by No. 2 SQN and the armament team who loaded it. Image from *Magpies in Vietnam* (Alex Alexander)



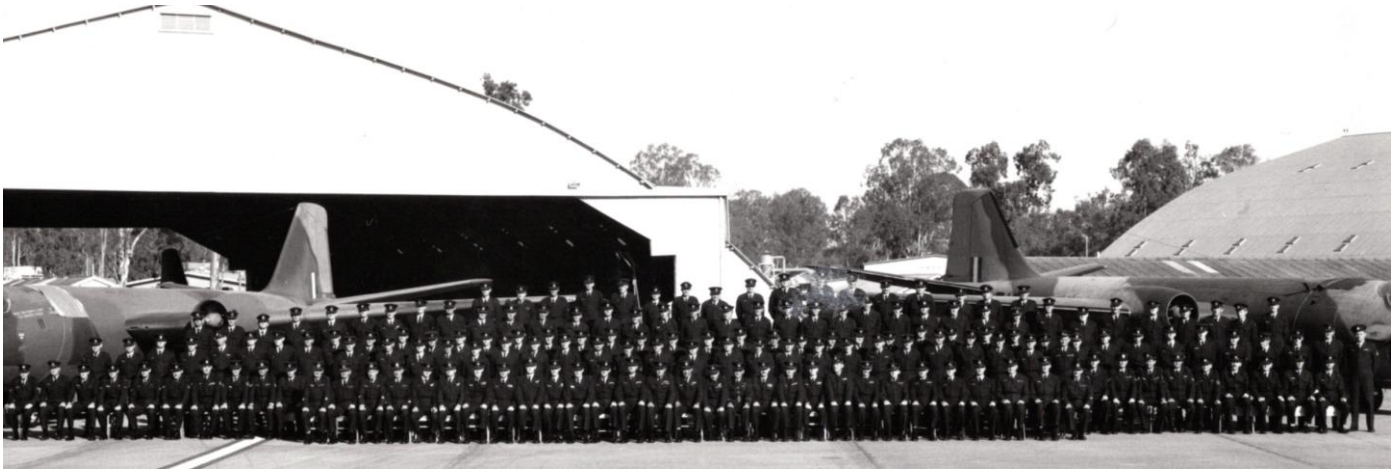
Promotion to Wing Commander & CO of No.1 (B) Operational Conversion Unit

Back in Australia, following a 12-month course at the RAAF Staff College, Fairbairn, Canberra in 1967 and a posting as Staff Officer Project Coordination Air Force Office, Canberra (1968-69), John returned to No.1 (B) OCU in January 1970, as Commanding Officer and with the rank of Wing Commander.



When taking over command of No.1 Bomber OCU, John Downing (right) shaking hands with T/CO Arthur Barnes. Looking on is the Base Commander Air Commodore Deryk Kingwell. Image John Downing

The process at the time was that John, as the CO of No.1 (B) OCU, not only had overall responsibility for the conversion training of aircrews to Canberras and training of ground crews before they were posted to No.2 SQN in South Vietnam, he was also preparing himself to take over as CO of No.2 Squadron later in 1970.



No.1 Bomber OCU Staff 20 August 1970. The substantial number of personnel was required because they trained staff going to No.2 Squadron in Vietnam, as well as training the aircrew for No.2 Squadron. When John took over in January 1970, the unit could only muster about 6 or 7 serviceable aircraft each day. By June 1970, John was able to provide 12 aircraft airborne for the Freedom of the City of Ipswich fly past, with one airborne spare and a serviceable spare on the ground. Image John Downing.



Taken at No.1 (B) OCU, Wing Commander John Downing (centre) studying a flight plan with Pilot Officers John Wood (left) and Bob Carver (right). Bob Carver and South Australian Mike Herbert disappeared on 3 November 1970 after conducting a night bombing mission in South Vietnam. Image John Downing.

John officially took over No. 2 SQN at US Air Force Airbase Phan Rang from the outgoing CO, Wing Commander Jack Boast, on 1 November 1970. On the occasion of the last flight for Jack Boast and his navigator, Frank Lonie, the tradition was they were physically hooked up to the wingtip bomb carriers. After the aircraft taxied into the squadron lines, they were ceremonially "dropped" a short distance to the ground.



Above: Wing Commander Jack Boast and his navigator Frank Lonie attached to the wingtip bomb carriers while the Canberra is taxiing.

Right: Wing Commander Jack Boast hooked up to the starboard wingtip bomb carrier. Images John Downing.



John remembered his first address to the whole unit after taking over the command of No.2 Squadron included the statement *"I am not here to ride on the reputation of the Squadron and to establish a career for myself. It is a privilege to serve you. You have an outstanding reputation, and I shall be here to assist in maintaining the status quo."*

As well as performing the duties and responsibilities of commanding the squadron, John was also required to be in one of the eight crews and fly an equal number of sorties. On arrival he was teamed with an experienced navigator for a week and experienced all the types of operations, from Combat Skyspot to medium level bombing and low-level ground support, while familiarizing himself with the topography and operational environment.

Left: John Downing shortly after taking over as CO of No.2 Squadron. Following the loss of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver in A84-231, two days after him taking over, John arranged similar images for all aircrew, to be used in the event of losses. Image John Downing.

From the outset and throughout his time as CO, he found the people of No.2 SQN to be highly motivated and to cause no major problems. Morale, efficiency, and performance were outstanding.

The Squadron performed 24/7 operations, with approximately 300 personnel working 3 x 8-hour shifts. Serviceability of aircraft was around 96-98%. If an aircraft developed a fault immediately prior to take off the aircraft could be worked on and then moved to the back of the line of waiting aircraft. Ground crews were so highly motivated they would often come in and service equipment on their days off.



The full staff of No.2 Squadron at the time John Downing took over as Commanding Officer. Image John Downing.

For the day-to-day operations and command and control of the Squadron, John was very ably assisted by an Operational Flight Commander (Squadron Leader Arthur Barnes) an Administrative Flight Commander (Squadron Leader Lyn Wynn) and a Senior Engineer (Squadron Leader Grahame Bickle). John said, "*The boys were outstanding at their jobs, and it was really a case of if it's not broke, don't fix it!*"



Headquarters Staff No.2 Squadron, November 1970. Image John Downing.

Loss of Magpie 91 and its crew, Flying Officer Michael Herbert & Pilot Officer Robert Carver



On 3 November 1970, two days after John took over as Commanding Officer, Magpie 91, crewed by Flying Officer Mike Herbert and Pilot Officer Bob Carver, failed to return from a routine Skyspot mission near the Laotian border.

Left: Canberra A84-231 on an earlier bombing mission. As Magpie 91, crewed by Mike Herbert and Bob Carver, it suddenly disappeared without a trace on 3 November 1970. Image RAAF.

The target had been a North Vietnamese military command unit in the mountains near the Ho Chi Minh trail, south-west of Da Nang. A radio transmission by the Vietnamese had been intercepted by the Americans, revealing the command unit position.

Operating under the control of MILKY, a Skyspot ground radar site. Magpie 91 had a successful bomb release at 22,500 feet. The MILKY controller thanked Magpie 91 for a successful sortie.

The call was acknowledged by Magpie 91, along with the intention of changing radio frequency to call PANAMA Control and Reporting Centre, for flight following information on return to Phan Rang. No further radio calls were made from Magpie 91 and about a minute later it disappeared from PANAMA's radar screen. No distress call or IFF emergency transmission was received by PANAMA or any other agency.

When interviewed for this profile in 2022, John still had clear memories of what followed. He had also written on this subject in March 2010:

"At the time I was like a deer in the headlights as I had no local knowledge and little in country experience I recall walking into the Op's room where there was a concerned but orderly activity underway to explain their absence. Activity was directed by the Operations Flight Commander, Arthur Barnes, assisted by Brian O'Shea and others. When it became clear that the aircraft's fuel would obviously have been exhausted and there were no reports of the aircraft diverging, a request for suspension of Squadron operations was made and a search plan initiated."

The search included other allied aircraft in the area, under the coordination of the United States Air Rescue and Recovery Group. Over three days, No.2 Squadron crews flew 38 sorties, amounting to 113 hours.

John recalled that during the search:

".... the crews were flying to the limits. The mood was very subdued and became pessimistic as time wore on. All crews realise the difficulty of spotting a parachute or seeing wreckage in heavy jungle canopy. My attention was drawn to the state of near exhaustion of Arthur Barnes who flew his share of missions but got little sleep as he managed the search. I had to order him to cease flying search missions."

With nothing found, every possibility was explored to explain the disappearance of Magpie 91. In John's words:

"The possibilities of a mid-air collision, loss from artillery fire, offshore bombardment, SAM strikes and so on were all examined and checked again for a Court of Enquiry. SAM strikes were ruled out because there was no ELINT (electronic intelligence) showing SAM activity, but hand-held SAMs were a possibility Ground fire was a remote possibility as it was a medium-altitude mission.

Throughout, of course there was the pervasive factor of no PLB (personal locator beacon) response. Speculation suggested loss of electrics and loss of control over the sea on a feet-wet return. Oxygen loss was unlikely because there was a clear and coherent request to change after a normal report of bomb release and an acknowledgement of a new heading to fly."

At the time, despite the unexplained loss of Herbert and Carver, the Squadron continued to fly nine or 10 sorties per day, and this remained the level of activity for the remainder of No.2 Squadron's operations in Vietnam.

Following a Court of Enquiry, which could not determine any reason for the loss, the disappearance and fate of the aircraft and Mike Herbert and Bob Carver remained a mystery until the aircraft and its crew were found 39 years later.



Christmas 1970 saw some traditional decoration of bombs. Image John Downing

February 1971 Mission Leading to Distinguished Flying Cross (US)

According to John, taskings were done in advance and most sorties were pre-planned and very much "production line", but sometimes crews were called off pre-planned missions for "troops in contact" situations. On several occasions in February 1971, No.2 Squadron crews were called upon to fly 11 missions per day. On one of these days, 9 February 1971, John and his navigation leader, Squadron Leader Bernie Johnson, flying a pre-planned mission as Magpie 31 (meaning this was the third sortie that day by a No.2 Squadron aircraft), in Canberra A84-234, were diverted to support friendly troops in contact with the enemy.



Canberra A84-234. Image ADF Serials Image Gallery - RAAF Photo 000 140 782

The situation with low-level bombing sorties was that there were enclaves of Vietcong in a fluid situation, so whenever a mission was scheduled a Forward Air Controller (FAC) worked very closely with the local Province Chief to make sure bombs were not dropped without clearance. To cover themselves, No.2 Squadron Canberra aircrews recorded all radio traffic after contact was made with the FAC until the mission was concluded. An audio recording of this mission is available on the Australian War Memorial website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S04275> The calmness of John and Bernie Johnson throughout is amazing to listen to.

The usual procedure for this type of attack was, once airborne, to navigate by TACAN Station to the relevant rendezvous point where contact would be made with the FAC who would then guide them onto the target using smoke rockets and making corrections on that smoke, as necessary.

In this case, they initially had trouble establishing a mutual frequency with the US Air Force FAC but finally were able to make contact. The action that followed is perhaps best described by Captain Larry D Bruce, 612th Tactical Fighter Squadron, in his report titled '*Outstanding Air Strike Performance*', a copy of which is reproduced over the page.

'Outstanding Air Strike Performance.'



Captain Larry Dean Bruce USAF, F-100 pilot with 612th Tactical Fighter Squadron 1970-1971 and also a US DFC recipient. Image from Super Sabre Society.

"I witnessed Wing Commander F.J.L. Downing and Squadron Leader B.A. Johnson demonstrate heroism and professional airmanship to an extraordinary degree on the morning of 9 February 1971 as crew members aboard their Australian Canberra bomber as they struck a target in close proximity to friendly troops in contact with the enemy.

They were briefed as they approached the target area of the hazardous conditions of low overcast weather shrouding the high rugged peaks around which they would have to work, of the intense ground fire they could expect, of the restrictions that would be placed on their run-in heading, and of the bombing accuracy necessary due to the nearness of friendly troops. The FAC indicated the seriousness of the engagement on the ground and, having diverted Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson from a pre-planned strike for immediate assistance, was especially concerned to see if they could operate in such an environment.

With no hesitation they maneuvered under the overcast and initiated preparations for attack. Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson could have elected not to strike the target due to the untenable conglomerate of factors or, at most, to have delivered a salvo in one pass. No one could have criticised them. But they were determined to make a maximum number of passes, exposing

themselves on five successive deliveries to intense ground fire, in order to enhance the effectiveness of their 750 lb bombs and provide some respite for the beleaguered friends.

Flying just 100 feet above their minimum altitude over the bomb impact area, grazing the overcast ceiling, they repeatedly flew across a ridgeline from which they were receiving intense ground fire, clearing it by only 800 feet. Their restricted run-in placed them in this extremely vulnerable position and their requirement of wings-level stabilised speed/heading deliveries made them sitting ducks. As I sat in the right seat of the FAC O-2 aircraft I could not believe they were not taking hits. Had I been on the ground with an automatic weapon, I feel certain I could have hit them. Their responses to messages passed from the ground praising their accuracy and advising them of the intense fire they were taking on each pass were so calm and professional I was thoroughly dismayed.

Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson, forced to operate beneath the weather and around peaks which disappeared into the clouds, were unable to keep the target in sight since they were as much as five or six miles away at times. This required consummate skill in order to roll out on a final attack heading. The target could not be acquired until the last possible moment due to the enemy held ridgeline, the ragged cloud bases, haze, smoke and thick triple canopy jungle which obscured the FAC's mark.

The accuracy of the bombs dropped by crew of the Canberra drew excited praise from the friendly ground troops who were located 800 metres from the impact area on a mountain top. Other friendly forces had set up ambush positions within 500 metres of the target; these locations could not be marked without revealing their emplacement to the enemy.

On their last pass Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson sustained serious battle damage to their aircraft. A massive chunk of bomb fragment ripped through the nose section where

Squadron Leader Johnson was lying prone without a parachute on and without benefit of armour plating beneath him. The fragment passed by him and went up into the pilot's compartment striking the control wheel: and partially severing elevator controls; it continued with high energy six inches past Wing Commander Downing's leg and smashed into the IFF panel. At this particular moment a flight of F 100s was checking in with the FAC. Since Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson had completed the last pass and since the radio frequency was in demand by others, they calmly wished us in the FAC aircraft a "good day" and departed the area. I was incredulous later that day to find they had sustained the battle damage.

Their aggressive and accurate deliveries were directly responsible for the saving of many friendly lives. The first bomb they dropped obliterated five enemy hootches; successive bombs accounted for a secondary explosion, an enemy radio station destroyed, yards and yards of trenches, bunkers, and with no doubt in my mind a significant number of enemy soldiers killed. I can make this last statement for several reasons: There bombs impacted directly on top of a concentration of enemy ground fire; someone must've been manning the radio station or in its immediate area; a FAC overflying the target area the following day detected numerous fresh graves. This same FAC told me that the enemy makes supreme efforts to bury their dead immediately and to secure all traces of casualties.

The friendly forces were not able to get to the impact areas until the following day. Dense jungle, sporadic sniper fire and a large blaze which continued for 24 hours subsequent to a 45-minute eruption of an ammo cache touched off by the F-100s on target after Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson, were reasons why the sweep was delayed.

When the area was investigated, only the periphery of one impact area was inspected due to vastly reduced but still persistent hostilities. The friendlies were extracted by helicopter on the morning of the third day after the strike.

Judging from the Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) reports which continued to trickle in for several days it seems certain the enemy was preparing to assault the friendly position in force. The piles of rockets, rocket motors, and mortars found by the friendlies in a bomb impact area, the radio station apparently an FM set fitted with a 20 foot antenna, and the level of enemy activity lends credence to the view that the friendlies might not have survived the assault had it not been for the efforts of Wing Commander Downing and Squadron Leader Johnson.

Being an F-100 pilot myself and having personally witnessed their performance, I can say with no reservation that I was inspired by their selfless courage and envy them the demonstration of the most singular example of true professionalism I have ever witnessed.

**Larry D. BRUCE, Capt.
U. S. Air Force"**

John believed Captain Bruce's account "*demonstrated a distinct contrast between a matter-of-fact Australian understatement and the hyperbole of the Americans.*" However, Captain Bruce's subsequent report appeared to be a citation and unbeknown to John and Bernard at the time, and although they were never formally presented with the medals, Captain Bruce's report had resulted in John and Bernard Johnson each being awarded the US DFC.

Some years later, John found some references, including in *Australian Awards Vietnam 1962-1991* by Ross Sutton, that they had won the US DFC and John tried to track it down, the Americans denied all knowledge but the Australian Historic Military Division had it listed and the awarding of the medals is recorded on the Australian War Memorial website. Accordingly, John bought two of the medals himself, sent one of them to Bernard Johnson and the two of them had worn them ever since.



Above:
US Distinguished Flying
Cross (DFC)

John Downing's Version of the Same Events

The six bombs were released singly and in pairs and during this time they were experiencing very heavy turbulence. John had fully tightened his straps and came back bruised as a result. Bernard was unrestrained during this entire time and had to repeatedly go back and forth from his position in the front of the aircraft to a panel where he would select the bomb or bombs to be dropped and put on any delay etc. He would then dash back to his forward position. The first bomb was just long and approximately 25 metres right and 25 metres short of where it was required. The last of the six bombs were dropped as a pair and landed right on target, 100% within 10 metres, destroying the radio station.

On each bomb run the FAC was reporting that he was seeing ground fire being directed towards the Canberra from the target area. On the last run, John had felt a "great thump" and knew something had hit the aircraft. With all bombs expended and reporting that the aircraft had apparently taken ground fire, the crew of Magpie 31 had wished the crew of the FAC aircraft a "good day" and departed for Phan Rang.

At the time of being hit by what was later identified as the top suspension lug from one of their last two bombs, John thought they had taken ground fire but did not declare an emergency because his assessment of the handling of the aircraft showed all controls were operating, there were no malfunctions and everything was "as advertised" in the cockpit. All pressures and temperatures were fine and although the elevator controls appeared damaged, the Canberra had a "flying tailplane" and was able to continue flying with full control by adjusting the trim for the tailplane.

They would have had to be above 10,000 feet to eject, so Bernard did not return to his ejector seat and remained seated on the floor near the emergency parachute, to which he strapped a harness in case he had to open the door and abandon the aircraft. The aircraft was able to return to Phan Rang and landed safely. That night, the US FAC, Captain Larry Bruce, who was also based at Phan Rang, came over to the No.2 Squadron mess and had a chat and a few beers.



Fuselage damage and bomb fragment. Images John Downing.

RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit

Just over a month later, on the afternoon of Sunday, 14 March 1971, John was on his 100th and what turned out to be his last mission with No.2 Squadron in Vietnam. He was flying Canberra A84-228 with his navigator Flight Lieutenant Allan Pinches. They were flying at 14,000 feet near the DMZ. They were performing a "Combat Skyspot" mission that was expected to be a "milk run."

Neither man should have flown that day. John had just returned two days early from leave, to help ease the burden of missions on his pilots. Allan Pinches was off duty but came back on so another navigator could play in a cricket match at the Base!

Arriving in the vicinity of the target and under Skyspot direction, they were ordered to turn very steeply onto the target. John believed this sudden turn probably saved them. According to John, *".... about halfway through the turn, the roof fell in. It really did. The sky exploded, and my canopy was shattered."* He said, *"The aircraft was still flying - everything was normal according to the cockpit - and then I saw a missile, high to the right, go past the aircraft. It was ballistic, and it hadn't exploded, but I then realised, of course, we had been hit by its partner, the other surface-to-air missile."* John told Allan Pinches to eject before making a mayday call and ejecting himself.



Painting titled "RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit" by aviation artist David Marshall, showing Allan Pinches ejecting. You can see John's white helmet still under the pilot's canopy. The painting was donated to the Australian War Memorial by Barry Carpenter in 2018. John and Allan Pinches' son Brad attended the ceremony. John and Allan Pinches had called each other every year on the anniversary of the incident until Allan Pinches passed away on Australia Day 2017. Image the author from a copy of the painting belonging to John Downing, since donated to the South Australian Aviation Museum.

Believing he had given Allan Pinches sufficient time to eject, John reached down and pulled the control column snatch release, thereby releasing the control yoke forward, reached for his helmet, positioned himself properly and pulled the blind. He said, *"In those days, the technique was to eject through the canopy. When the pilot ejects, the seat actually breaks the canopy before his head does."*

John free fell for a while before his canopy deployed and at that point, he saw the aircraft circling just below him. The starboard wing was "just a ball of flame." He was glad to see the aircraft at this time or else he would have always wondered whether he had jumped out of a serviceable aircraft. In hindsight, he believed ejecting was a good decision. There was an undercast at about 4000 or 5000 feet which prevented John seeing the aircraft impacting with the ground. He had time to wave to Allan Pinches before descending into cloud.

Allan Pinches' recollections were that they had been turning onto their target run when they were rocked by the explosion: *"...my nav's station was immediately a great turmoil of blasting air stream, flapping canvas, flying papers and charts, dirt, dust, and noise. It had also got suddenly darker. John saw another SAM go by, but it did not explode. A second or so later we felt the aircraft beginning to break up and John ordered me to eject. I blasted my hatch off and pulled the face blind to fire the ejection seat, but nothing happened. A second desperate tug was successful. I was barely clear of the aircraft when I saw John blasting through his pilot's canopy."*

Although John's parachute worked, as advertised, by opening automatically at 12,000 feet, Allan Pinches' did not. He was about to deploy manually when the canopy finally blossomed. He said later, *"I remember being annoyed ... Annoyed because of the noise, annoyed because my watch had been ripped off, and because John's parachute opened and mine would not."* They had parachuted through cloud and rain and were floating down into the mountainous jungle with near zero visibility. John fortunately broke out of cloud briefly in a valley with just enough time to set himself up for a landing as he crashed through trees on the side of a steep ridge. His parachute snagged about two or three metres up a tree and he landed hard on the ground in a "praying" position, hurting his knee. At the time he thought it was just a bruise, but it later turned out to be a fractured kneecap. He was otherwise uninjured.

Allan Pinches had been operating the four-way bomb release at the time of the explosion. With his harness done up tight, he could not reach the bomb release, so he had slackened off his harness in preparation for dropping the bombs. With his loose harness and leaning forward at the time of ejection, he had received four fractured vertebrae and a broken left wrist during ejection. Fortunately, after parachuting down, he had his fall broken by the thick jungle canopy which snagged his parachute, leaving him dangling about a metre above the boulder strewn ground. John believed this had probably saved his life as falling on the boulders combined with his back injuries would most likely have killed him. According to Allan Pinches, *"..as I lowered myself, I noticed pain in my back but thought I had merely bruised or sprained it. I managed to cut some equipment and a dinghy from the seat pack and scurried from the scene in case there were any 'unfriendly' nearby."*

Both were of the belief that aircrew who had ejected were not taken prisoner and would be shot by the North Vietnamese. According to John, *"You stuck out like a thumb being Caucasian and if you landed in 'bad country' you were not going to be able to evade successfully. If you got to higher ground, the 'King Birds' or 'Rescue Birds', who were on station 24/7 could then start homing in on you."* John collected his survival kit and headed up the mountain ridge line to evade and secure a likely rescue site. His radio calls from this vantage point remained unanswered. Allan Pinches, who had landed about 400 metres away, could hear his pilot's radio calls but could not climb the ridgeline because of his back injury. He could not bend over and was exhausted after covering only a few hundred metres in a couple of hours, so found shelter for the night. John used his emergency ARC10 radio every 30 minutes and a couple of further times after dark but he had no joy reaching any potential rescuers.

The two of them remained separated overnight and the dawn brought renewed efforts for them to make contact on their radios. About midday they were able to establish contact with each other when John changed radios. Making contact was quite a boost to their morale. They then alternated their distress calls to conserve radio battery power.

During the afternoon, John heard the callsign of another "Magpie" overhead, using his callsign of "Magpie 41". John called up using the same callsign and said, "Magpie 41, this is your Commanding Officer Magpie 41 on the ground." A USAF C-130, King Bird, "King 26", from the 39th Aerospace Rescue and

Recovery Squadron, heard this transmission and told the airborne Magpie 41 to change his callsign and get out of the area. "King 26" then began coordinating the rescue. While they recognised John had a distinctive Australian accent, they had two personal questions to authenticate who he was, and they also asked for distinctive numbers that would only be known to him. John told them he wouldn't have a clue what his distinctive numbers were and that he had heard no enemy activity during the night.

There were no Search and Rescue (SAR) "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters available for the extraction, but they had a Bell UH-1 "Slick." This helicopter had no protruding armaments. A FAC aircraft then overflew their position and directed John and Allan to track the position of the aircraft by sound. It was a very quick location, but John could not see the "Slick" because the cloud base had come right down the mountain below John's position. He almost called off the rescue attempt.

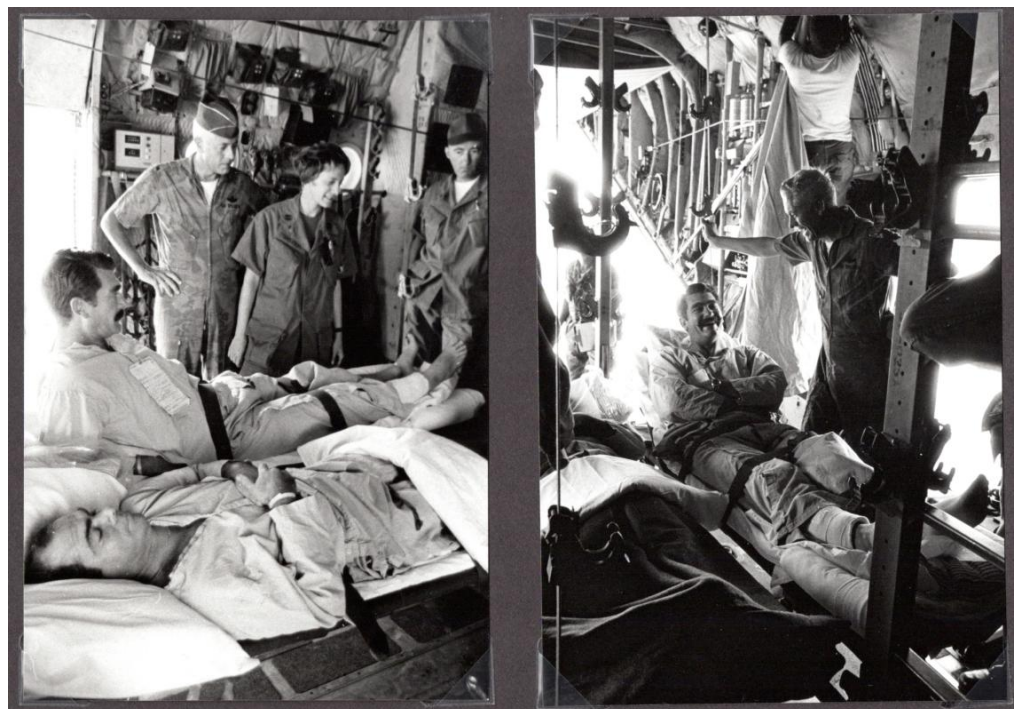
The extraction system used by the rescue helicopter, known as a "jungle penetrator" could be lowered by cable through the jungle canopy to lift out downed airmen. The cloud lifted after a quick prayer and the helicopter lowered a "jungle penetrator." This was now about 24 hours after their ejection and the helicopter was almost out of fuel. John praised the helicopter pilot who had flown up and down the sides of the mountains in heavy cloud, trying to locate them in *"stinking weather conditions."*

They were then able to locate Allan Pinches who had struggled to make his way towards the valley floor, but unable to make it, Allan Pinches had dragged himself through heavy jungle and into an overgrown clearing which appeared to be an old Montagnard garden. Allan Pinches said, *"When the pilot came in to pick me up, he actually chopped away tree branches with his rotors. He was really sticking his neck out."*

Allan Pinches had been expecting a more rudimentary harness type hoist. Upon sighting the "jungle penetrator" he said, *"Rather than waste any precious seconds working out how to unfold it (I now know it only takes a second), I slid one leg through a canvas loop and hung on. Immediately that I was clear of the tree tops the chopper swung out into the valley, so that within seconds I was suspended about 1000 feet above the ground. All that was between me, and a big drop was a loop of canvas held in place with the press-stud and eyelet, and my grip on the cable. That is how I remained until the winch operator was able to get me into the cabin."*

After refuelling at a US fire support base, they were flown to the US 18th Surgical Hospital at Quang Tri, where John had his fractured kneecap plastered. While waiting to be treated, John had watched ground troop casualties being brought in by helicopter. He describes this as *"absolute carnage and like a butcher's shop."* Everyone who came through the door had a Purple Heart medal around their neck, apparently given to them before arriving at the MASH.

Right: While passing through Cam Ranh Bay enroute to Vung Tau, John and Allan Pinches had a reunion with their rescuer, USAF Lt Col. Sidney Spilseth (top left), Commander of the 39th ARRS at Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, who piloted the Hercules "King 26". Images from John Downing.

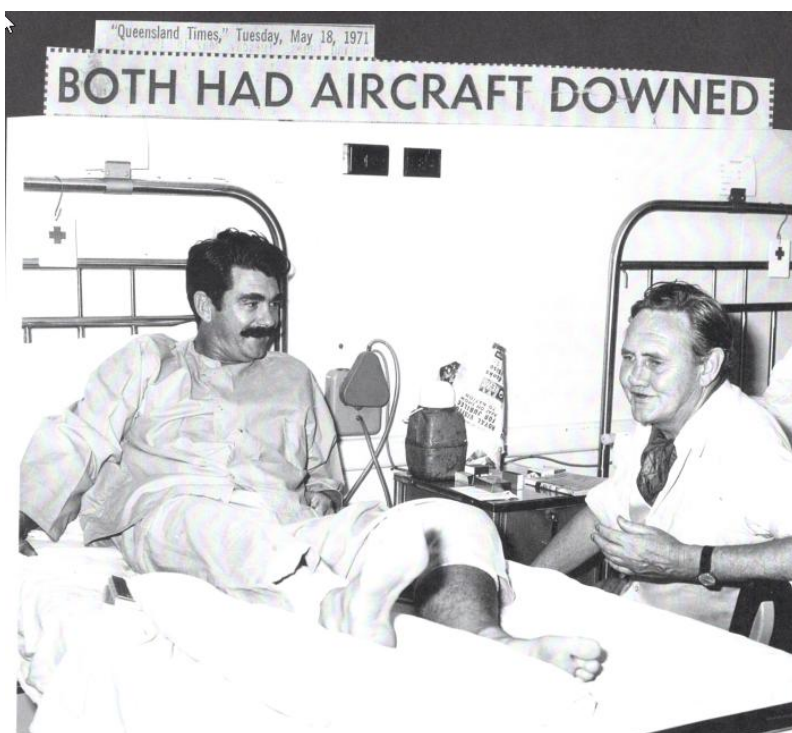


Rescued Meets Rescuer



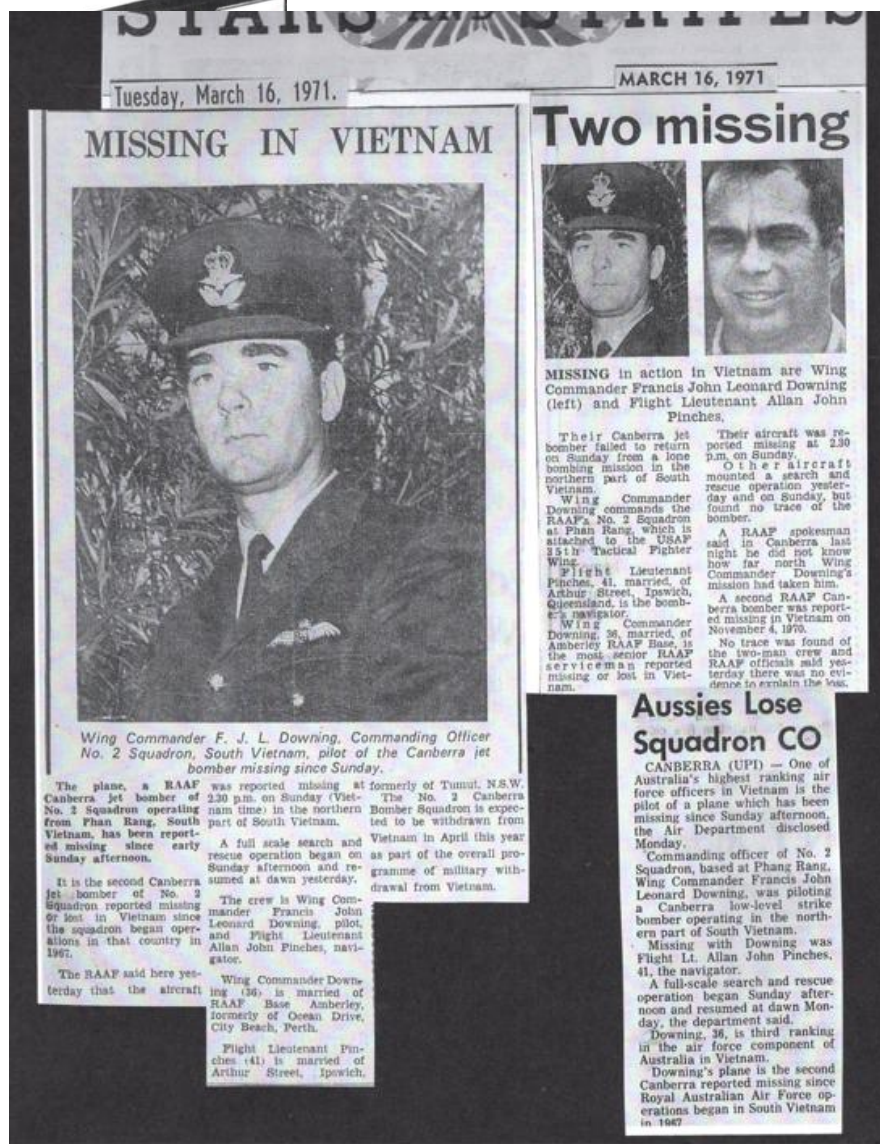
FIRST MEETING -- RAAF Wing Cmdr. F.J.L. Downing (foreground), commander of RAAF Number 2 Squadron here, and USAF Lt. Col. Sidney M. Spilseth, (right), commander of the 39th ARRS at Cam Ranh Bay AB, met verbally during an extended search and rescue operation following the loss of Commander Downing's Canberra bomber last month. Colonel Spilseth, piloting the HC-130 Hercules rescue control aircraft, was the first searcher to determine the location of the downed RAAF crew. The other rescued RAAF member, Flt. Lt. Allen J. Pinches, navigator/bombardier, is not pictured here. The Aussies were passing through Cam Ranh Bay enroute to Vung Tau when the "reunion" took place.





Above: While in the First Australian Field Hospital at Vung Tau, John and Allan Pinches were visited by the then Defence Minister, Mr John Gorton. The pair found they had a common bond with both having had their aircraft shot down – Mr Gorton twice during WWII. Image Queensland Times, 18 May 1971.

Right: Some Newspaper cuttings, dated 16 March 1971, showing John Downing and Allan Pinches as missing. Source John Downing.



Missiles downed RAAF bomber

From LAURIE O'NEILL

Aust. bomber crew rescued near Laos

SAIGON, Mon.—The commanding officer of an Australian bomber squadron and his navigator were today rescued by an American helicopter after their Canberra went down west of the northern city of Hue.

Wing Commander F. J. L. Downing (36) and Flight Lieut. Allan Pinches (41) were reported missing during a lone bombing mission yesterday.

Wing Commander Downing's father lives in Oceanic Drive, City Beach. His wife is at the R.A.A.F. base in Amberley, Queensland.

The plane went down about 14 miles from the Laotian border.

An Australian military spokesman said that the rescue was made at dusk under difficult weather conditions.

Both crew members were in good condition at a U.S. military hospital in Quang Tri—one with a slightly injured back and the other with an injured knee.

The cause of the crash and other details were not known tonight.

The aircraft was reported missing at 2.30 p.m. yesterday.

Other aircraft mounted a search and rescue operation but found no trace of the bomber.

Wing Commander Downing trained at the R.A.A.F. college at Point Cook before he became a flying instructor.

Before he left for Vietnam in October last year, he spent about nine months as commanding officer of No. 1 opera-



W/Cdr Downing

tional conversion unit at Amberley.

He was responsible for training pilots and navigators of other aircraft to fly Canberra bombers.

He has three children, Michael (13), Wendy (10) and Katherine (9).

Wing Commander Downing heads the R.A.A.F.'s No. 2 Squadron at Phan Rang, which is attached to the U.S.A.F. 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.

There are usually eight Canberra bombers in No. 2 Squadron. The aircraft are about 20 years old but are rated as having an "as new" operational use.

A Canberra bomber was reported missing in Vietnam on November 4, 1970.

AIRMEN RESCUED

CANBERRA — The Department of Air in Canberra yesterday confirmed that the crew of an RAAF Canberra jet bomber reported missing on Sunday in South Vietnam, had been found alive and well.

A spokesman said the department had not yet received advice on what caused the crash, west of Hue in northern South Vietnam, and about 14 miles east of the Laotian border.

The two man crew was found yesterday by a search and rescue helicopter of the United States Air Force.

They were presently in hospital under observation.

They are: Wing Commander Francis John Leonard Downing, pilot, aged 36, married, of Amberley RAAF Base — the Commanding Officer of No. 2 Squadron at Phan Rang — and Flight Lieutenant Allan John Pinches, navigator, aged 41, married, of Ipswich, and formerly of Tumut, N.S.W.

CANBERRA. — A RAAF Canberra bomber shot down in South Vietnam 10 days ago had been hit by surface-to-air missiles (SAMS) the Defence Minister, Mr Gorton said yesterday.

He said it was the first time the North Vietnamese had been known to use Sams below the demilitarised zone.

Mr Gorton said he had spoken to the bomber's pilot and navigator in Vung Tau Hospital during his four-day visit to Vietnam.

"There is little doubt they were fired on by two SAMS where SAMS had never been before," he said, at a press conference.

The Canberra jet was piloted by the commanding officer of Australia's Canberra bomber squadron in Vietnam, Wing-Cdr. F. J. L. Downing.

With the navigator, Flight-Lt. A. J. Pinches, he was rescued by a US helicopter 24 hours after the plane was shot down on March 14, 14 miles inside the South Vietnam border with Laos.

Mr Gorton said the SAMS would not restrict the Australian bomber squadron's operations.

He said the attack had been near Khe San, near the border, where the Canberra had been bombing.

The two airmen had told him they ejected from the plane after it was badly damaged.

They had been turning at the time, which had probably saved them from a direct hit.

A near-miss had caused considerable damage to the plane, then another near-miss had damaged it severely.

As they ejected, the bomber had crashed with one wing on fire.

Both men had been hurt as they ejected, Mr Gorton said, but when he had seen them in hospital "they were quite chipper."

Mr Gorton said the battle in Laos had undoubtedly been extremely bloody on both sides.

South Vietnamese forces had taken quite heavy casualties, he said.

North Vietnamese casualties were said to have been twice as heavy and they had also lost many tanks.

Mr Gorton said that during his visit he had been briefed by Australian military and diplomatic sources on the Laotian operation.

He had been told the operation was not a rout or a retreat. Its objectives had been achieved.

"The enemy now will never know if a raid of this kind might occur again," he said.

"They will have to maintain heavy forces in that area to protect what had never before been attacked."

"The area the South Vietnamese went into was where stocks had been built up over a period — supply dumps."

"They went in to destroy these stocks."

Newspaper reports about the shooting down of RAAF Canberra 228 and the rescue of John Downing and Allan Pinches.
Source John Downing.

RAAF Canberras were not fitted with Missile Early Warning Systems (MEWS). After this event, no aircraft without MEWS were programmed to fly into any zones covered by missile envelopes.

Reflecting their incredible escape, John and Allan Pinches called each other on the anniversary of the incident every year until Allan Pinches passed away in 2017.

On 5 June 1971, the eight remaining dark camouflaged bombers that were the spearhead of No.2 Squadron returned to RAAF Amberley after a record 13 years of continuous service outside of Australia, including four years in Vietnam. John was present to greet them.



Above: Tarmac Reunion at RAAF Amberley for the new CO of No.2 Squadron, Wing Commander Tom Thorpe (left) and his predecessor Wing Commander John Downing, photographed on the Squadron's return from Vietnam. Image John Downing.



While on sick leave in Australia and recovering from his injuries on a Gold Coast holiday, John was told to fly to Canberra for an interview to be a Staff Officer to the Governor-General. He was given three weeks' notice to move from Queensland to Canberra and spent nearly two years in the position of Military-Secretary to the Governor-General.

Receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross

On 6 December 1971, while serving in the role of Military-Secretary to the Governor-General, John received notification of being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). The recommendation for his award read:

"Wing Commander Francis John Leonard Downing was Commanding Officer of No.2 Squadron in the Republic of Vietnam from 5 November 1970 to 22 March 1971. Throughout his operational tour of duty, Wing Commander Downing displayed outstanding command ability, professionalism, and devotion to duty. By his personal example of professional competence and sincere interest in the welfare of his subordinates, Wing Commander Downing succeeded in maintaining the morale and proficiency of No. 2 Squadron, thus sustaining the already high reputation enjoyed by the Squadron.

On several occasions, Wing Commander Downing was involved in air operations against strongly defended and tactically sound enemy positions. Often the targets were situated in terrain that permitted only restricted attack headings and which thereby placed the attacking aircraft in a vulnerable situation. During these missions, often flown in adverse weather, reduced visibility and low cloud base, Wing Commander Downing without thought of personal safety, pressed home his attacks in the face of enemy fire, and accurately bombed the targets. On one such occasion, when target destruction was essential for the safety of nearby Allied troops, Wing Commander Downing's aircraft sustained severe battle damage during the final bombing run, necessitating him to carry out an emergency landing under minimal control conditions. The accuracy and success of Wing Commander Downing's attack was praised and confirmed by Allied troops, who witnessed the attack.

Wing Commander Downing's tour of duty was cut short when he had to be repatriated to Australia as a result of injuries sustained during ejection from his aircraft after it had been severely damaged by an enemy surface-to-air missile during an operational mission.

Throughout his operational tour of duty in the Republic of Vietnam, Wing Commander Downing continually displayed outstanding leadership, devotion to duty and courage in the air and on the ground. The excellent example he set his subordinates brought great credit to himself and the Royal Australian Air Force."



Above: John Downing receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross from His Excellency the Governor-General at a Government House Canberra Investiture on 28 April 1972. **Below:** John Downing with his wife Louise and his two daughters, at Government House, Canberra, after receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross. Images John Downing.



John had a subsequent posting, as Staff Officer Project Coordination at Support Command in Melbourne and then a posting as Director of Air Force Safety in Canberra, spending nearly two years in that position.



John with his staff as Director of Air Force Safety, Canberra. Image John Downing

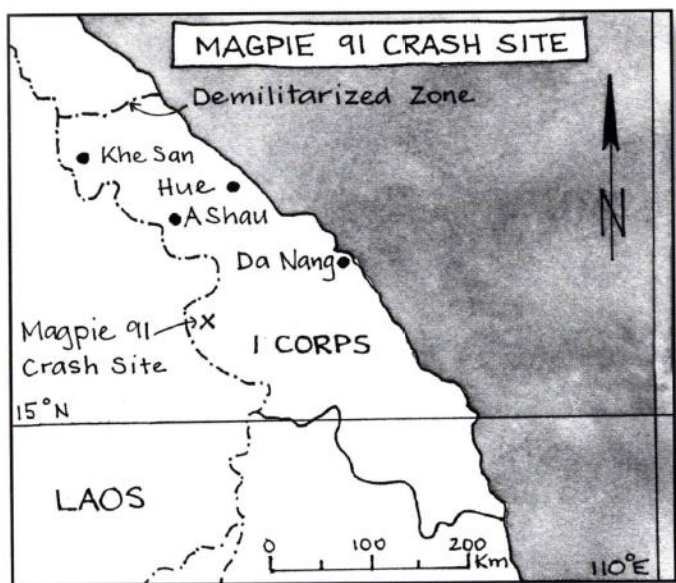
John resigned from the RAAF on 13 June 1977, taking up a position with the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation (BASI) on 1 July 1977. John spent approximately 14 years overall with the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation, initially at the Central Office in Canberra, followed by the Adelaide Field Office, back to Canberra and then back to Adelaide, where he became the Superintendent for the Northern Territory and South Australia.

Magpie 91 Epilogue

The crash site for Magpie 91 (Mike Herbert and Bob Carver) was believed to be as indicated on the map (Shown Right), drawn by Catherine Gordon and appearing in Doug Hurst's book *'Magpies in Vietnam - Canberra Bomber operations in Vietnam and the recovery of the lost crew thirty-nine years later'*.

While the war was still on, further access to search the area where Magpie 91 disappeared was impossible. Hostilities in Vietnam officially ended in 1975. Largely due to widespread civil unrest in Vietnam and post-Vietnam War sentiment in Australia, not much was done about locating Australian MIAs and the fate of Canberra A84-231 and its crew continued to remain a mystery.

In 1982, while hunting, Ka Tu villagers from a remote area in the Quang Nam province, Central Vietnam, found metal wreckage which was scavenged and things like electrical wiring was used to make snares. They kept this find of valuable scrap metal to themselves, but word later got out.



An Australian diplomatic and military delegation went to Quang Nam Province in 1984, hoping to find information to assist the location of six MIAs, including Herbert and Carver. Little useful information was gained and the search for the aircraft and Herbert and Carver stalled until December 2000 when Americans found aircraft wreckage in Quang Nam Province, that by its nature and position could be the missing Canberra.

Headed by Vietnam veteran and retired Lieutenant Colonel, Jim Bourke, a group called Operation Aussies Home (OAH) was started in March 2002 with an aim "to locate Australia's six missing in action personnel from the Vietnam war and bring their remains back to Australia, or to prove that no remains were there to be recovered." By late 2008, the only missing Australian MIAs still in Vietnam were Mike Herbert and Bob Carver.

The search gathered momentum in 2008 following the experienced Army History Unit offering their services to the Air Force Search and Recovery Team and a Report from Jim Bourke resulted in approval for a combined Army History Unit/Air Force Search and Recovery Team operation. A reconnaissance mission between 5 and 15 January 2009 was a complete success and after further investigation on site, on 20 April 2009 the crash site of Canberra A84-231 was confirmed and plans were made for a full archaeological dig to find and recover all that could be found of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver and bring their remains home for burial in Australia. Finally, on 31 August 2009, the remains of Mike Herbert and Bob Carver were welcomed home in a reception ceremony at RAAF Base Richmond, attended by their families and former comrades from No.2 Squadron in Phan Rang and Amberley.

As part of the 18 August 2010 Vietnam Veterans Day Remembrance Service, held at the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial in Canberra, plaques re-listing Mike Herbert and Bob Carver as Killed in Action instead of Missing in Action were dedicated.



John Downing spoke at that Service, on behalf of No.2 Squadron members, saying *"how thankful he was, as a newly arrived Commanding Officer in Phan Rang, to have men who quickly and competently ran a thorough search, and how grateful all who knew Mike Herbert and Bob Carver were that their remains had finally been found, brought home and put to rest in such a dignified way."*

Left: John Downing speaking at the Vietnam Memorial, Canberra, 18 August 2010. Image from Magpies in Vietnam - Canberra Bomber operations in Vietnam and the recovery of the lost crew thirty-nine years later. Image Lance Halvorson.

David Marshall's painting 'RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit'

When John was at a ceremony at the Australian War Memorial in 2018, for the presentation of David Marshall's painting 'RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit', John said he was forever grateful to those who helped rescue them. He said, *"pilots can't fly unless all the groundcrew do their job and you've got to give tribute to them. Without them you can't operate...."*

Right: David Marshall's RAAF 'Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit', presented to The Australian War Memorial in 2018. From Left to Right: AWM Director, Dr Brendan Nelson, John Downing and Brad Pinches who attended for his father who passed away in 2017. Image AWM.



John went on to say: "Now do I have any regrets? Yes. Years ago, my daughter was in the Navy serving in Darwin. An NCO made himself known to her, and he said, 'I served in No.2 Squadron under Wing Commander Downing. Are you any relation?' When Wendy said, 'Yes, he's my dad,' the NCO then said, 'I packed his parachute.' John said, "So, do I have any regrets? Yes. I didn't meet that man, and say thank you, and shake his hand."

John donated a framed print of the painting, together with some of his Vietnam memorabilia to the National Vietnam Veterans Museum on Phillip Island in 2018. During that ceremony John had an emotional meeting with Lindsay Tucker, the man who had packed his parachute the day before the fateful flight.

Right: Pictured at the National Vietnam Veterans Museum on 19 April 2018, standing in front of a display dedicated to John Downing are, from left to right, Lindsay Tucker, John's wife Louise Downing, Marion Brennan who created the display and John Downing. Image National Vietnam Veterans Museum Facebook.



John's display at the National Vietnam Veterans Museum underwent cleaning and maintenance in 2023. Ms Wendy Anderson, Education & Interpretation Officer at the Museum, kindly provided some images from the display, shown below.



In 2023 John donated his own copy of 'RAAF Magpie 228 Takes a Fatal Hit' to the South Australian Aviation Museum.

Recent Years

John turned 91 in April 2025. At that time, he was still living at home, in Rose Park an inner suburb of Adelaide, with his wife of 54 years, Louise. John was a widower when he met Louise. He and his late wife had three children, one son and two daughters. Two of them followed John with military service careers. His eldest son Michael served in the Australian Army and his eldest daughter Wendy in the Australian Navy, both giving around 20 years' service. John and Louise had one son, Kristian.

John had a long interest in sporting shooting and firearms, beginning when he was around eight years old, hunting rabbits and foxes. In 1958, John was captain of the eight-person RAAF College Shooting Team which won the RAAF intraservice competition. After leaving the RAAF in 1977, John developed an interest in "Single Action Shooting", also known as "Western Action or Cowboy Action Shooting." The sport attempts to preserve, promote and respect the skills, traditions and pioneering spirit of the historic American Old West, using pre-1898 single action pistols, rifles and shotguns. John was an active shooter in this sport for many years, competing 10 times in the US between 1990 and 2000, and only retiring from competition in 2022. John was the editor of *The Australian Shooters Journal* and *The Australian Pistol Shooters Bulletin* publications for many years.

John's aviation interests and active contribution to the preservation of aviation history continued in his later years. John was a member of the South Australian Aviation Museum and a member of the Museum's History Group, a group of volunteers with an interest in researching and preserving SA aviation history and writing profiles on significant SA aviators such as himself.

A part of his volunteer commitment to the South Australian Aviation Museum, John worked on the Museum reception desk on occasional weekends. He enjoyed dealing with visitors, including children and answering their questions about the exhibits and flight. No one had an inkling they were talking with a decorated legend of Australian Air Force history!



Left: Taken in 2023, at 89 years of age, John is standing alongside the South Australian Aviation Museum's Canberra bomber exhibit, John reflects back on the time he stood alongside a No.2 Squadron Canberra in South Vietnam 50+ years ago! – Images the author and John Downing.

John had some speaking engagements in 2023 and 2024. In May 2023, as part of the South Australian Aviation Museum's contribution to South Australia's History Festival 2023, John gave a very interesting talk, to a packed audience, about his time as the C.O. of No.2 Squadron and flying Canberra bombers in Vietnam.



Above: John Downing talking to a packed audience during the 'South Australia History Festival 2023' at the South Australian Aviation Museum. Image South Australian Aviation Museum Facebook.

Below: After the talk, John mingled with guests around the Museum's Canberra exhibit. Pictured, from left to right are John's son Kristian Downing, John Downing, Louise Downing and Member for Bragg, Mr Jack Batty MP. Image the author.





John and the author at the Burnside Historical Society in April 2024. – Image Burnside Historical Society

In 2024 John gave talks to the Probus Club at Burnside and to a supper meeting of the Burnside Historical Society.

John was a friend of RAAF Edinburgh and the Air Force Association (South Australia) and attended Air Force events, including the Air Force Centenary Commemorative Service in 2021 in Adelaide, sharing his story of distinguished service and surviving being shot down with junior Air Force members.

Pictured below at the Air Force Centenary Commemorative Service in Adelaide in 2021, John is wearing awards for his 26 years of distinguished service with the Royal Australian Air Force. Image Department of Defence.

John received the following Awards:

Distinguished Flying Cross.

*Australian Active Service Medal
1946 – 1975 with Clasp Vietnam.*

Vietnam Medal.

Defence Force Service Medal.

National Medal with First Clasp.

Australian Defence Medal.

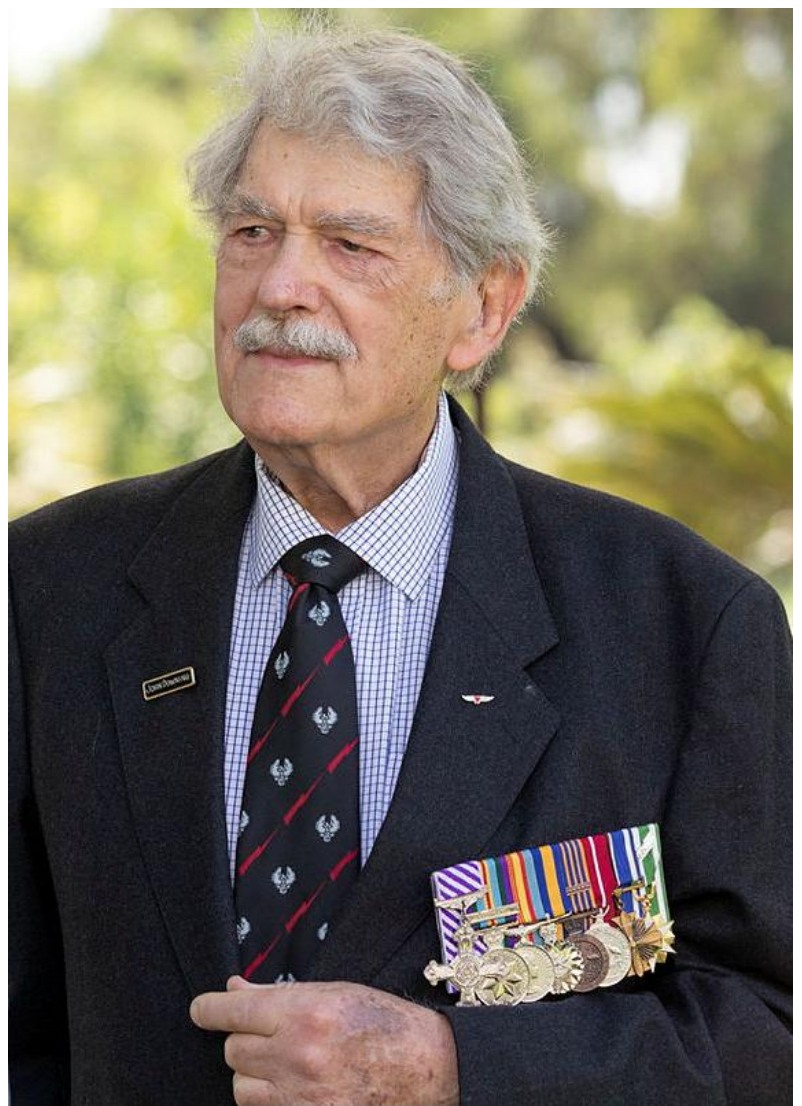
*United States of America Air Force
Outstanding Unit Award with Valor.*

Returned from Active Service Badge

*Distinguished Flying Cross
(United States).*

*Martin-Baker Tie Club
(Ejected from an aircraft using a
Martin-Baker ejection seat in order
to save his own life).*

*Membership of the Caterpillar Club
(Having saved his life by parachute).*



“Blue Skies and tailwinds.”
“May your wings stay strong and your spirit soar high.”

Sadly, John Downing passed away on 22 August 2025, at the age of 91, and a funeral service was held by Charles Berry and Son at Norwood on 4 September 2025.

John’s casket was draped with a RAAF Ensign and items on the top of the coffin included his medals and flowers. In place of an offered RAAF Officer’s cap was his favourite cowboy hat which he had insisted be present.



Kristian Downing delivering his eulogy at his father’s funeral service at Charles Berry and Son, Norwood on 4 September 2025. Image from Charles Berry & Son livestream with permission of Louise Downing.

Eulogies were delivered by John’s sons Michael and Kristian and daughter Kathy. A Military Eulogy was delivered by Group Captain Greg Weller, RAAF Edinburgh and Vice President of the Air Force Association (South Australia).

Kristian Downing’s Eulogy

John’s youngest son, Kristian Downing, began his eulogy by reading the sonnet “High Flight” by John Gillespie Magee Junior (Reproduced over the page). Magee, a Royal Canadian Air Force fighter pilot during World War II, had written the poem after piloting a Spitfire to 33,000 feet during a training flight in August 1941. He was so impressed by the speed and agility of the aircraft and moved by the experience of flying at that altitude, he finished the poem once back on the ground. Magee died three months later in a training accident.

According to Kristian *"I know dad loved this poem, as he chose it some time ago when he sat down to make some notes for his funeral service. He wasn't unwell at that time – he was just very pragmatic, and very well organised!"*

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds,--and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of--wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air. . . .

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew--
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr., 1941

[As printed in High Flight: A Story of World War II, by Linda Granfield,
illus. by Michael Martchenko, Tundra Books, 1999.]



With Kristian Downing's kind permission, the following is reproduced from his eulogy:

".....In his later years I would frequently describe dad, with affection, as a tough old bugger.

Despite drinking plenty as a young RAAF pilot, smoking for 40 odd years, and putting all manner of unhealthy foods through his body, he lived a remarkable long and healthy life.

Dad had so many surgeries for replacement bits, I used to call him Steve Austin, or the six million dollar man.

Some of his medical ailments were discovered or diagnosed quite accidentally, including when his pituitary tumour causing acromegaly was diagnosed by a casual handshake and a discussion re his increasing hat size.

Another time, his almost ruptured aorta was found during a routine check-up. Thankfully, these medical problems and many more were resolved through surgery, including a broken collarbone, a broken patella, a broken humorous, 2 replacement hips and various other bits and pieces.

So when Dad was approaching his 75th birthday, I said to my siblings

that they'd better come to town to celebrate this milestone, because "he won't be around much longer".

I said the same at 80, at 85 and again at 90, which we celebrated in grand style with the extended family, including those from across the pond in NZ, and three generations and their partners.

So, eventually and unfortunately, I was right:

Dad's health declined more rapidly after 90 and his mobility decreased as he exercised less and less because, by his own admission, he was "just being lazy today". But he stayed mentally sharp.

7 weeks before his death, Mum and I were summoned to his GP to be told he was in acute kidney failure, and he had only days to go. But one last time, just like ejecting from that aeroplane, he defied the odds and greatly exceeded the GP's expectations.

He was genuinely surprised and very disappointed when he realised that he was not going to recover from this downward spiral. He said "I feel fine. I feel healthy. But the Dr tells me I'm going to die. Bugger!"

Over the final weeks and days I spent many hours sitting and talking with Dad. He had no dark confessions, no great revelations, and no pearls of wisdom to share, but he regaled many stories of a long, happy and adventurous life.

He told me he had no regrets, no unfinished business and that he had achieved everything he wanted to do in his life.

I think that's an enviable thing to be able to say, after 91 years.

I think that's a very good way to say goodbye."

Military Eulogy

A Military Eulogy was delivered by Group Captain Greg Weller from RAAF Edinburgh. Group Captain (GPCAPT) Weller is also the Vice-President of the Air Force Association (South Australia).

GPCAPT Weller had known John and Louise Downing for over five years, having first sought John out as a distinguished Vietnam veteran who had an incredible story to share with contemporary serving Air Force personnel and the broader community. GPCAPT Weller said:

"It is an honour to be here today providing this synopsis of John's remarkable military service which will be etched in RAAF history forever."

GPCAPT Weller noted that John was clearly well respected by his colleagues, as reflected in the countless tributes that had been posted in social media since John's passing. These included statements such as....

"You were an inspiration to all of us that served in 2 Sqn."

"A very good CO at 2sqn."

"My old CO from 1BOCU and 2Sqn in Vietnam. We were all upset that he was shot down and happy as he was found by a Jolly Green Giant who heard his hand-held radio at the end of the valley he parachuted into. We never saw him again but heard he was home safe, happy times. Great respect for a great man."

"Privileged to have served under your command in Phan Rang."



"RIP Sir. Condolences to family. Privileged to have served under your command in Phan Rang."

On a lighter note, GPCAPT Weller also noted the following comment made by someone about the image of John standing alongside a Canberra in 1971:

"When I first saw the post and photo of John, I thought it was Tom Cruise from Top Gun!"

Author's comment:

It was noted at the time of writing this update to John Downing's profile on 19 September 2025, the original Air Force Association (SA Division) Facebook post announcing John's passing, posted on 24 August 2025, had been shared 34 times and many of those shares had gone on to be shared many times also.

On behalf of the Royal Australian Air Force and the Air Force Association (South Australia), GPCAPT Weller offered condolences to the family:

"Louise, on behalf of the Royal Australian Air Force and the Air Force Association (South Australia), I offer the sincerest condolences to you and the family. John was a proud and respected Air Force Officer who served the Air Force with distinction, making an indelible mark in its incredible story and legacy. You and the family should be immensely proud of your husband, father and grandfather. He will always be remembered for his distinguished service, airmanship and leadership. Today, the Air Force family comes together to be with you to say farewell to a friend, a warrior, an aviator, a commanding officer and a fellow Air Force Officer."

No.2 Squadron, the unit John commanded in the Vietnam War, was reformed in 2000 to operate the Boeing "Wedgetail" aircraft; the Air Force's airborne early warning and control aircraft. GPCAPT Weller closed by reading a special message from Wing Commander Sam Thorpe, Commanding Officer No.2 Squadron, based at RAAF Base Williamtown:

"Today, No 2 Squadron mourns the loss of one of our truly distinguished aviators. John Downing's service to our nation and enduring connection with Air Force has formed a deep part of the legacy of modern day No 2 Squadron. A legacy we deeply cherish with the values of courage, dedication, teamwork, and professionalism at the forefront. I had the privilege to be with John and share in his memories at the Australian War Memorial when he presented the painting of that perilous day in March 1971, re-creating that moment when he and his navigator were shot down. A print of the painting proudly adorns the halls of 2 Squadron today, serving a stark reminder and inspiration to all of us who have followed in his footsteps, of the sacrifices he made for our nation. Etched in history, his legacy will remain there for all our current and future aviators as long as the 2 Squadron Colours fly."

Lest we forget.

Wing Commander Samuel Thorpe,
Commanding Officer No. 2 Squadron.

John's Final Resting Place

After the Adelaide funeral service on 4 September 2025, John made a final journey to Canberra, where he was laid to rest on 16 September 2025, during a small service attended by family, at Woden Cemetery, Woden Valley, in Canberra, ACT. He was buried in the Anglican Headstone Section A, Portion 3 A142B.

Sources:

John Downing Interviews with Gary Petts November 2022.

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<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S04275>

John Downing's September 2005 interview with Colonel David Chinn MBE (Rtd) at AWM website

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S03826>

John Downing's RAAF Log Books.

John Downing's Photo Collection

Captain L D Bruce, 612th TFS, letter "Outstanding Air Strike Performance" (apparently forming DFC (USA) citation) dated 9 Feb 1971, to Commander 35th TFW.

Australian Awards Vietnam 1962-1991 by Ross Sutton.

Highest Traditions – The History of NO 2 Squadron, RAAF by John Bennett.

Magpies in Vietnam – Canberra Bomber Operations in Vietnam and the Recovery of a Lost Crew 39 Years Later by Doug Hurst.

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Wikipedia: No.1 (B) OCU.

National Vietnam War Memorial, Phillip Island, Victoria.

Kristian Downing Eulogy for John Downing.

WGCDR John Downing - Military Eulogy, Thursday 4 September 2025, delivered by GPCAPT Greg Weller, RAAF Edinburgh and Vice President of the Air Force Association (South Australia).

Gary Petts

Friend of The History Group

South Australian Aviation Museum

Updated 19 September 2025