



Figure 1 –



Figure 2 –

# William Theodore Pedler

416608

2AAU (No.2 Air Ambulance Unit)  
&  
100 Squadron

Served for Australia  
21 July 1941  
to  
5 September 1943

Honoured by STU024.  
SCH017

Anzac Spirit School Prize

William Theodore “Theo” Pedler was born on 22 July 1922 in Blyth, South Australia.<sup>1</sup> He had five siblings, of which he was the second born to George and Sarah Pedler (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).<sup>2 3 4</sup> Raised on a farm along the Broughton River, approximately seven kilometres east of Koolunga, Theo attended primary school in a small two-room schoolhouse.<sup>5</sup> From an early age Theo was fascinated with the armed forces, often asking his father, an ANZAC veteran, to teach him skills like Morse Code.<sup>6</sup> Theo was a member of the Koolunga Rifle Club and was reportedly a handy shooter.<sup>7</sup> Theo later attended Prince Alfred Collage, where he joined the Cadets and Rowing Club, and took challenging classes such as Advanced Mathematics.<sup>8</sup> Theo left school early to return to the farm and help his father (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

On 21 July 1941, Theo enlisted into the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) for the Second World War just one day short of his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Theo’s parents had to approve his enlistment as he was still a minor.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that Theo’s parents let him enlist with the promise that he would join the 2AAU (No.2 Air Ambulance Unit) as a precaution to ensure Theo stayed relatively ‘safe’ throughout his service.<sup>12</sup>

Theo trained at five sites to develop his skills as a gunner, bomber and pilot. He began at No.4 Initial Training School in Victor Harbour in early September 1941 and was allocated his initial role: Wireless Air Gunner (see Figure 6).<sup>13</sup> He was sent to No. 1 Wireless Air Gunners School in Ballarat immediately after allocation, arriving in Ballarat on 18 September 1941. He trained in all aspects of wireless operating, including sending and receiving messages by Morse Code, setting up and repairing equipment, and basic operating procedures to bring an aircraft back to ground base.<sup>14</sup>

After six months of intense training in Ballarat, Theo was posted to No.2 Bombing and Gunnery School in Port Pirie, which he commenced in April 1942 (see Figure 7a, Figure 7b and Figure 8).<sup>15</sup> Here, Theo trained in machine gun use, bomb sightings, aircraft recognition and tactical exercises.<sup>16</sup> In May, Theo moved to No.4 Embarkation Depot in Adelaide before being sent to No.8 Service Flying Training School, based just out of Bundaberg, on 14 May.<sup>17</sup> At 8SFTS, Theo’s training focussed on low level formation flying and combat tactics.<sup>18</sup>

In January 1943, Theo was transferred to 2AAU in Archer Field but relocated to Kingaroy just weeks later.<sup>19</sup> In Kingaroy, repetitive duties like transmitting and receiving messages, monitoring air traffic and logging communications consumed Theo’s workday. After hours, Theo enjoyed writing letters home to his family, reflecting Kingaroy, and his longing for Archer Field:

*“This joint is not the best of places and I would far rather be back at Archer Field... it is fairly high above sea level and in winter time it gets very cold, which I hope I won’t be here for.”<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> NAA: A9301, 416608

<sup>2</sup> nee Atkinson

<sup>3</sup> The 6 children born to George and Sarah were: George (died at 9 months), William, Lesley, Doris (died at 4), Laura, and Kingsley.

<sup>4</sup> William Theodore Pedler family tree, built on [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au)

<sup>5</sup> Personal reminiscence of Roger Cox, interview with STU024 , 25 April 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Personal reminiscence of Kingsley Pedler, provided to/by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>7</sup> National Library of Australia (2008) *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA: 1931–1954)*, Trove, viewed 16 May 2025, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-title44>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Personal reminiscence of Roger Cox, interview with STU024 , 25 April 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d) ‘William Theodore Pedler’, viewed 6 May 2025, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/>

<sup>11</sup> At this time, people under the age of 21 were considered minors.

<sup>12</sup> Personal reminiscence of Roger Cox, via email correspondence with STU024 , 12 May 2025

<sup>13</sup> Virtual War Memorial, (n.d) ‘No.4 Initial Training School Victor Harbour’, viewed online 6 May 2025, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/1300>

<sup>14</sup> 1WAGS (n.d), ‘History of 1WAGS No.1 Wireless Air Gunners School Ballarat’, viewed 10 May 2025, <https://www.1wags.org.au/history-of-1wags/>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Places of Pride (n.d) ‘No.2 Bombing & Gunnery School’ viewed online 12 May 2025, <https://placesofpride.awm.gov.au/stories/2>

<sup>17</sup> NAA: A9301, 416608

<sup>18</sup> RAAF Historical Section, *Units of the Royal Australian Air Force, Vol. 4*, pp. 83–84

<sup>19</sup> NAA: A9301, 416608

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Theo to Margaret, 22 March 1943, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Despite his dislike for Kingaroy, Theo enjoyed the evenings after work as they resembled evenings of his childhood: attending local dances, singing songs, and visiting cafes with fellow soldiers:

*“Last Friday night Paddy and myself went off to the pictures,... while Saturday night Smithy and myself went to the local dance, while last night I managed to scramble into church...”<sup>21</sup>*

The constant relocations took a toll on Theo and highlight the transience and unpredictability servicemen experienced:

*“I am at the moment trying to collect together some of my gear which is spread out as usual up and down the country.”<sup>22</sup>*

Correspondence with his sister, Maragret, indicates that Theo was transferred to Papua New Guinea sometime between 22 March and 6 April 1943 (see Figure 9a and Figure 9b). Upon arriving in Papua New Guinea, Theo found the weather comparable to Kingaroy, though the local wildlife frustrated him:

*“Just at the moment, the mozzies are... upsetting me... The only cause of complaint so far is the insects, beetles, reptiles and other forms of pests which make quite a habit of either crawling into your bunk, clothes and boots... I often have to clear a few frogs out of my bed...”<sup>23</sup>*

In early September 1943, Theo was placed on loan to No. 100 Squadron, serving as a wireless air gunner. The squadron’s mission was to attack Japanese bases, especially Gasmata, which was being used to refuel aircraft enroute to Lae, a major Japanese base on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea. Cutting off this supply route by bombing airstrips, barges, submarines, and ships became a vital part of the squadron’s mission, preventing the arrival of supplies and reinforcements which would otherwise strengthen the Japanese.<sup>24</sup>

On the morning of 4 September 1943, the day before Theo was placed on duty, Squadron leader Ronald Hepburn led three Boston’s in a low-level bombing raid over Gasmata airstrip, successfully damaging parts of the runway; a further mission was planned for the next morning. By morning, Hepburn was deemed medically unfit to lead the mission and Flight Lieutenant Roy Woollacott was called to lead the raid. Assigned to Beaufort bomber A9-374, an aircraft built for low level bombing raids, their task was to ensure the airfield was unserviceable.

At first light, Woollacott led the squadron in a low-level dive-bombing attack. This decision went against orders from Group Captain Hewitt who had instructed Hepburn not to let any aircraft fly below 8,000 feet due to the high risk of anti-aircraft fire, though previous raids saw planes diving from 3,000 to 1,500 feet. At approximately 7 AM, Theo and crew aboard the A9-374 approached Gasmata, but were hit while passing over the airstrip. Woollacott managed to complete the attack before the aircraft was engulfed in flames and plunged into the sea. All four crew members were presumed dead instantly.

Laura Cox, Theo’s youngest sister, recalls her parents’ reactions to his death:

*“...Dad and I were returning from a meeting... At the turnoff to home, we saw the... minister sitting in his car... Dad... knew immediately something was wrong. He didn’t*

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Theo to Margaret, 6 April 1943, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>24</sup> WW2DB (2004-2025), ‘Gasmata in WW2 History’, viewed 25 May 2025, [https://ww2db.com/event/timeline/place/Australian-New-Guinea/New-Britain\\_Gasmata#google\\_vignette](https://ww2db.com/event/timeline/place/Australian-New-Guinea/New-Britain_Gasmata#google_vignette)

*stop to ask. He kept on going... 'Missing in action – presumed dead'. That's all he could tell us."*<sup>25</sup>

*"After the war, my mother burned all his letters. Maybe it was her way of moving on."*<sup>26</sup>

In 2020, Dr Andrew Forrest began a personal mission to find Beaufort bomber A9-188, a plane carrying his uncle, which was also shot down on a bombing mission over Gasmata. Forrest's mission led to the discovery of Beaufort A9-374, Theo and his crewmates, in 2022.<sup>27</sup>

Theo's service demonstrates the Anzac Spirit, particularly courage and perseverance. As the son of a veteran, Theo had great respect for the history of Australia's armed services. He'd heard stories of great sacrifice in the First World War, yet despite this, he courageously enlisted. The fact he was a minor significantly highlights his determination to serve. After just one day with 100 Squadron, Theo was courageous enough to fly in a raid with a crew he was unfamiliar with, but who will forever be part of his story. Theo also demonstrated perseverance in the way he dealt with the emotional toll of constant relocations between Victor Harbour, Ballarat, Port Pirie, Adelaide, Bundaberg, Archer Field, Kingaroy and Papua New Guinea. Theo tried to see the positives in each new environment, telling his sister about his camp in Papua New Guinea:

*"...We have a bit of a stream running by our camp which we use the water for drinking and washing... we are most fortunate that way..."*

*... some of the boys have scrounged a whole bunch of bananas and an armful of paw paws... I can see for the next day or so we will be having quite a feed..."*<sup>28</sup>

William Theodore Pedler's service and spirit is remembered locally on the Koolunga War Memorial and within the Koolunga community. Lest we forget

**Word Count: 1494, excluding figure numbers.**

---

<sup>25</sup> Written reminiscence of Laura Cox, provided to/by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Emma Kirk (2024), 'Identity of a missing WWII plane has been confirmed by the Royal Australian Air Force,' viewed on 27 April 2025, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/identity-of-a-missing-wwii-plane-has-been-confirmed-by-the-royal-australian-air-force/news-story/0463789b16a6d3a75205a0b3b01c2b9d>

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Theo to Margaret, 6 April 1943, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

## Figures



**Figure 1:** Theo's enlistment portrait, 1941 (age 18)<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 2:** Theo's enlistment portrait, 1941 (age 18)<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 3:** Theo (age 16) on the back of one of his horses located somewhere in Koolunga c. 1938<sup>31</sup>



**Figure 4:** Family Portrait taken in Koolunga c. 1931 (L to R): Margaret, George, Sarah, Laura, Kingsley, Theo (age 9)<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 5:** Family Portrait taken in the northern end of the Koolunga township c. 1932



**Figure 6:** Theo prior to departure for No.4 Initial Training School, Victor Harbor c. 1941<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> NAA: A9301, 416608

<sup>30</sup> NAA: A9301, 416608

<sup>31</sup> Unknown Photographer, c. 1938, Theo age 16, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>32</sup> Unknown Photographer, c. 1938, Pedler family portrait, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>34</sup> Unknown Photographer, c. 1941, Theo prior to departure for Victor Harbour, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Theo (aged 10), George, Sarah, Kingsley, Laura, Laura (auntie), Margaret.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 7a and 7b:** Family welcoming Theo back from Ballarat at the railway line before continuing training in Port Pirie c. March 1942.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 8:** Family Portrait taken just before Theo left for Port Pirie c. March/April 1942.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 9a and 9b:** Theo (circled in red) during his service in Papua New Guinea, 1943.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Unknown Photographer, c. 1932, Pedler family in Koolunga, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>35</sup> Unknown Photographers, c. March 1942, Pedler family with Theo prior to training in Port Pirie, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>36</sup> Unknown Photographer, c. March/April 1942, Pedler family portrait, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

<sup>37</sup> Unknown Photographers, c. 1943, Theo serving in Papua New Guinea, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

**Part B**

At SCH017, all Year 9 and 10 students complete a project aligned with the Anzac School Spirit Prize guidelines. The competition is a much loved and anticipated task among students. As a Year 9 in 2024, I became familiar with a range of sources to support my research. This year as a Year 10, I felt very prepared to undertake this task. After much deliberation, I decided to research William 'Theo' Pedler; I heard his story at a local Anzac Day Service. After the service, I was lucky enough to speak to Theo's nephew, Roger Cox, who shared more about Theo's life and service. We exchanged emails to share sources and allow me to fact check information I discovered using online sources.

I found that working with a relative was challenging, but also incredibly helpful. Roger provided me with a range of wonderful sources, particularly letters and photographs, but I was faced with challenges when he became protective of information until he understood my task and the Prize. I think he wanted to ensure that the task is original and not a repeat of his own research, but also that I was respectful of Theo's service. As I completed the project, I shared information he hadn't discovered; he realised my commitment to developing my own research and shared things more willingly. This was a great example of how historians need to consider perspective and bias during their research.

Another example of perspective I found was historians debating the key reason for the Beaufort's crash. Timothy Hall claims that Hepburn failed to pass on Hewitt's orders about the descending height limit, claiming that Hepburn stated, "I regret not putting my words in writings."<sup>38</sup> Hewitt suggested Woollacott's overconfidence and familiarity with the target played a role in their death. While this information was interesting, I left it out of my task because placing blame detracts from the nature of commemorating Theo's service.

A key resource that helped with my research was the Virtual War Memorial, but being a wiki style platform that relies on user contributions, the information available sometimes varies in detail. I needed to consider this when measuring the reliability of the site. Overall, the entry about Theo was helpful as a starting point but posed more questions for my research, such as how a 2AAU member came to be on a 100 Squadron mission. I used the 'Research Links' on the site to access the National Archives of Australia where I downloaded Theo's enlistment record. This record gave me further useful information about where Theo served, but the dates of his movements were unclear, and some did not align with information provided by other sources. Information regarding his move to Papua New Guinea is still unclear, with his letters to Margaret the only source to mention his relocation. This highlighted for me the importance of cross-referencing information to ensure my information is as accurate as possible.

**Word Count: 500**

*HaSS word count: 497*

---

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Hall (1981) *New Guinea 1942-44*, Routledge

## Bibliography

1WAGS (n.d), 'History of 1WAGS No.1 Wireless Air Gunners School Ballarat,' viewed 10 May 2025, <https://www.1wags.org.au/history-of-1wags/>

Emma Kirk (2024), 'Identity of a missing WWII plane has been confirmed by the Royal Australian Air Force,' viewed on 27 April 2025, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/identity-of-a-missing-wwii-plane-has-been-confirmed-by-the-royal-australian-air-force/news-story/0463789b16a6d3a75205a0b3b01c2b9d>

Letter from Theo to Margaret, 22 March 1943, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Letter from Theo to Margaret, 6 April 1943, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

NAA: A9301, 416608

National Library of Australia (2008) *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA: 1931–1954)*, Trove, viewed 16 May 2025, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-title44>.

Personal reminiscence of Kingsley Pedler, provided to/by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Personal reminiscence of Laura Cox, provided to/by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Personal reminiscence of Roger Cox, interview with STU024 , 25 April 2025.

Personal reminiscence of Roger Cox, via email correspondence with STU024 , 12 May 2025

Places of Pride (n.d) 'No.2 Bombing & Gunnery School' viewed online 12 May 2025, <https://placesofpride.awm.gov.au/stories/2>

RAAF Historical Section (n.d), *Units of the Royal Australian Air Force, Vol. 4*, pp. 83–84

Timothy Hall (1981) *New Guinea 1942-44*, Routledge p. 95

Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d) 'William Theodore Pedler', viewed 6 May 2025, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/>

Virtual War Memorial, (n.d) 'No.4 Initial Training School Victor Harbour,' viewed online 6 May 2025, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/1300>

William Theodore Pedler family tree, built on [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au)

WW2DB (2004-2025), 'Gasmata in WW2 History', viewed 25 May 2025, [https://ww2db.com/event/timeline/place/Australian-New-Guinea/New-Britain\\_Gasmata#google\\_vignette](https://ww2db.com/event/timeline/place/Australian-New-Guinea/New-Britain_Gasmata#google_vignette)

## Figures

Figure 1 - NAA: A9301, 416608

Figure 2 - NAA: A9301, 416608

Figure 3 - Unknown Photographer, c. 1938, Theo age 16, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 4 - Unknown Photographer, c. 1938, Pedler family portrait, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 5 - Unknown Photographer, c. 1932, Pedler family in Koolunga, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 6 - Unknown Photographer, c. 1941, Theo prior to departure for Victor Harbour, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 7a and 7b - Unknown Photographers, c. March 1942, Pedler family with Theo prior to training in Port Pirie, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 8 - Unknown Photographer, c. March/April 1942, Pedler family portrait, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.

Figure 9a and 9b - Unknown Photographers, c. 1943, Theo serving in Papua New Guinea, provided by Roger Cox, personal collection.