

**Speech by  
Wing Commander A.M. O'Leary OAM**

Royal Australian Air Force

**Ceremony held at Englændergraven, Tarm  
12 March 2015**

to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the shooting down of  
RAF Lancaster ME449

*Photo by Birthe Holme Kasch*



Distinguished guests, family members of the crew of Lancaster ME449, ladies and gentlemen: my name is Anthony O'Leary and I am a Wing Commander in the Royal Australian Air Force. Today I have the great privilege of representing both the Australian Government and the Royal Australian Air Force.

As an airman I am absolutely delighted to be here with you and to take part in this commemoration. We are here to acknowledge the service and sacrifice of a unique British and Australian Lancaster crew who crashed, with mixed fortunes, in March 1945 while returning from a mission to lay mines in the straits between Denmark and Sweden.

In honouring the crew today we also pause to reflect on the contribution of the service men and women of Australia, Denmark, and Great Britain who have fought and fallen to preserve the peace and freedoms we enjoy today.

Today also highlights that it's not just service men and women who contribute and make sacrifices during war. There are remarkable people who fill the gaps left by those who serve. In WWII there were the underground or the resistance, and there were the members of the community who stood up for what they believed in, and promoted humanity at a great risk to themselves and their families, and showed humanity to absolute strangers.

The story of ME449 in March 1945 is the story of many people, all showing great courage and doing extraordinary or remarkable things. It is therefore most fitting we pay tribute to the humanity and generosity of the Danish community that came to the aid of the crew of ME449 in their hour of need. These people risked theirs and their families' lives to help total strangers.

I would like to reflect on Bomber Command, of which 103 Squadron and ME449 crew were an integral and most important part. 125,000 airmen served in Bomber Command during WWII, of which 55,573 were killed on operations. Approximately 70 percent of crews either died, or were taken prisoner, or were injured between 1939 and 1945.

The crews of Bomber Command flew over 364,000 sorties; remarkable when you think about it. And at the peak of the campaign, up to a thousand heavy bombers would conduct operations on a single night, of which ten percent of aircraft and crews would not return home. In 1943 and 1944 the attrition rate was so high that crews had less than a 50 percent chance of surviving a tour of 30 operations.

Understanding this risk, over 12,000 Australians still volunteered to serve in Bomber Command, and believe it or not, over 10,500 of them were like Bertie, Mitchell, and Porter and served in mixed crews within RAF Squadrons. Only two percent of all Australians who enlisted served in Bomber Command; however, the 3,486 who died account for 20 percent of our Australian combat deaths. The Australian 460 Squadron alone lost 1,018 aircrew, or the equivalent to the Squadron being wiped out five times over. The men of Bomber Command showed great character and conviction.

The men, like the crew of ME449, who elected to serve in Bomber Command are remarkable because they knew the odds, yet still volunteered. Day after day they still walked out to the aircraft, they did their flight checks, they started their engines, and they took the fight to the enemy. I've never met an airman from Bomber Command who didn't have a twinkle in the eye and understand the value of life. My father was one of them.

ME449 has five members who earned the right to wear a small caterpillar on their tie<sup>1</sup>. I was fortunate in 2013 to dine with the members of the Escape Lines Memorial Society who parachuted to safety and chose to recognise the contribution of the humble silk worm in saving their lives. I'm sure Slater, Foster, Bertie, Mitchell, and Fairclough would have all been thanking their lucky stars in March 1945 for the humble silk worm and for the Danish people who assisted them in their escape and evasion back to England.

Whilst these men were making their way back to England, their families and mates were worrying about them, just like so many Mums and Dads and other loved ones of airmen, soldiers, and sailors today.

Today we also remember the loved ones who farewelled them, who worried for them, who welcomed them back home or, too often, lost them on foreign fields. The large numbers of promising young lives lost during war time is devastating for families and communities. It is important that we continue to pay tribute and to remember their sacrifice. It is of comfort to family members to know where their loved ones are laid to rest and to know that these places are cared for. And, I must say as an Australian, that it is a great comfort to me and my fellow countrymen that our compatriots rest here on Danish soil in a country that upholds the values and freedoms for which our men and women fought.

This site recognises the contributions of Porter and Morris and ensures they are not forgotten, and also those that served, those that made the ultimate sacrifice, and the community that showed both humanity and courage in caring for and assisting them in their hours of need. Their legacy is reflected in the community that has chosen to remember, and those who have

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<sup>1</sup> *The Irvin Air Chute Company issued a lapel pin in the shape of a caterpillar and membership in the Caterpillar Club to air crew whose lives were saved by using a silk parachute to bail out of a disabled aircraft.*

contributed to the healing of those from the families who are here through showing compassion and goodwill.

The Australian Government would like to thank all of you for being here today, and the many people and organizers who have contributed to the success of this commemoration.

We would especially like to thank the local council and the nearby communities and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who made and continue to care for these airmen graves.

May this site continue to be a reminder of the continued solidarity and bonds of friendship between the people of Australia, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, who have fought together for many years and through their efforts have promoted international peace and security and our shared values.

On a personal note it is a humbling experience for me to be representing the Royal Australian Air Force in thanking those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the finest tradition of ANZAC<sup>2</sup>. It is our legacy, our responsibility, and our privilege to uphold the memory of those who have fallen and to carry the memory forward.

I would like to finish with a prayer written by an Australian airman, Flight Sergeant Hugh Brodie, of 460 Squadron, Bomber Command.

Acknowledgement: FSGT Hugh Brodie, 460SQN, RAAF (Killed on Operation to Bremen 3 June 1942)

Almighty and all-present power  
Short is the prayer I make to thee  
I do not ask, in battle hour,  
For any shield for me.

The vast unalterable way,  
From which the stars do not depart,  
May not be turned aside to stay  
The bullet, flying to my heart.

I ask no help to strike my foe,  
I seek no petty victory here,  
The enemy I hate, I know  
To Thee is also dear.

But this I pray – be at my side  
When death is drawing through the sky,  
Almighty God, Who also died,  
Teach me the way that I should die.

Lest we forget.

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<sup>2</sup> *Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, famous for its service in World War I.*

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. I hope that gives you an insight into the airmen of Bomber Command and the courage that their family members showed every day of their lives. And thank you for your generosity and courage in looking after them in their hours of need.



RAAF Wing Commander O'Leary and Australian Embassy representative Rebecca Marshall  
after laying their wreaths at Englændergraven  
12 March 2015

*Photo by Anders Straarup  
Also see <http://www.airmen.dk/c101-6.htm>*

**[www.shotdownindenmark.com](http://www.shotdownindenmark.com)**