

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

David John Shannon, DSO and Bar, DFC and Bar

106 SQN (RAF), 617 SQN (RAF), Bomber pilot; Dambuster



Above: FLTLT David Shannon as a Flight Lieutenant at 617 SQN (AWM)

On the evening of the 16th/17th May 1943, three South Australian aircrew flew in the famous Dambuster Raid with No 617 Squadron (RAF). SQUADRAN David John Shannon, DSO and Bar, DFC and Bar, was the youngest Captain in the strike. He completed successive Bomber Command tours and became one of Australia's most brilliant and decorated pilots of Bomber Command.

David John Shannon was born 27 May 1922 at Unley, South Australia. His father, Howard Huntley Shannon, was an auctioneer and later Member of the South Australian Parliament from 1933 to 1968. His grandfather, John Wallace Shannon, also served in the South Australian Parliament as well as the Australian Parliament where he represented his home State for six years. Graduating from Unley High School, David was working for an insurance company when he enlisted in the RAAF on 4 January 1941. Completing initial training at No. 5 Initial Training School, Pearce (WA), Shannon then completed basic training at No. 9 Elementary Flying Training School at Cunderdin, WA, and obtained his wings commissioned as a Pilot Officer in September 1941 after completing No. 4 Service Flying Training School at Geraldton, WA. He was then posted to the No. 19

Operational Training Unit in Scotland where he completed bomber conversion on the dated Armstrong Whitley aircraft.

Shannon was posted to 106 SQN (RAF) in June 1942, a bomber squadron converting to the new Lancaster, based at RAF Coningsby in central England. He conducted his first mission, a mass 10000 aircraft raid over Germany, only four days after arriving at the squadron. Quickly earning a reputation as a gifted pilot, he completed 36 missions between June 1942 and February 1943. Surviving flak striking his aircraft on four separate missions, Shannon was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in January 1943 for his actions on his first operational tour.

Initially seeking a posting to an elite Pathfinder squadron, Shannon was specifically requested by his Commanding Officer No 106 Squadron, WGCDR Guy Gibson, to transfer with him to the new specialist unit, No. 617 Squadron that was formed specifically for the famous Dambusters strike. One of four

Australians in the Squadron, he was 617 SQN's youngest Captain at only 20 years old; an aspect he tried to conceal by growing a moustache.

On the evening of the 16 May 1943, Shannon captained one of 19 Lancaster's on the famous Dambuster Raid against three German dams. During the daring and dangerous strike, eight of the aircraft did not return and all but three members of the seven-man crews were killed, a loss of 53 lives. Shannon, captain of a Lancaster in the first wave, was tasked with striking the Mohne Dam or if it was destroyed, to attack the Eder Dam as a secondary target. After the initial aircraft successfully destroyed the Mohne Dam, WGCDR Gibson tasked Shannon to fly onto the Eder Dam, approximately 60nm away.

Attempting three unsuccessful approaches through fog and mountainous terrain, Shannon approached the dam on a fourth approach dropping his skipping bomb which successfully detonated against the dam wall damaging it to the extent where a successive strike by another pilot caused the dam to breach. For his actions on the 16th / 17th May 1943, Shannon was awarded an immediate Distinguished Service Order.

One of several aircrew to receive awards for the mission, the Citation read:

"On the night of 16th May, 1943, a force of Lancaster bombers was detailed to attack the Moehne, Eder and Sorpe dams in Germany. The operation was one of great difficulty and hazard, demanding a high degree of skill and courage and close co-operation between the crews of the aircraft engaged. Nevertheless, a telling blow was struck at the enemy by the successful breaching of the Mohne and Eder dams. This outstanding success reflects the greatest credit on the efforts of the following personnel who participated in the operation in various capacities as members of aircraft crew."



Above: The Eder Dam after the Dambuster Raid on the evening of 16 May 1943.(AWM)

For the remainder of 1943 and 1944, Shannon served with 617 Squadron conducting dangerous and specialist strike missions against canals, dams, and V-1 rocket sites, regularly using the new 12,000lb bomb.

On the night of 15 September 1943, he flew one of eight aircraft attacking the vital Dortmund-Ems Canal. Despite severe weather and the loss of five of the eight aircraft, Shannon successfully struck the target. He was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for this action.

In January of 1944, Shannon flew three successful missions attacking V1 rocket sites. Between March and May that year, his crew targeted Germany's war industry including daring strikes on factories, shipping ports and railway yards. During April he flew multiple low level pathfinder missions in Mosquito aircraft marking targets for other larger bomber aircraft. During June he flew more than eight missions in support of the D-Day landings. By September 1944, he had completed 69 bomber command missions across two tense operational tours over two years.

He was awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Service Order in September 1944 with the Citation stating:

"Since the award of a bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross, Squadron Leader Shannon has completed many sorties which he has executed with outstanding resolution and success. He has at all times displayed courage and fortitude of a high order and his appreciation of the responsibilities entrusted to him have set a fine example to all."



Above: PLTOFF Shannon (fourth from the right) after a 106 SQN Lancaster mission over Genoa on 22-23 October 1942 (IWM).

During 1945, Shannon was rested from Bomber Command and posted to two transport squadrons where he continued to fly to support the war effort. He was discharged in Britain in December 1945 and remained there in the immediate post war years, working for the Shell Company.

Shannon was an active member of the 617 Squadron Association and was deeply involved in organisation of the official commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Dambuster raid, as well as the establishment of the RAF Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park. Sadly, he passed away in 1993 shortly before the anniversary. Surviving three operational tours, he was one of Australia's most brilliant operational pilots and highly decorated RAAF members of World War 2.

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