

50th Anniversary of the Loss of Magpie 91

A Tribute to FLGOFF Michael 'Herbie' Patrick John Herbert



FLGOFF Herbert (left) with the 60,000th bomb dropped by 2 SQN in Vietnam (AWM)

This year is the 50th anniversary of the loss of Magpie 91, a RAAF Canberra bomber that was lost on an operational mission during the Vietnam War on 3 November 1970. The pilot of the aircraft, FLGOFF Michael Herbert, was a South Australian who had grown up in Glenelg and was on his first operational posting.

Michael Patrick John Herbert was born in Freeling, South Australia, on 6 September 1946. He grew up in Glenelg and attended Sacred Heart College from 1957 to 1963. Wanting to

fly as a boy, he joined the local Air Training Corps at 13 and won a flying scholarship allowing him to gain a private aircraft licence at only 16 years old. He applied for the RAAF Academy, securing a position in 1964 on Course 17. On 6 December 1967 he graduated from the RAAF Academy, filling the role of Squadron Warrant Officer for the graduating parade; an honour normally reserved for the high performing cadets.

Herbert then completed basic flying training at Point Cook and RAAF Pearce, graduating as a pilot in January 1969. Posted to RAAF Amberley to fly the Canberra bomber, he completed operational conversion training onto the jet bomber in 1969. Importantly, the operational conversion training was not just focused on flying the aircraft but also thoroughly preparing aircrew for combat flying in Vietnam. Indeed, by the time aircrew arrived in Vietnam, they only had to do several in-country familiarisation missions before being ready to fly combat missions.

On 25 February 1970 Herbert arrived at Phan Rang for his operational deployment in Vietnam; a significant step for any young pilot who had only recently completed pilot and operational conversion training. However, Herbert was a good pilot. His flight commander in Vietnam described him as “very safe” who “thought a lot about flying techniques and emergencies – more so than many of his contemporaries on the squadron.” Nicknamed Herbie, he slotted into squadron life at Phan Rang, playing in the local football teams and participating in the bases social life.

No 2 Squadron had been operating the Canberra bomber in Vietnam since April 1967. Although showing its age, the aircraft was reliable and the squadron had developed a smooth operating tempo resulting in considerable success.

Based at Phan Rang Air Base in “Ninh Thuan” province, the squadron was operating as part of the United States Air Force 35th Tactical Fighter Wing and during its four-year deployment flew approximately 12,000 sorties. In 1969, the squadron flew 2,862 missions and dropped its 50,000th bomb on 28 November. Missions were largely daylight by visual with missions being conducted seven days a week. By June 1970, the squadron was flying nine missions a day and Herbert had dropped the squadron’s 60,000th bomb on Vietnam.



RAAF Canberra Bomber A84-231, the aircraft that FLGOFF Herbert was flying when he went missing in 1970, on an earlier bombing mission in Vietnam. (AWM)

On 3 November 1970, Michael Herbert was flying his 199th mission over Vietnam. Accompanied by his navigator, PLTOFF Bob Carver, another young squadron member who was on his first posting, Herbert was conducting a routine bombing mission southwest of Da Nang near the Laotian border in Canberra Bomber A84-231 (Callsign Magpie 91). Having dropped their bombs on the target at 22,000 feet, they were returning to base when communications with the aircraft were lost and the aircraft disappeared from American radar screens.

Despite intensive searches, the missing aircraft was not located. There was no distress call made from the aircraft and no indication that it had been intercepted by long range high altitude surface to air missiles. It had been operating at high altitude meaning Vietnamese Anti aircraft fire could not have shot down the aircraft. Michael Herbert and Bob Carver were officially listed as Missing in Action, presumed killed. The deaths hit the squadron hard; they were the only operational losses during the war with only one other Canberra being shot down a year later with the aircrew successfully bailing out.

In April 2009, following a concerted campaign by LTCOL (Retd) Jim Bourke AM MG from *Operation Aussies Home* to find the crash site, an Australian Defence team investigated the crash and found the aircraft's crash site resulting in the repatriation of FLGOFF Herbert's remains to Australia along with those of his navigator, PLTOFF Bob Carver. FLGOFF Herbert was laid to rest at Centennial Park Cemetery, Adelaide, on 7 September 2009 following a full military State funeral at St Xavier's Cathedral, Adelaide, providing important closure for their families, colleagues, the Air Force and the Australian Government.

FLGOFF Herbert and PLTOFF Carver were the last remains previously unrecovered and listed as missing in action to be returned to Australia. Meanwhile, FLGOFF Herbert is listed on the Adelaide Southeast Asian Conflicts Memorial (North Terrace), the Adelaide Vietnam War Memorial (Torrens Parade Ground), the Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour and the Somerton Park Sacred Heart College Memorial Gates. Herbert is also remembered through the Sacred Heart College *Michael Herbert Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bursary* awarded to a Year 11 student who displays courageous service to others. In 2020, No 2 Squadron prepared a special nose art for an E-7A Wedgetail aircraft commemorating the 50th anniversary of the loss of Herbert's Magpie 91 Canberra bomber in 1970.

Herbert is the last South Australian Airmen to have been killed in combat.



FLGOFF Herbert's medals on display at the repatriation ceremony for the return of his remains to Australia. (Defence)



The special 50th anniversary Magpie 91 noseart on a 2SQN E-7A Wedgetail aircraft. (Defence)

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