

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

WING COMMANDER HARTLEY 'VIV' SHEARN DFC AFC

RAAF Fighter and Test Pilot (WW2, Korea)



Figure 1: Portrait of Hartley Vivian Shearn. (AWM)

Hartley Vivian Shearn, commonly known as Viv, was born on 19 Oct 1921 in Perth, Western Australia to Harry Vivian and Emily Ann Shearn. His father was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly as the Member for the Maylands Electorate in 1936 and held the Seat until his sudden death in January 1951. Viv was educated at Inglewood State School. During his teenage years, he gained his first exposure to the RAAF when he saw RAAF aircraft such as Bristol Bulldog, Wapiti, Hawker Demon and Avro Trainer aircraft visit the nearby Maylands for air displays and visits. Such experiences inspired him to gain a Private Pilot Licence through the local aero club.

Viv Shearn enlisted in the RAAF in Perth 18 July 1940. He was initially disappointed to be called up for training as an Air Observer (Navigator) and posted to commence Initial Training at Bradfield Park, Sydney, New South Wales. During the course, there was a call for recruits interested in pilot training due to a shortage of pilot trainees and so Shearn applied for remuster and was quickly accepted as he already held a Private Pilot Licence. Completing initial training, he was posted to No 5 Elementary Flying Training School at Narromine where Shearn completed basic flying training from September to November 1940, with a total of 53.25 hours on Tiger Moth aircraft with “no outstanding faults and an above average pilot” assessment.

Shearn completed advanced flying training at No 1 Service Training School, Camp Borden, Canada, through the Empire Air Training Scheme, receiving his Wings from AVM Stan Goble in mid-March 1941. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer upon graduating as a pilot.



Figure 2: Shearn (middle) with fellow trainee pilots in front of a Tiger Moth trainer at 5EFTS, Narromine, in 1940. (Shearn family)

He was then posted to England to undergo spitfire conversion training before being posted to No 457 Squadron, the RAAF's second Spitfire Squadron formed in England. Arriving in May 1941, he was largely involved in workup training and then combat air patrols with the new squadron flying both Mk 1a and Mk Vb Spitfires. During this period, he roomed with fellow 457SQN flight commander FLTLT Johnnie Gibson DSO DFC, an RAF air ace who had great success in the Battle of Britain and recorded a total of twelve aerial victories during the war. On 7 March, as a bit of a joke, the two pilots conducted an unauthorised night flight over neutral Ireland buzzing Dublin port and a nearby airfield in Spitfires that had their roundels and serial numbers blackened out.



Figure 3: Viv Shearn alongside fellow 457SQN air ace FLTLT John Gibson (RAF) and Gibson's Mk V spitfire in England (Shearn Family)

In March 1942, he returned to Australia where he became a foundational member of 77SQN flying Kittyhawk aircraft including over 150 operational missions in Northern Australia and New Guinea. Serving under noted leader SQNLDR Dickie Creswell and alongside future Prime Minister, John Gorton, Shearn flew fighter patrols and attack missions. On 25 August 1942, he made a forced landing on a beach at Anson Bay in the Northern Territory in a 77SQN Kittyhawk. During the squadron's deployment to Northern Territory, he flew combat air patrols and attempted intercepts of Japanese bombers but never actually engaged in combat due to the challenges of locating and intercepting enemy aircraft which during the final months of 1942 mainly appeared over Darwin at night.

In Late January 1943, the 77 SQN was tasked to relocate to New Guinea and in the process, transition from the P-40E Kittyhawk to the P-40K Kittyhawk. This involved flying the squadron's old aircraft to RAAF Amberley for disposal and then being transported on to RAAF Richmond to pick up the new P-40K Kittyhawks. Shearn ferried his P-40E A29-51 Kittyhawk via Daly Waters, Cloncurry, Charleville to Amberley arriving on 1 February, 1943. He then travelled via RAAF transport aircraft to RAAF Richmond where he picked up a new P-40K Kittyhawk and flew via Amberley, Rockhampton, Townsville, Cooktown, Horn Island, Port Moresby eventually arriving at Milne Bay on the 20th February.

In New Guinea, he flew Kittyhawk A29-189 nicknamed "Shaggus". From Milne Bay, he flew mostly low-level ground attack missions with the occasional air defence intercept mission. In May 1943, the squadron deployed to Goodenough Island, eventually sharing the airfield with 22 SQN (Bostons), 31 SQN (Beaufighters) and 76 SQN (Kittyhawks). Flying from Goodenough Island, Shearn continued to conduct fighter sweeps/intercepts but also fighter escort missions for Milne Bay based 100 SQN Beauforts, as well as the Goodenough Island based Boston and Beaufighter aircraft, along the southern coast of New Britain as far east as Jacquinot Bay destroying, when found, Japanese barges which were being used to bring supplies from Rabual to outstations down the coast. They also conducted strike missions against enemy airfields such as Gasmata.



Figure 4: 77SQN aircrew playing cards under the fuselage of a 77SQN Kittyhawk aircraft at Goodenough Is, New Guinea. FLGOFF Shearn is sitting second on the left. (Victorian Museum)

In November 1943, Shearn completed his operational tour with 77 SQN flying his last operational mission on 17 November. Posted to No.1 Aircraft Depot at Laverton, Victoria, as a Test and Ferry Pilot, he commenced his duties in March 1944, after four months operational leave. Tasked with testing and ferrying aircraft to operational units, Shearn was able to fly a wide variety of aircraft including Spitfire, Avro Anson, Tiger Moth, Kittyhawk, Airspeed Oxford, Beaufort, Beaufreighter, Beaufighter, Lockheed Hudson, Lockheed Lodestar, Lockheed Ventura, Liberator B24, Boston A20, Norseman, Mitchell, Wirraway and Wackett Trainer. During the posting, he experienced a number of engine failures, particularly on twin engine aircraft, forcing him to recover over some distance to airfields on a single engine.

Completing his posting at No.1 Aircraft Depot, Shearn was then posted to command No.87 Operational Base Unit at Geraldton, W.A, in July 1945. The base hosted No.2 Service Flying Training School operating with Avro Ansons providing pilots with twin engine training which provided Shearn an opportunity to continue flying. With the Japanese surrender in August, Shearn completed his posting in December 1945 and was demobilised in January 1946.

In late 1948, Shearn joined the Citizen Air Force Officer serving with No 25 Squadron where he was able to fly Tiger Moths, Wirraway and Mustangs. In late 1950, he was asked to re-join the RAAF as a FLTLT. He was posted to command the Western Australian University Squadron where he continued flying training aircraft and experienced his first flight in a jet aircraft, flying a Vampire in January 1952.

With the RAAF short of pilots with operational experience for the Korean War, Shearn was selected to join 77 SQN in Korea. He completed jet fighter training at No.2 (fighter) Operational Training Unit, RAAF Williamstown, during October 1952 and converted onto Meteors at Iwakuni, Japan, in early December, before being posted to 77 SQN in Korea. Arriving in Korea on 18 December 1952, he flew operational

sorties from January to July 1953, primarily in a Meteor A77-728 nicknamed "Betty Toot" and serving as a Flight Commander. The sorties were largely strike missions comprising 16 aircraft in four sections of four aircraft.



Figure 5: FLTLT Vic Shearn (right) standing in front of his 77SQN Meteor A77-728 "Betty Toot" at Kimpoo, Korea.(AWM)

Whilst in Korea Shearn flew 163 operational missions and was assessed as an exceptional pilot. He was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for planning and leading a courageous strike of 16 jets against a heavy anti-aircraft gun battalion, resulting in many targets destroyed without any loss. The Citation read;

"Flight Lieutenant Shearn joined 77 Squadron on 19 December 1952 and since that date has flown 157 missions. For the greatest part of his tour, his appointment has been that of Flight Commander. This officer has planned and led many successful attacks against the enemy. The thorough manner in which he has assessed every detail of the impending raid has enabled his formations to hit heavily defended targets with the minimum of loss. On the 5th June 1953, this officer planned and led an attack by 16 aircraft against an anti-aircraft training battalion, far into enemy territory. The target consisted of nine 76mm anti-aircraft guns, three heavy machine guns, and a considerable quantity of small arm weapons and 32 buildings. Flight Lieutenant Shearn personally selected as his target the anti-aircraft pits and attacked them first with such success that the remaining 15 aircraft attacked the target and evaded without any aircraft receiving damage. The final assessment revealed that 30 buildings and several gun emplacements had been destroyed. Flight Lieutenant Shearn's eagerness to fly on operations has been a fine example and inspiration to his fellow pilots and reflects great credit on himself and the Royal Australian Air Force."

On returning to Australia, Shearn was employed on research and development test flying from 1953 to 1958, which included attachment to the United Kingdom for research and development trials on air-to-air missiles. He was promoted to Squadron Leader in July 1954, shortly before spending six months in the United Kingdom on the Blue Jay/Firestreak air-to-air missiles trials.



Figure 6: FLTLT Viv Shearn (left) returning from the 77SQN flightline at Kimpo, Korea, after a strike mission. (AWM)

He commanded and trained aircrew members in the techniques and procedures of air-to-air missiles, personally flying over 1,000 hours in these tasks at Woomera, Edinburgh and the United Kingdom. He was instrumental in the development and trials of the highly successful 'Firestreak' missile and was the first person to successfully destroy a Jindivik target aircraft using the missile fired from a RAAF Sabre aircraft.



Figure 7: Shearn conducting an acceptance flight for RAAF Sabre A94-915 with a Blue Jay/Firestreak air to air missile for trials with Air Trials Unit. (Shearn family)

He recalls that living conditions were pretty simple in his initial stays at Woomera, as the Woomera Village was still under construction and members were accommodated in tents with open air bathing and toilet facilities.

Completing his flight test posting, Shearn was posted to RAAF Darwin, as Commanding Officer, Base Squadron RAAF Darwin, from April 1958 to January 1960. He was then posted to No.11 Squadron flying Neptune aircraft. He participated in a number of spectacular mercy missions, including the location of the foundered motor vessel 'Verao' which sunk in heavy seas 400 miles off Brisbane. Having found the survivors, he ensured his aircraft circled the survivors for eight hours until relieved by another Neptune and rescue ships, undoubtedly saving the lives of this ship's crew.

From July 1964, he was posted to RAAF Edinburgh in base management roles at Base Squadron Headquarters before retiring from the RAAF in October 1970. He was granted Honorary Wing Commander rank on retirement.

Shearn retired completing a distinguished flying career that had seen him serve in the same squadron in two wars, three operational tours and fly a total of 6,500 hours, including 1,000 hours in jet aircraft, and 59 types of military aircraft. He was at the forefront of Australia's development of air-to-air missile technology. He was awarded the Air Force Cross in 1963; the Citation stated: "*Shearn possesses one of the most outstanding flying records of a serving officer in the Royal Australian Air Force.*" His Honours and Awards include: Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Force Cross, 1939-45 Star, Air Crew Europe Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939-45, Australian Service Medal 1939-45, Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasp Korea, Korea Medal, Australian Defence Medal, Air Efficiency Award and Returned from Active Service Badge.

Following the Air Force, Shearn settled down in Adelaide completing twenty years in finance management and serving three years as a Burnside Council Councillor and then as the Burnside Mayor from 1991 to 1993. In 2011, the US Ambassador to Australia presented Viv Shearn, alongside 10 other colleagues, the US Air Medal for his service in Korea.



Figure 8: WGCDR (Retd) Viv Shearn DFC AFC (bottom right) after being presented with the United States of America Air Medal in 2011 in Canberra.

Viv Shearn passed away on 18 September 2018 in Adelaide. He was farewelled at a funeral supported by RAAF Edinburgh in which AIRCDRE Joe Iervasi, Commander Air Warfare Centre and Senior RAAF Officer South Australia and a former Commanding Officer of 77 Squadron, provided a military eulogy. The eulogy included a statement from the serving Commanding Officer 77 Squadron, WGCDR Jason Eastgate, which read:

“It was with great sadness that 77 Squadron learnt of the passing of WGCDR Hartley Viv Shearn, DFC, AFC. His skilful and aggressive leadership was an inspiration to those he flew with, and served alongside, at 77 Squadron. To the family; on behalf of No. 77 Squadron, it’s members past and present, our most sincere condolences on your loss. Our thoughts and prayers are with you as you lay to rest one of our Squadron warriors. He will always be remembered in the volumes of our Squadron history. Rest in peace ‘Viv’.

Viv Shearn was buried at Centennial Park Cemetery with a vintage Tiger Moth aircraft, the aircraft he had trained on, conducting a flypast.



Figure 9: Flying memorabilia and certifications commemorating the life of the late Wing Commander Hartley Vivian Shearn, DFC, AFC (Retd), on display at his funeral service held at Berry Funeral Directors, Norwood in Adelaide. Image RAAF Facebook.

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