

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN REGINALD JEFFREY "JEFF" BARNES

Reportedly South Australia's first Aboriginal to join the RAAF

NB. This document contains imagery of Aboriginal people who have since died which may cause sadness and distress.



Enlistment photo of Reginald Jeffrey Barnes in 1942 (NAA)

Approximately 3000 Aboriginals and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served in Australia's armed forces during World War II. The Air Force was at the forefront of recruiting non-Europeans during World War II, due largely to the need to supply 27,000 airmen to Britain under the Empire Air Training Scheme. However, unfortunately there is little knowledge on the Indigenous South Australians who served in the Air Force. Recent research has now identified over 30 Indigenous South Australians who served in the Air Force during World War 2 in various roles such as mechanics, general hands, nursing and cooks but the list is still probably not reflective of how many did serve. LAC Reginald Jeffrey Barnes is one of the few on which the Air Force Association SA has been able to develop some knowledge.

Reginald Jeffrey Barnes was born on 21 November 1922 at Davenport, an aboriginal community at the time, just north of Port Augusta, South Australia. His mother, Alice Booth, born in Leigh Creek, was married to William Thomas Barnes who sadly died before Reg was born. Alice later

married Walter Gibson. From the age of two, Jeff was brought up under the care of a Mr H Forster, the station manager of Lake Torrens Station located in central Australia north of Port Augusta. Barnes later wrote on his discharge notice *"by arrangement with my mother (who was a cook on the station), I was brought up as the foster child of Mr and Mrs Forster. I received all the care and attention that they could have shown their own child."*

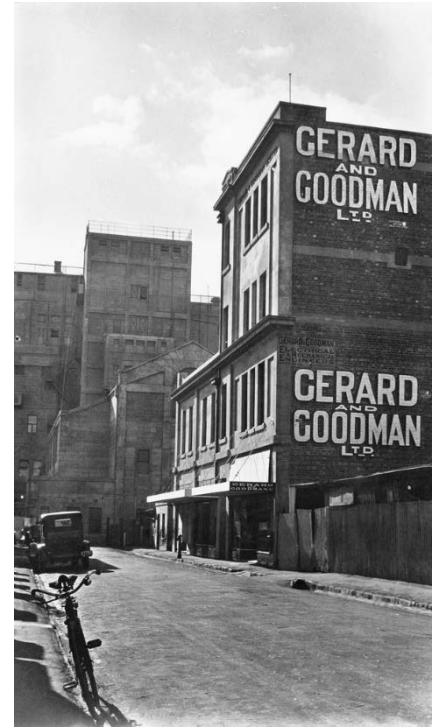
He also spent some time at the Colebrook Childrens Home at Quorn. The Colebrook Home was previously Oodnadatta Children's Home, established by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) in 1924, under the supervision of missionary Miss Annie Lock. In 1927, the home was moved to Quorn and was renamed Colebrook Children's Home. Managed by Matron Ruby Hyde and Sister Delia Rutter, Colebrook Home was one of the noted South Australian aboriginal homes between the wars and post-World War 2 up to the 1970s. At the time, it is highly likely, Barnes would have met George Tongerie, another young Indigenous child taken from his family who would later serve his country in the RAAF overseas and return to Adelaide becoming a leader in the Indigenous community.



The Colebrook Children's Home in Quorn that Barnes attended during the 1920's. (State Library of South Australia)

In 1933, he moved to Adelaide following Mr Forster who had retired from his station manager role at Lake Torrens Station. He obtained his Qualifying Certificate from Prospect Public School in 1937 aged 14. He pursued further education after school studying Fitting and Turning at Adelaide School of Mines in 1939 and then Freehand Drawing at the Adelaide School of Arts and Crafts in 1940. He was described as a keen church worker and Sunday school teacher at Kilburn Methodist Church. After school he worked as a storeman with Gerard and Goodman Ltd, an electrical engineering company. The company was established by Alfred Edward Gerard (11 August 1877 – 13 October 1950), known as "A. E. Gerard", a South Australian electrician and businessman who was at the forefront in founding and financially supporting the United Aborigines' Mission (UAM), which operated Colebrook Children's Home in Quorn.

In late May 1941, Barnes applied for entry to the RAAF as an aircrew trainee. His application was supported by correspondence from the Aborigines Department advising the Commanding Officer No 5 Recruiting Centre that *"I have pleasure in advising that the Aborigine Protection Board has given consent for Reginald Jeffrey Barnes to enlist in the Royal Australian Air Force. The Board has also agreed to exempt him unconditionally from the provisions of the Aborigines Act 1934-1939. Mr Barnes is now regarded in law as a white man."* The CO also received correspondence from the Directorate of Recruiting, Air Force Headquarters stating, *"authority is granted to enroll the abovenamed [Reginald Jeffrey Barnes] in the Royal Australian Air Force Reserve."*



Gerard and Goodman premises in Adelaide in the 1930's

Aboriginal May Be Pilot

The first aboriginal to join the R.A.A.F. in South Australia, if not Australia, was enrolled and sworn in as an air-crew reservist yesterday. He is Reginald Jeffrey Barnes, 18, of Prospect.

Officers described him as being of a good type, keen, and satisfying all requirements.

This high opinion of Barnes is endorsed by his employer, Mr. A. E. Gerard, chairman of directors of Gerard & Goodman Ltd., electrical engineers.

Barnes said today that although he had made only one flight he had always been keen on flying. He intended to study hard to become a pilot.

Brought up since babyhood on Lake Torrens Station by the manager, Mr. H. A. Foster, Barnes came to Adelaide when Mr. Foster retired in 1933. He has been with him ever since.

He is a keen church worker and Sunday school teacher at Kilburn Methodist Church.

In June, the Daily Mail of Adelaide reported him as being the first aboriginal to join the RAAF in South Australia, an aspect unverified at this time.

In early July, the Recruitment Officer wrote to Jeff advising *"at your examination you were successful in passing the necessary tests. In the first instance, you have been selected to enter an initial training school as trainee aircrew. Final assessment will be dependent upon the progress and ability displayed by you during the initial training course."* The Officer further advised that due to lack of training capacity, Barnes would be placed on a waiting list and unlikely to be called up before October 1941 adding *"in the meantime, you have been enrolled in the Royal Australian Air Force Reserve with the rank of Aircraftman Class 2."*

He was advised however that his mathematics was not of a sufficient standard and thus, the RAAF placed him on reserve pending completion of a preliminary mathematics course and passing of subsequent mathematic exam. In December 1941, he was advised that he was *"unable to attain the required educational standard for entry into the RAAF as a member of an aircrew, your name has now been removed from the reserve."*

On 5 January, Barnes applied for enlistment into the RAAF as a trainee electrician at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, and subsequently passed RAAF entry tests in mid-January. He was re-enrolled into the RAAF Reserve on 13 January pending a training position becoming available. He was later advised in February that a position was available and on 10 March 1942, Jeff enlisted in the RAAF as a trainee electrician.

During March, he attended No 1 Engineering School at the Melbourne Showgrounds, Ascot Vale and on 5 April 1942, he commenced training at No 1 School of Technical Training at the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne. Established in January 1940, 1STT conducted training in various trades including wireless operators, electricians, instrument makers, instrument repairers, fitters, cooks, X-ray technicians, welders, mess stewards, and high frequency direction finding.

Completing the Trainee Electrician Course by late July and graduating as an Electrician, Barnes was posted to No 6 Service Flying Training Squadron (6SFTS) at RAAF Base Mallala just north of Adelaide and not far from his birthplace.

6SFTS was established on 25 August 1941 by Wing Commander, R.N. Brearley DSO, MC, AFC, a World War 1 veteran and noted aviation pioneer between the wars, as one of the Empire Air Training Scheme schools in Australia to train air crew for the Commonwealth. Designed to consolidate trainees who had completed elementary flying training at other units, the Service Flying Training Schools introduced techniques such as instrument flying, night flying, advanced aerobatics, and formation flying. One of eight such units established around Australia to train pilots under the Empire Air Training Scheme, 6SFTS operated Avro Anson and Airspeed Oxford twin-engine trainers with Tiger Moth and Moth Minor aircraft in support roles.

Over 2,250 trainees, including a course of Royal Netherlands East Indies Air Force airmen, completed pilot training at the unit during World War 2, until it was disbanded in January 1946. It was a large and busy base with two large aprons, over 14 hangars and over 160 aircraft. The unit flew 7,689 flying hours and graduated 2,250 trainee pilots between 1942 and 1946. As an electrician at the unit, Barnes would have worked on base infrastructure such as buildings in a similar role to what a civilian electrician would perform.

In early September 1942, Barnes was posted to No 70 (Reserve) Squadron. The unit was established on December 1941 following RAAF attempts to mobilise for the Defence of Australia. In response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Asia and the Southwest Pacific, the RAAF began designating reserve units aircraft at RAAF advanced flying training bases to provide cadre of aircraft and aircrew to conducted operations in support of the defence of Australia where tasked. 70 SQN was formed to provide a reserve cadre of personnel to conduct operational missions including army cooperation, meteorological survey, and reconnaissance duties across the broader Adelaide area from RAAF Mallala.



Aerial image of RAAF Base Mallala during World War 2 showing the two large aprons, many hangars and extensive aircraft on the flightline.



In August 1942, 6SFTS records show 28 Ansons were allocated to 70SQN but there is limited information on how many personnel were with the unit per se. In February 1943, No. 70 (R) Squadron at Mallala had a strength of 14 pilots and 26 Wireless Air Gunners (including six on attachment to No.67 Squadron at Laverton). It had managed to carry out some high and low-level bombing exercises during the month. The squadron had mobile stores ready to move at 72 hours' notice to airfields designated as Advanced Operational Bases at Port Lincoln, Kingscote and Ceduna.

*70 SQN Avro Anson - note the text on the right bomb
"From 70 SQN" (SAAM)*

Barnes was promoted to Leading Aircraftmen on 16 November 1942. However, Barnes successfully sought remustering as an Electrician Fitter. From late December 1942 to early April 1943, he again attended No 1 Engineering School at the Melbourne Showgrounds/Flemington Racecourse. He was one of over 12,000 trainees that completed training at the large and busy technical school during 1943. He then completed Electrical Fitter Course from late March to July 1943 at No 4 School of Technical Training, Adelaide. This represented a step up for Barnes in terms of his electrical tradecraft as an Electrical Fitter would work on aircraft generally in a squadron, repair & salvage unit or aircraft depot.



No 4 School of Technical Training was located in the former Adelaide Exhibition Building on North Terrace, Adelaide. More than 20,000 trainees completed training at the school during World War 2. (State Library of South Australia)

During this period, it is evident Barnes again applied for aircrew training. During the interviews, he was described by one interviewing officer as having a pleasant and keen personality and a good average intelligence. In particular, the officer wrote *"appears to be almost full-bloodied abo. Nicely spoken – well mannered. Has worked hard to improve himself"* and recommended him for aircrew training. Another interviewing officer also recommended him writing *"Good type of chap – Maths not very strong. Well worth a trial."*

Having been assessed suitable, Barnes was posted to No 1 Wireless and Gunnery School at RAAF Base Ballarat, Victoria, awaiting aircrew training. However, in September 1943, a representative for the Air Member for Personnel wrote *"It is advised that whilst the abovenamed [LAC R.J Barnes ELCTRICIAN] was approved for air crew in 1941, the present policy is for such applicants to be rejected on medical grounds. This policy has also been adopted as far as the Department of Army is concerned. The Director-General of Medical Services has indicated to the Director of Recruiting that he would advise the Senior Medical Officer at each Recruiting Centre accordingly. In view of the foregoing, it is suggested that this airman be again called up for medical review with a view to reversing the original medical assessment."*

There is no specific medical reason evident in his personal file for the decision. While it is possible, he may have failed a medical examination, this should have been identified in the documentation and one does wonder if the September 1943 letter was racially influenced. This is interesting as at the same time, Len Waters, the only known Indigenous fighter pilot of World War 2, had just been selected for aircrew training and was at No 1 Initial Training School before proceeding to No 8 Elementary Flying Training School in November 1943. Either way, sadly, Jeff Barnes was denied the opportunity to pursue flying training.

Based on the September advice from Air Force Headquarters, Barnes was posted to No 67 (Reserve) Squadron based at RAAF Base Laverton in late October 1943. Initially, raised as a Reserve Squadron at RAAF Mallala, 67SQN was established as an operational squadron in January 1943 at RAAF Laverton as a general reconnaissance squadron with a strength of 180 personnel and 14 Ansons. The squadron operated from Laverton and other bases in Victoria to escort convoys and conduct anti-submarine patrols. It was later organised into two flights which operated alternately from Laverton and Mallacoota. Given his experience as an electrician at 6SFTS/70SQN, the unit and aircraft would have been somewhat familiar to him but his role now was as a electrical fitter working with the actual aircraft.

In March 1944, the unit had 244 personnel and 17 Anson aircraft on strength conducting maritime patrols and routine unit training. In January 1944, Barnes again applied for aircrew training but the application again failed.

In May 1944, he was posted to No 13 Squadron at RAAF Fairbairn which, following a reconstitution period in mid-1943, was flying Bristol Beauforts and then Lockheed Venturas on anti-submarine and shipping patrols along the Australian east coast. The squadron was moved to Cooktown, north-eastern Queensland, in late May 1944 just after Barnes arrived before moving again to Gove, Northern Territory, in August. From there it mainly carried out anti-submarine and escort patrols, though it also mounted a small number of bombing raids against the eastern islands of the Netherlands East Indies. During this period, Barnes may have met the future Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who served with the squadron as a navigator from August 1943 until February 1945.



13 SQN ground crew repairing a squadron Ventura under a camouflage net at Gove Airfield, NT (AWM)

Barnes was attached to No 9 Stores Depot from late October to 4 November 1944 which had only just moved to Winellie just south of RAAF Base Darwin earlier in the year following the threat of Japanese air attacks in the north had stopped. The unit was responsible for supplying support to all RAAF units in the Northern Territory. During this period, Barnes was court-martialed for the theft of two Smith and Wesson Revolvers. He pleaded guilty to the theft explaining he did not know why he took them and stating that he wanted to get the issue resolved as soon as possible, that he did something wrong and was prepared to accept any punishment. He was subsequently sentenced to field punishment, some of which involved heavy labour duties for ninety days. The incident appears to have been quite out of character for their usual well-mannered, polite and attentive Jeff Barnes.

In mid-February 1945, Barnes was posted to No 21 Squadron which had only moved to RAAF Fenton, southwest of Darwin, in December-January having just converted to the B-24 Liberator. Based at Fenton along with No 24 Squadron and No 23 Squadron, 21 SQN was part of No 82 Wing, a new heavy bomber unit tasked with conducting bombing strikes against Japanese forces and infrastructure in the Dutch East Indies. During January and February, the unit conducted more than a



RAAF ground crew working on a 24SQN Liberator aircraft on the flightline at RTAAF Fenton airfield in September 1944. (AWM)

hundred missions against Japanese targets. On 6 April, near Koepang, 21 SQN and 24 SQN Liberators attacked a convoy of ships including the cruiser Isuzu. Other targets attacked included troop areas at Tawo and fuel tanks in Tarakan and Borneo in April. In May, Barnes deployed forward with a small 21SQN detachment to Morotai from 14 to 21 May to support a major Liberator strike on a Japanese float plane base at Balikpapan on the 19 May. No doubt, Barnes encountered a particularly very tense operational tempo supporting the operations of a new and large bomber.

On 5 June 1945, Barnes was posted to No 201 Flight based at RAAF Base Darwin. The unit was formed in March 1945 at RAAF Laverton as a specialist electronic intelligence unit operating specially modified B-24 Liberators. The detachment at RAAF Base Darwin. Its specific role was to identify and analyse the characteristics of Japanese radar stations so that they could be effectively attacked by Allied aircraft. The work was highly sensitive and classified. Few people outside of No. 201 Flight knew that the unit existed and unit personnel were not briefed on the purpose of the unit and its aircraft beyond their individual responsibilities. The unit comprised a detachment in Darwin of about 100 personnel, but it was not until August that the first specially modified B-24 Liberator arrived, and no operational missions were flown. However, notwithstanding, Barnes posting to such a sensitive electronic intelligence unit as an electrical fitter illustrates he was considered a reliable and trustworthy worker.

Following the Japanese surrender and more importantly the death of Mrs Forster back in Adelaide in mid-August, Barnes sought a discharge for compassionate grounds. He cited in the application that the death of Mrs Forster left Mr Forster in poor health and unable to cope with the work of his house nor capable of caring for himself and that he was not able to source outside help for his care. The Air Force agreed to the request and on 29 October 1945, Barnes was discharged completing three and half years of service including active service overseas and in northern Australia serving in multiple operational units in ground crew roles. For his service with the RAAF, Jeff Barnes was awarded the Pacific Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal 1939 – 1945, and the Australian Service Medal 1939 – 1945.

Barnes returned to Kilburn, Adelaide, to care for Mr Forester. In the 1950's and 1960's, Barnes became a leader in Aboriginal rights movements. He spoke about aboriginal discrimination in South Australia at a meeting at the Adelaide Town Hall in 1953 organised by the Aborigines Advancement League. He was a key advocate for a hostel in Adelaide for Aboriginal people working and living in Adelaide. In 1954, he met with the Premier, the Hon Tom Playford, advocating for assistance in the construction of the hostel.

In 1958, he was the South Australian delegate to a national conference that met to form a federal council, uniting existing state bodies to press for greater Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal affairs and to work for the removal of discriminatory state legislation. The conference was a success leading to the formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) electing an executive committee and establishing a set of principles to guide the new body. The forum expressed reservations about the federal government's assimilation policy, and decided to press for a referendum to amend the Australian Constitution so that the federal government could legislate for Aboriginal people as a group. The FCAA later became the FCAATSI including the Torres Strait Island groups, and united a number of state-based advocacy organisations to lead the campaign for the defining 1967 referendum.

In 1963, Barnes was one of three to be the first Aborigines on the new South Australian Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Board. It focused on the capability of Aboriginal people 'accepting the full responsibilities of citizenship' rather than on assimilation. Barnes joined Nancy Brumbie, who he would later marry in 1968, and Gladys Elphick as the Aboriginal members of the new board.



Jeff Barnes with Indigenous leader Sir Doug Nicholls at the 1958 conference in Adelaide.



Image of stakeholders attending the handover of the Aborigines Advancement league in June 1994. Jeff Barnes is standing in the back row 3rd from left. George Tongerie, another RAAF WW2 Indigenous Veteran is standing 5th from right.

Jeff Barnes passed away on 16 September 2016 aged 93. He was buried at the Enmore Memorial Park alongside his wife Nancy Brumbie. From a tumultuous beginning without his father living in the Colebrook Children's Home, he worked incredibly hard to improve his education and position in society to the extent where he responded to the call of duty to serve his country. Despite being denied the opportunity to become a pilot, he served his country in World War 2 in operational units in southern and northern Australia and overseas. Returning to Adelaide, he became a leader in the South Australian Indigenous community's quest for reconciliation making a significant impact. His service to the nation embraced multiple dimensions despite the ongoing challenges of racial discrimination for most of his life.

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