

## SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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### PLTOFF LEONARD PENDRELL BENCE (1923 – 2022)

#### *World War 2 Bomber Command Pilot*



*Len Bence shortly after receiving his Commission in September 1944*

Leonard Pendrell Bence was born in Burra in May 1923. He completed his education at St Peters College, Adelaide, before commencing work as a bookkeeper at Kellendi Station, Pillaga, in central New South Wales.

He enlisted in the RAAF on 20 June 1942 at No 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide, before completing initial training at No 4 Initial Training school at Victor Harbor from June to September. He then completed basic flying training on DH82 Tiger Moths at Parafield with No 1 Elementary Flying Training School. He attended flying training at two advanced flying schools, including No 7 Service Flying Training School at Deniliquin from December 1942 to February 1943 and No 6 Service Flying Training School at Mallala from February to June 1943, flying Wirraway and Anson aircraft. He obtained his Wings on 1 June 1943.

In early August 1943, Len embarked for the United Kingdom arriving a month later. Len attended No 6 (Pilot) Advanced Flying Unit from February to May at RAF Little Rissington in Gloucestershire consolidating his pilot training in European flying conditions. He then converted onto heavy bombers at No 16 Operational Training Unit at RAF Upper Heywood in Oxfordshire. He was Commissioned in September 1944 as a Pilot Officer and later promoted to Flying Officer in March 1945



*Group portrait of Leading Aircraftmen (LAC) of A and C Flights of Course 29, No 1 Elementary Training School, RAAF, at Parafield Airport, SA. Len Bence is 2<sup>nd</sup> from right, 3<sup>rd</sup> row.*



*Len Bence as a SGT pilot in 1943*

By October 1944, Len had completed his training and was posted to No 106 Squadron (RAF) flying Lancaster heavy bombers at RAF Metheringham in Lincolnshire. A World War 1 squadron reformed in 1938 in Bomber Command, 106 Squadron saw distinguished service during World War 2. Originally flying Handley Page Hampdens and then briefly Avro Manchesters in 1942, the squadron converted to the Avro Lancaster during 1942. The noted Bomber Command pilot, WGCDR Guy Gibson VC, DSO and Bar DFC and Bar was the Commanding Officer 106 SQN (RAF) from March 1942 to March 1943 at the tender age of 23. During the war, the squadron conducted missions on 496 nights and 46 days, flying 5,834 operational sorties with the loss of 187 aircraft.



*106SQN (RAF) Lancaster aircraft preparing for another mission from RAF Metheringham in 1944. (IWM)*

Bence was one of the fortunate airmen to complete a full operational tour with 106 Squadron flying 30 missions. He once recalled that his first mission was particularly scary with the navigator making an error leading to them arriving alone over the target 20 minutes late. As they commenced their bomb run, he recalled it looked like hell below with everything in flames but suddenly their aircraft was illuminated by searchlights. They were hit by flak resulting in the bomb doors unable to be closed and Len having to fly slower for their return back to base. Meanwhile, they were attacked by two German fighter aircraft with cannon firing holing their aircraft in thirty different places. Thankfully, Len, his aircraft and crew survived the mission.



Len conducted missions over the European continent including France and Germany, conducting bombing missions against strategic targets such as munition factories, rail yards and waterways. One long range mission involved a risky 12 hr flight to Norway

Len Bence's Logbook entry and pilot's map for the strike against synthetic oil refineries at Böhlen in Norway, referred to above, appear over the page.

*An 8,000lb being loaded onto a 106SQN (RAF) Lancaster during World War 2. (IWM)*



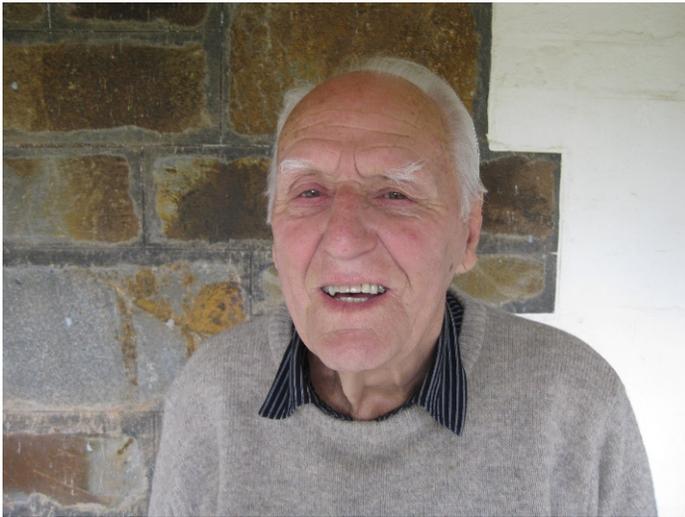
While in England, he met his future wife, Muriel, at a dance and later married her in June 1945. Completing his tour at the end of World War 2, Len embarked for Australia in early July only several weeks after marrying Muriel. Arriving in Australia in August, he was discharged from the RAAF in October completing three years of service during World War 2.

Returning to Australia, Len worked in his family's business, a drapery store called Bence's in Burra until the family sold it in 1975. Meanwhile, he turned his hand to painting and became a noted self-taught water colour artist particularly of Burra's landscapes and heritage buildings. Len and Muriel opened a successful gallery in a heritage cottage in Burra. The Burra Regional Art Gallery has the Leonard Bence Exhibition Room in honour of his contributions to the town in art.

In 2016, Len was a special guest of the Australian War Memorial and its Director, Dr Brenan Nelson. It was an emotional visit for Len as he walked around the famous G for George Lancaster that flew with No 460 Squadron (RAAF) and saw the sound and light display simulating a night Bomber Command mission in 1943. Dr Nelson presented Len with a framed memento of Len in front of the famous Lancaster. Len noted during the visit "the Lancaster was the finest bomber plane in the world at the time. They're a wonderful plane to fly ... they were very maneuverable and a really lovely plane to fly."



*Dr Brendan Nelson, Director Australian War Memorial, presenting Len Bence with a memento of his 2016 visit to the war memorial in front of the famous G for George Lancaster.(AWM)*



*Len Bence in 2012 at his Burra heritage stone cottage.*

Len Bence passed away on 27 July 2022 aged 99. One of Burra's last World War 2 veterans who completed a Bomber Command tour of Duty and then returned to the Burra community to successfully paint and establish an art gallery, he was an icon of the Burra community. His funeral at St Mary's Anglican Church in Burra saw many from the Burra community come together to acknowledge the remarkable life of Len. The Bomber Command veteran who survived a tour of duty flying Lancasters was appropriately farewelled with the reciting of the Ode, the sounding of Last Post, and a minute silence broken with the playing of Rouse.

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