

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

PILOT OFFICER CLARENCE CHARLES BENNETT (1916 - 1940)

*South Australian World War 2 Pilot serving with the Royal Air Force
who perished in the Battle of Britain Air Campaign.*



*Portrait image of
PLTOFF Clarence Bennett*

Clarence Charles Bennett was born on 28 November 1916 at Mallala, a small country town north of Adelaide that would become home to a large RAAF base conducting flying training for the Empire Air Training Scheme during World War 2. His father, Septimus Boord Bennett worked with the South Australian Railways. Clarence's younger brother, Leonard James Bennett joined the RAAF in April 1940 serving as a fitter throughout the war in various maintenance depots and flying units across Australia before being demobilised in March 1948.

Clarence completed schooling at Kapunda High School. As a youth he was fascinated by aviation, building model planes and gliding. He built a glider at the age of only 16 in which he made many flights near Adelaide and joined the Adelaide Gliding Club in 1936. After completing school, he was employed by South Australian Railways, working as a junior clerk at Mt Gambier. He took flying lessons at Mt Gambier during 1937.

Unable to enlist in the Royal Australian Air Force, he applied for a Royal Air Force Short Service Commission and was accepted in early December 1938. On 2 February 1939, he left Australia for England. He was the first South Australian Railway employee to serve in World War 2.

Completing pilot training in England, he was posted to No 248 Squadron (RAF) on 6 November 1939 receiving his Wings and being commissioned as a Pilot Officer. On 13 March 1940, he was confirmed in his appointment as a Pilot Officer following five months' probation. At 248 SQN he served and became good friends with fellow South Australian Alexander Lewis Hamilton, who had joined the RAF in similar circumstances and arrived at 248SQN shortly after Bennett.

Originally formed in August 1918, 248 SQN was a seaplane squadron that flew anti-submarine patrols off the Yorkshire coast before disbanding in March 1919. The unit reformed on 30 October 1939 at RAF Hendon in London as a night fighter squadron in Fighter Command. It received 18 Bristol Blenheim Mk IF aircraft which were modified from the light bomber version for night fighter operations with additional guns.

The Bristol Blenheim was a light bomber. It was one of the first British aircraft to feature an all-metal stressed-skin construction, retractable landing gear, flaps, a powered gun turret and variable-pitch propellers. When first incorporated into the RAF in 1935, the Blenheim was a modern aircraft with a top speed of 266 kmph and able to fly faster than many existing bomber and fighter aircraft. However, by 1940 it was faced with significantly better German fighter aircraft and the Blenheim quickly proved unsuitable for daylight fighter missions. The aircraft had three crew comprising a pilot, observer/navigator and wireless operator/air gunner.



A No 248 Squadron (RAF) Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF with the characteristic extended nose and gun pack for fighter missions on its underbelly. (Imperial War Museum)

The Bristol Blenheim Mk IF proved inadequate as a night fighter during workup training due to the absence of radar and speed. Thus, 248 SQN was transferred to Coastal Command and relocated to RAF North Coates, Lincolnshire in February 1940 until it received the updated Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF. The Mk IVF featured a revised and elongated nose, heavier defensive armament, additional fuel capacity, more powerful Mercury XV engines and a gun pack mounted under the aircraft. The unit began conducting long range reconnaissance operations before returning to Fighter Command in April 1940 where it conducted long range fighter patrols over the North Sea until late June 1940 when it returned to Coastal Command. These missions were inherently risky as they invariably involved the aircraft flying as single aircraft or at most, in pairs.



248SQN Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF on a coastal patrol mission. (IWM)



PLTOFF Clarence Bennett showing where he was injured in the leg by enemy fire from a Do-18 aircraft.

On 28 September 1940, Bennett was flying a 248SQN Blenheim on a long-range reconnaissance mission over the North Sea when he engaged a German Dornier Do-18 flying boat. The aircraft returned fire and both Bennett and his observer suffered injuries before breaking off the engagement due to low fuel. Meanwhile, Bennett damaged the Dornier which landed on the water and subsequently sank, providing Bennett with a rare aerial victory flying a Bristol Blenheim.

On 1 October, Bennet, accompanied by fellow aircrew SGT George Brash (Observer, RAF) and SGT Gordon Clark (Wireless operator/air gunner, RAFVR), was flying a Bristol Blenheim Mk IVF (R3626 / WR-J) on a daylight long-range reconnaissance mission to the Norwegian coast. Departing England in the early afternoon, the single aircraft failed to return, and the three aircrew were posted missing in action. It was another challenging mission where Bennett had to fly a single aircraft on a risky long-range patrol compounded by bad weather; a second aircraft sortie was cancelled due to the poor weather later in the day.

PLTOFF Lewis Hamilton wrote to Len Bennett about his brother, stating "he left to do a sticky job by himself and we have heard no more. We in the squadron have great faith that he will be reported as a prisoner of war so don't give up hope. He was a good pilot who concentrated on bad weather and blind flying. He was popular with his brother officers and with the ranks and you should be proud of such a brother."

Sadly, the squadron heard nothing more about or from the crew of R3626 / WR-J. Within a week of the aircraft going missing, the Australian government was asked to advise Clarence's next of kin that he was missing in action and that enquiries had commenced. In August 1941, the RAAF wrote to his family advising 'in view of the lapse of time and the absence of any further news regarding your son' they 'must regretfully conclude that he has lost his life and his death will be presumed, for official purposes, to have occurred on 1st October 1940'.

Meanwhile, Clarence's personal belongings from his time with the RAF were returned to the family. Included in the usual RAF uniforms and personal items was a model plane reflecting his passion with aviation since childhood. His South Australian Railways colleagues honoured him by including him on their association's Honour Roll, and via a tribute in their magazine noting 'A better man I've never met, a better man I never wish to meet.'

Of the just over 30 Australians to fly in the Battle of Britain air campaign, more than one-third perished in the critical air campaign. PLTOFF Clarence Bennett was the twelfth Australian aviator to perish. He is listed on the Australian War Memorial's Commemorative Roll, the Runnymede Air Forces Memorial, a Battle of Britain Honour Board at the RAAF Edinburgh Officers Mess and the South Australian Railways Honour Roll in Adelaide's North Terrace Railway Station.



The Battle of Britain Honour Board at the RAAF Edinburgh Officers Mess, listing Australians who flew in the epic air campaign. PLTOFF Clarence Bennett's name is listed along with seven other South Australians. (Department of Defence)