

## SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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### **WARRANT OFFICER KEVIN JOHN DENNIS CGM 462 SQN (RAAF) Wireless Operator, World War 2**

*The only South Australian Airman to be awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal*



*Kevin Dennis CGM in 2016 (AWM)*

Born on 5 September 1924 in Ceduna, Kevin John Dennis grew up in country South Australia. His father, Leslie Hammil Dennis, was a teacher and the family moved to Angaston where Kevin attended Nurioopta High School from 1936 to 1940. Leaving high school, he was employed as a bank clerk with the National Bank in Pinnaroo.

On 7 November 1942, Dennis enlisted in the RAAF at No 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide. During November and December, he completed initial training at Victor Harbor at No 4 Initial Training School. He was then posted in January 1943 to No 1 Wireless Air Gunnery School at Ballarat, Victoria which he attended from January to July 1943.

Dennis attended No 3 Bombing and Gunnery School at Sale, Victoria, from July to September 1943, where he received his Air Gunner's Badge and was promoted to Sergeant on 19 August 1943. He then attended No 1 Air Observer School at Cootamundra, New South Wales, during September and October 1943.

Selected for duty with Bomber Command in Europe, Dennis departed Australia on 26 November 1943, arriving in England on 10 January 1944 after spending Christmas and New Year on the ocean.

Through 1944, he completed RAF follow-on training, including operational conversion onto heavy bombers. On 19 February 1944, he was promoted to Flight Sergeant and was regraded to Wireless Operator (Air) on 11 March 1944.

From July to September 1944, he completed No 27 Operational Training Unit at RAF Lichfield in central England, which was a Heavy Bomber conversion unit flying Halifax and Wellington aircraft.

In February 1945, 28 months after he first joined the Royal Australian Air Force, Dennis was finally posted to his first operational unit, No 462 Squadron (RAAF). No. 462 Squadron was formed on 6 September 1942 at RAF Fayid, Egypt, as an RAAF Article XV squadron with aircrew and groundcrew transferred from three RAF squadrons and thus distinctly lacked Australian members. Equipped with Handley Page Halifax MkII bombers, the squadron saw action conducting land and maritime strike in the Mediterranean Theatre across North Africa, southern Italy, and the Greek islands between late 1942 and early 1944. The squadron was redesignated No 614 Squadron (RAF) in March 1944.

No 462 Squadron (RAAF) was reformed on 12 August 1944 at RAF Driffield, Yorkshire, England, now equipped with the Halifax Mk III heavy bomber, as part of Bomber Command. The reformed squadron had a much larger Australian contingent including an Australian Commanding Officer, WGCDR David Elliot Strachan Shannon DFC, who had completed several tours in Bomber Command including one as a Flight Commander in 466 Squadron.

The reformed unit conducted its first operational mission on 25 August 1944, only two weeks after its reformation. Between August and December 1944, it conducted 39 Bomber Command missions across Western Europe.



*A 462SQN Halifax heavy bomber aircraft (Z5-E) on a mission in September 1944 targeting German synthetic oil plants in the Ruhr. Note the absence of antennas as this was before the unit was redesignated to its EW role.*

In January 1945, 462 SQN was transferred to No 100 Group (RAF), a Bomber Command Group that specialised in electronic warfare. Based at RAF Foulsham in Norfolk, 462 SQN was given a new role to disrupt the German air defences for Bomber Command. The squadron's Halifax aircraft were modified with special radar jamming equipment which would interfere with German night fighter radars and ground-based radars. Further, the aircraft carried various incendiaries, target markers and bombs which would be used to confuse the Germans as to what targets were being attacked.



*A 462 SQN Handley Page Halifax B Mark III aircraft (MZ913 / Z5-N also known as 'Jane' due to its nose art). The aircraft flew over 100 sorties. Note the various antennas and unique vertical stripes on its vertical stabilizers. This aircraft was one of ten 462SQN aircraft that flew on the evening of 13 March 1945 in which Warrant Officer Kevin Dennis' aircraft was hit.*

On the evening of 13 March 1945, Bomber Command launched several major attacks into northern Germany. 354 bombers, comprising Halifax, Lancasters and Mosquitos, struck the Wuppertal and Barmen areas, while 195 Lancasters and 32 Mosquitos attacked benzol plants at Herne and Gelsenkirchen. In support, 462 Squadron had eleven aircraft in the air conducting a spoof radio countermeasures mission over the Frankfurt area.

It was the first mission for 462 Squadron aircraft equipped with the new *Airborne Cigar* Radio-Countermeasure equipment which had been designed to monitor and jam frequencies used by German night fighters. Of the eleven 462 Squadron aircraft in the air, one carried the new equipment to provide the specialist radio countermeasure support for the other 462 Squadron aircraft conducting general spoof tasks.

On the mission, Warrant Officer Kevin Dennis was flying with his crew on their second mission in Halifax RG384-M. Departing RAF Foulsham at 6pm, the mission proceeded as planned for three hours until its return leg when the aircraft was engaged by flak near Koblenz. The crew lost the outer starboard engine, with it catching fire, with significant damage to the starboard wing. A shell hit the fuselage, killing the flight engineer, SGT Charles Webb (RAF), injuring FLTLT Kevin Shanahan (navigator) and severely injuring Dennis. Despite bleeding profusely, with one foot almost completely severed and his other leg shattered, Dennis refused to leave his post, supporting the crew who were desperate to find an emergency airfield where they could land their aircraft. He continued to send and receive mission critical messages until the pilot, PLTOFF Thomas Partridge, was able to crash land the stricken aircraft at Juvincourt Airfield near Reims, France, at 10:30pm.

On 24 May 1945, King George VI approved the awarding of an immediate Conspicuous Gallantry Medal (Flying), a prestigious bravery award second only to the Victoria Cross for airmen.

The Citation of the award read:

*"WO Dennis was the Wireless Operator in a heavy bomber detailed to attack Frankfurt on the night of 13 March 1945. Shortly after leaving the target, the aircraft was hit and damaged by flak, killing another member of the crew and wounding WO Dennis. Although most of one foot was severed and his other leg also wounded, the WOP [wireless operator] refused to leave his seat until the aircraft landed. He was bleeding profusely and even with first aid applied the bleeding could not be stopped. He carried on with his duties, and correctly received all messages passed to the aircraft, obtaining a weather report from a diversionary airfield in France to which the aircraft was being flown. The courage displayed by WO Dennis was of the highest order when he must have been experiencing extreme agony."*



*The medals of Warrant Officer Kevin Dennis including from left: The Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, the 1939-1945 Star, the France and Germany Star, Defence Medal 1939-1945, War Medal 1939-1945, and Australian Service Medal 1939-1945.*

Warrant Officer Dennis is one of only 11 Australians to receive the award, 10 of which were awarded during World War 2 and six of which were awarded to Bomber Command aircrew. He is the only South Australian to be awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Due to the significant injuries and ongoing subsequent rehabilitation, Dennis received the award in the mail while convalescing in hospital in England.



WOFF Kevin Dennis with his wife Olive in 1945. (AWM)

Following the crash, Dennis spent significant time in hospital recovering and had extensive rehabilitation during 1945. He married his English wife Olive in mid-December 1945 before embarking on a troopship on 20 December 1945 arriving back in Australia on 17 January 1946. He was discharged from the RAAF on 7 June 1946.

He still lives in Adelaide, very humble about his actions of the 13 March 1945 and his awarding of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal.

In May 2014 as a special guest of honour, he attended the seventh Bomber Command Commemorative Service at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. After the service, he commented to a journalist:

*"It's a great recognition. It's something that normally anybody else would have done in the same circumstances but I happened to be there and I happened to be recognised – one of the many."*

In 2017, he was one of four South Australians to be awarded France's prestigious military honour, *Knight of the Legion of Honour*, during a ceremony in Adelaide, for his contribution to World War II and the liberation of France.

In recent years, he has been warmly embraced by today's No 462 Squadron, which was reformed in 2005 and is now based at RAAF Base Edinburgh in Adelaide. The squadron has recognized his courage and actions by naming a squadron conference room after him and having a display in his honour.

Today, Kevin Dennis is inspiring the next generation of Air Force veterans through his actions on the 13 March 1945.



Kevin Dennis at a 462 Squadron Dining-In at the Adelaide Naval, Military and Air Force Club in September 2014.

**Greg Weller**  
**SAAM History Group**  
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