

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

SQNLDR (Lewis) David Leicester DFC & Bar, OAM



David Leicester after promotion to Squadron Leader 1944.
[David Leicester]

David Leicester was born in Mitcham, South Australia on 30 June 1923. He enlisted in late 1940 and was called-up for duty on 16 August 1941. He undertook his initial three months' training at No. 4 ITS (Initial Training School) in Victor Harbor, was selected for pilot training and posted to No. 1 EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) at Parafield. After three months training on DH82A Tiger Moths there, he was selected to be a fighter pilot and was posted to Point Cook No. 1 SFTS (Service Flying Training School) in February 1942 for further training on Wirraways.

The SFTS course was divided into two two-month sessions: ITS (Initial Training Section) followed by a fortnight's leave, then ATS (Advanced Training Section). David went solo on the Wirraway after 41/2 hours instruction but returned from his mid-course leave to find the Wirraways had been replaced with

twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords. This horrified him because he feared it signaled his course was no longer being trained for fighter service on Hurricanes and Spitfires, but he nevertheless completed his course and was awarded his wings as an 18-year old sergeant in May 1942.

After a short leave in Adelaide, he was called-up to No. 2 ED (Embarkation Depot) Bradfield Park NSW at the end of May 1942. After a few days he sailed on the MV *Wahine* with his course mates to Auckland then the SS *Capetown Castle* to England via the Pacific, Panama Canal and Halifax in Nova Scotia. They arrived in Liverpool in July, 11 months after joining the RAAF.



David Leicester DFC in a pencil sketch by Barry Spicer
[David Leicester]



Enroute to England on the SS Capetown Castle. David captioned this "I am directly in front of the nurse, the only female on board".

[via Michael Leicester]

From Liverpool they went by train to the receiving depot in Bournemouth, from where David was posted to No. 12 AFU (Advanced Flying Unit) in Grantham to spend more time on Oxfords training single-engine pilots in multi engine operations. His course mates all went to East Fortune to fly Beaufighters. David was disappointed that he had apparently been singled out to fly heavy bombers while they were to fly fighters, but as it turned out they all ended up on bombers.

By February 1943 he had completed another course at No. 1514 BAT (Beam Approach Training) at RAF Coningsby and qualified on obsolete two-engined Whitley bombers at No. 24 OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Honeybourne. It was there that he experienced his first major incident when he had an engine fire on take-off on his first night solo. This required a wheels-up forced landing, which earned him a "green entry" in his log book: *"14/1/1943. Whitley VEB 347. Landed with wheels retracted in difficult circumstances at night (port engine dead and on fire and propeller in full fine) causing comparatively little damage to aircraft."* This was endorsed by order of AOC 91 group *"Commended for coolness and calmness in emergency."* Also while at Honeybourne he completed his first operation against the enemy when he was part of a leaflet raid over France. This gave him his first taste of flak and searchlights.

After completing the Honeybourne OTU course in February 1943 with an "above average" rating, he was posted to No. 1658 HCU (Heavy Bomber Conversion Unit) for conversion to 4-engined Halifax bombers. HCUs assembled all trained bomber crew members (pilots, navigators, engineers, wireless operators, bomb aimers and gunners) into 7-member crews through an apparently haphazard method of self-

selection. David assembled his crew, all RAF sergeants, and all subsequent training at the HCU was as a complete crew. David, as the crew's captain, was expected to have operational experience as a second pilot, and he gained his with 158 Sqn RAF on raids to Stettin on 20 April then Duisberg on 25 April 1943.

He finished with No. 1658 HCU on 2 May 1943 and on 6 May he and his crew were posted to 158 Sqn RAF at Lissett in Yorkshire in No. 4 Group RAF Bomber Command. The squadron was equipped with Halifax B Mk II aircraft, powered by Merlin XXs. This mark had entered service with 35 Sqn in October 1941. David and his crew were assigned to 'C' Flight, commanded by Squadron Leader Smylie DFC.



*David's Halifax crew, 158 & 640 Sqns 1943-1944
L to R P/O Portsmouth (Bomb Aimer), P/o Miller (Navigator), SQDLDR Leicester (Pilot). P/O Koupland
(W/Op), SGT Eaglefield (Mid Upper Gunner)
In Front SGT Pailing (Rear Gunner) & F/O Holden (Flight Engineer)
[via Michael Leicester]*

They were quickly in action. On 11 May 1943 their first operation was to Duisberg, followed by 26 more through to December flying Merlin-powered Halifax IIs to targets including Bochum, Dortmund, Dusseldorf, Essen (twice), Wuppertal (twice), Krefeld, Mannheim, Gelsenkirchen (twice), Cologne, Hamburg, Nuremberg, Leverkusen (twice), Berlin, Modane, Kassell and Stuttgart. David in his monograph somewhat laconically related that *"... we got through the raids relatively unscathed although we had to withstand ack-ack fire, nightfighters and searchlights etc."* He went on to say: *"A few very bad moments when we thought a bail out was necessary and an occasion when the bomb aimer was injured – but not seriously. A return to base with a badly holed aircraft – through shrapnel – and/or on three engines was not an uncommon experience."*



A Halifax B Mk II of 35 Sqn before that squadron converted to Lancasters in March 1944.

[PD]

It was while still at Lissett that David, then a 20 year old flight sergeant, was commissioned and promoted to 'C' Flight Commander. This unlikely circumstance – he had only been a flight sergeant for six weeks - was a result of the 158 Sqn Commanding Officer, WGCDR Hope DFC, deciding, against regulations, to take a crew on an operation. He selected as his crew the 'C' Flight Commander, SQDLDR Smylie, as navigation leader and all the various bombing, gunnery, wireless, engineer leaders, plus a gunner from another crew. They were shot down near the target, survived to become prisoners of war, but left the squadron and 'C' Flight completely leaderless. David, in spite of his youth, was the most experienced pilot left on the squadron. A new CO, Jock Calder, was appointed in August 1943 and David, with no replacement flight commander available, became the youngest Squadron Leader in the RAF – and in all the allied air forces - as Flight Commander 'C' Flight.

During this period, on 14 January 1944, David was awarded his first DFC. The award was flagged on 31 December 1943 in a telegram to him from the Commander in Chief, Bomber Command. David has said¹ that 4 Group gallantry awards were not for individual acts but for sustained exposure to extreme danger through completion of multiple missions. An undated press clipping in his book reads he *"...has been awarded the DFC for bravery while attacking heavily defended targets in Germany, including Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne."*

¹ Interview with the author on 27 Feb 2018

The WGCDR Hope debacle resulted in the AOC 4 Group issuing instructions that squadron COs were not permitted to fly on operations and flight commanders were allowed only one a month. David's crew were ready to be rested by then, but it is a tribute to his leadership that they all agreed to continue, and to assist with the training of new crews assigned to his Flight.

In late 1943 a new squadron was formed at Leconfield in Yorkshire, less than 20km south-west of Lissett. David's 158 Sqn 'C' Flight was to be the nucleus of the new squadron, No. 640, and David was made its acting CO until a new CO was appointed, and 'A' Flight commander. He moved to Leconfield on 7 January 1944 to take up his new duties. He had previously flown the Merlin-powered Halifax IIs from Lissett, but the new squadron was equipped with Bristol Hercules XVI radial-engined Halifax IIIs. The re-engining resulted in the Mk III having a 3,000 foot higher ceiling and an increase in economic cruise speed of some 30mph. The air-cooled radial engine was also far less prone to flak or night fighter damage than the glycol-cooled Merlins, which were effectively disabled if the glycol tank was holed.



Halifax B Mk IIIs from an original painting by Keith Woodcock
[David Leicester]

His time with 640 Sqn was short but he did undertake another four operations (actually conducted still from Lissett) to Stuttgart, Trappes (in France), Essen and Nuremberg. The last, David's 31st Operation, was on 30/31 March 1944 and was the worst night in RAF history. David and his crew were included on the mission although his 30-mission tour of operations was already complete, because the size of the operation called for squadrons to 'make maximum effort' to contribute aircraft to it. Of the 779 bombers taking part, 96 were lost and another 10 written off after landing back in England. 545 crewmen were lost. And little was gained – due to adverse weather conditions Nuremberg was only lightly damaged. According to

Martin Middlebrook², 158 Sqn dispatched 16 Halifaxes, of which 10 bombed, 4 were missing and 1 damaged. 14 crewmen were killed, 12 captured and 2 evaded capture. David's aircraft was attacked by a German night fighter over the target and suffered severe damage including loss of one engine, and the nose perspex at the bomb-aimer's position being shot out. Fortunately his bomb aimer was only lightly wounded but this damage made for a difficult and hazardous flight home and landing.

Nuremberg was David's 31st Op and his crew, understandably, felt they had done enough and requested a rest from Ops and appointment to non-combat duties. Those appointments went ahead and the crew went their separate ways and never flew together again. All had been commissioned and some decorated while on the squadron.

David was posted to the RAF College at Cranwell to attend a course for junior commanders (being squadron leaders and above). He found himself immersed in Air Force law, regulations, administration etiquette and parade ground drill – areas that David had no inclination to follow. He did well in spite of his lack of interest in the subjects, and especially well in Air Force Law. This resulted in his next appointment to assist with the conduct of Courts of Enquiry in aircraft accidents occurring in training programs. He hated that job – especially when it became clear that the non-flying lawyers were primarily concerned with achieving 'pilot error' verdicts.



David's 35 Sqn Lancaster crew – L to R: Bill Hatton (W/Op); 'Rusty' Russell (Bomb Aimer); Jimmy Hughes (Rear Gunner); 'Tich' Lloyd (Engineer), Pat Patrick (Navigator); David Leicester (Pilot); Freddie Cross (Set Operator); 'Nicky' Nicholson (Mids-upper Gunner)
[via Michael Leicester]

² Middlebrook, Martin, *The Nuremberg Raid* 30-31 March 1944, Penguin Books 1973

He asked for a posting back to flying only to be told that his only course back into operational flying was to volunteer for the Pathfinder Force (PFF). This he managed through his acquaintance with the 4 Group AOC's secretary, who he was visiting when a phone call came in to her saying 35 (PFF) Sqn needed an experienced SQNLDR pilot to replace a pilot wounded the night before on a German raid. Being in the right place at the right time and knowing the right people (the WAAF secretary) resulted in David being a quick appointment to 35 Sqn.

When he reported to 35 Sqn, however, he learned that the wounded pilot was expected to be recovered by the time his crew came back from leave. David's next best option was to report to the Pathfinder Navigation Training Unit (PNTU) at Warboys, complete the PFF navigation training course, form a new crew and start a new tour of operations with the Pathfinders. This he did with his new crew all being RAF officers who had completed a full tour of operations, and in July 1944 they were posted back to 35 Sqn at Gravelly.

The first Op was to Kiel, then Stuttgart then Hamburg – then 34 more to make up a total of 68 including his 31 missions with 158 and 640 squadrons.



Barry Spicer painting of David Leicester's Lancaster TL-F returning from a mission. Close examination of the painting shows considerable flak damage to the rear fuselage and port tailplane.

[David Leicester collection]

David was uniquely qualified to comment on the relative merits of the Halifax versus Lancaster bomber, since he completed 31 missions on the former and 37 on the latter. He remains unequivocal in his preference for the Halifax – because of its faster response to control inputs so necessary in the constant weaving involved in

operational flying, the closer proximity to the pilot escape hatch (which he never had occasion to use!) and, in the case of the Halifax III, the advantages of air-cooled versus liquid-cooled engines noted above.

There were normally 20 to 30 Pathfinder aircraft included on an operation performing various functions of increasing hazard. As crews gained experience they progressed from 'supporters', who were spread throughout the bomber stream; to 'illuminators', who were first at the target to illuminate it with flares when weather conditions were suitable to enable more accurate marking; to 'visual or blind markers', who dropped colour-coded flares to mark the aiming point for the bomber stream, either visually or by instrument flight calculation depending on the weather; and ultimately to 'master bombers', who stayed over the target for the entire duration of the raid to direct bombers and remark the aim point with different coloured flares to counter any decoy flares placed by the Germans. All these roles were extremely hazardous, both because their arrival at the target ahead of the bombing stream resulted in the entire defensive effort at the target being directed at them, and because of their presence over the target for such extended periods. David performed all of the roles during his 37 Pathfinder operations. Pathfinders suffered the highest casualty rate of any branch of the armed services.

David received a Bar to his DFC on 16 January 1945 when his tour with 35 Sqn finished, and he attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace the following month with seven others when his DFC and Bar were presented to him by King George VI.



David Leicester's medals, photographed at his home on 27 Feb 2014. His DFC and Bar and OBE are at left and his Pathfinder badge in the middle. His Legion d'Honneur is not included.

[Mike Milln]

The citation for the award was: *"Since the award of the DFC, S/L Leicester has continued to operate with undiminished efficiency, determination and enthusiasm. Under his fine captaincy his crew has achieved many successes and has set an*

example to all the Squadron. This officer's attention to every detail, combined with his cool courage in the face of the heaviest opposition is worthy of high praise."

Just prior to finishing with 35 Sqn, he was interviewed by the then managing director of Qantas with the seven other pilots who attended the special investiture in February 1945, and selected as Qantas aircrew to recommence UK-Australia flights using Lancastrian aircraft. Following the investiture, the eight of them flew back to Australia as Qantas aircrew although still not discharged from the RAAF. His discharge on 15 August 1945 was as 'medically unfit'³ because he had been diagnosed as being deaf in his left ear. This caused his disqualification by the Department of Civil Aviation from civil flying, which he unsuccessfully fought. It prevented him taking up the Qantas position and he never piloted an aircraft again. He encountered much difficulty in gaining other employment because of his lack of civilian qualifications. He had briefly worked as an 'office boy' in the clothing trade between leaving school and being called up, but his distinguished war service and command experience counted for little among postwar employers. He nevertheless succeeded in securing a position back in the clothing trade and later in the food trade, and worked his way up in those businesses until his retirement as SA State Manager of the Australian Dairy Corporation in 1988.

In 2012 he participated in a Mission to the UK sponsored by the Department of Veterans' Affairs "to commemorate the service and sacrifice of those Australians who served and died in Bomber Command 1939-1945."⁴ The DVA's invitation did not extend to family members, but his son Michael made his own way to England for the important event.



The Queen stops to talk to David during the 2012 Commemorative Mission. David told me he had told the Queen that he received his DFCs from her father, King George VI in 1945. He was also anxious to point out that he wasn't standing because he was in a wheelchair at the time.

[via Michael Leicester]

He married his wife Joan on 6 April 1946. They had two sons, Michael born in 1949 and Graham in 1951. He was

awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in the 2007 Queen's Birthday Honours, "For service to the community through ex-Service, heritage and local government organizations". He also received the French Legion d'Honneur for his role in the liberation of France. David, now aged 95, lives with Joan in Adelaide.

³ His service record shows his rank at discharge as Flight Lieutenant although he never held that rank and was commissioned from Flight Sergeant directly to Squadron Leader as described.

⁴ From the cover of the Mission prospectus

As an interesting postscript to the story, an examination of David's official service record shows how out of sync the wartime RAAF bureaucracy was with what the RAF was actually doing with RAAF personnel in RAF squadrons. The service record shows RAAF promotions to pilot officer on 16 May 1943 after he was posted to 158 sqn, to flying officer on 16 November 1943 after 640 sqn was formed and to temporary flight lieutenant on 16 May 1945. Amongst all that he is shown as being appointed as acting flight lieutenant on 1 July 1943 then acting squadron leader on 1 September 1943 – both when his substantive RAAF rank was pilot officer. He held the acting squadron leader appointment until 15 August 1945 when he was transferred to reserve. David is adamant that he received no notice of any of those changes until he switched his flight sergeant's uniform to a squadron leader's in order to act as flight commander as related in the preceding story!

Sources

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Scutts, Jerry, *Halifax in Action*, Aircraft No. 66, 1984 Squadron/Signal Publications Inc

ABC Interview with David Leicester, 25 April 2011

Langdon Badger interview with David Leicester, November 2010

Mike Milln interview with David Leicester, 27 February 2018

Email exchanges with Michael Leicester, 28 Feb – 6 Mar 2018

Mike Milln
History Group Member
South Australian Aviation Museum Inc
July 2018



*SQNLDR David Leicester DFC and Bar OAM
on a postwar Anzac day.*
[David Leicester]

APPENDIX - (Lewis) David Leicester

Personal

Father	Hardman L. Leicester, Sapper 2nd Signals Troop, WW I Palestine & Egypt
Uncle	Sgt David G.J. Badger, 10 th Battalion AIF WW I, KIA Mouquet Farm, Pozieres
Uncle	LC Magnus Rupert Badger, 10 th Battalion AIF WW I, MID Villers Bretonneux
Uncle	Cpl Ronald H.N. Badger, Fitter No. 5 OTU RAAF WW II
Wife	Joan Valmae Leicester (nee Thomas) AWAS Australian Intelligence Service
Sister	Joan Morgan (nee Leicester) AWAS
Sons	Michael David Leicester b1949 & Graham Bruce Leicester b1951

WW II Service

Posting	Dates	Rank
No. 4 ITS Victor Harbour (SA)	15 August-November 1941	AC2
No. 1 EFTS Parafield (SA)	November 1941-February 1942	LAC
No. 1 SFTS Point Cook (Vic)	February 1942 –May 1942	LAC to Sergeant
No. 12 AFU Grantham (UK)	September 1942- November 1942	Sergeant
No. 24 OTU Honeybourne (UK)	November 1942-February 1943	Sergeant
No. 1658 HCU Riccall (UK)	April 1943-May 1943	Sergeant
No. 158 Squadron (RAF) Lissett (UK)	May 1943-January 1944	Sergeant to Squadron Leader
No. 640 Squadron (RAF) Leconfield (UK)	January-April 1944	Squadron Leader
RAF College Cranwell (UK) Junior Commanders Course	May-June 1944	Squadron Leader
Pathfinders Force NTU Warboys (UK)	July 1944	Squadron Leader
No. 35 PFF Squadron Gravelly (UK)	July 1944-December 1944	Squadron Leader
Discharged	15 August 1945	

Postwar employment

1945-1957	Soft goods trade in Adelaide
1957-1961	Sales Representative for Cadbury-Fry-Pascal
1961-1968	Sales Manager for Snack Foods Pty Ltd
1968-1988	State Manager (SA) Australian Dairy Corporation, Australian Produce Board
1988	Retired

Honorary Positions Held

President	Pathfinder Force Association of Australia (SA Branch) (39 yrs)
Member	RSL
Member/President	RAAF Association (20 yrs)
	Air Force Memorials Adelaide Airport
Councillor	City of Mitcham (10 yrs)
Councillor	Royal Agricultural & Horticultural Society (SA) (19 yrs)
President	Australian Society of Dairy Technology
Chairman & Trustee	Centennial Park Cemetery Trust (SA)
Member	Legacy Club of Adelaide (14 yrs)
President/Secretary	Bowling Clubs in SA
Member	Point Cook Flying Club Inc



*Two remarkable men at the Jamestown Air Show in 2009: SQNLDRs Bob Cowper (left) and David Leicester (right).
[Steve Lewis]*



*David Leicester at the 2012 Jamestown Air Show.
[Steve Lewis]*



*David Leicester (left) with Bob Cowper at the 2012 Jamestown Air Show. They are in front of the last remaining flying Hudson.
[Steve Lewis]*



*David Leicester taking a ride in Barry Hill's DH82A Tiger Moth at Hindmarsh Island in 2013
[Steve Lewis]*