

## WARRANT OFFICER ARTHUR GEORGE 'MAC' McROSTIE (1917-1998)

### *Lancaster Mid-Upper Gunner, RAF 617 Squadron*

When we think of 'The Dambusters' or RAF 617 Squadron, the first person that normally comes to mind is Wing Commander Guy Gibson, VC, DSO & Bar, DFC & Bar. Or for South Australians, Squadron Leader David Shannon, DSO & Bar, DFC & Bar.

On the evening of 16 May 1943, 19 Lancasters from 617 Squadron, with a total of 133 airmen, took off from RAF Scampton on the famous 'Dambuster' raid on the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams, where 'bouncing bombs' invented by Barnes Wallis were used. After their success on this mission, 617 SQN was retained by RAF Bomber Command for specialist bombing operations where precision was vital. For the remainder of the War, they experimented with new bomb sights and new bombs developed by Barnes Wallis (12,000lb 'Tallboy' and 22,000lb 'Grand Slam' bombs). Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire developed and perfected low level marking techniques, using Mosquitos and P51 Mustangs without loss.

In the two years of its existence, 617 SQN took part in 100 bombing raids, flying 1,478 Lancaster sorties. A WWII Lancaster bomber had a crew of seven, comprising: pilot, navigator, bomb aimer, flight engineer, wireless operator, mid gunner and rear gunner. All crew members were vital to the success of each sortie, but unlike the names of famous pilots, their names do not spring readily to mind. Some of these aircrew members were South Australians and one of those was Arthur George 'Mac' McRostie.



Born in Angaston, South Australia on 13 October 1917, Mac's parents were Edwin Arthur McRostie and Martina Cecelia Ryan. It appears Mac and his parents moved to Millicent around the time he was 12 years old and he attended the Millicent Primary School until age 14 and then did one year at Millicent High School where he passed the 'Qualifying Examination' on 11 December 1931. After leaving school, Mac studied poster design for three years by correspondence with International Correspondence Schools Ltd.

Mac worked as a grocer's assistant in Millicent for about five years and when his employer sold his Millicent grocery business, he asked Mac to move with him to Cadell on the River Murray, where his employer became the Postmaster. At Cadell, Mac performed general post office work and, as a telephone operator, operated the manual switchboard, consisting of 48 subscribers (continuous service), averaging approximately 2,500 calls a month.

With the outbreak of WWII, Mac McRostie applied for enlistment as an airman in the RAAF in October 1939. He specifically applied to be a telephone operator. He passed all required tests on 26 March 1940, was enrolled in the RAAF Reserve on 28 March 1940 and was enlisted on 30 July 1940, reporting to No. 1 Recruit Dep. Laverton, Victoria, then to No.1 SFTS Point Cook on 13 August 1940 and No.4 ITS Victor Harbor on 4 November 1940, where he undertook and failed Trade Test Board testing for Trainee W/T Operator on 29 March 1941, achieving only 42%.

On 21 April 1941, by now a LAC Telephonist, Mac applied to be remustered to air crew. He was posted to No. 5 ITS Pearce, WA on 13/9/1941 and then, as per his preference, for pilot training at No.9 EFTS Cunderdin, WA on 5 March 1942. After only 2 weeks of training on DH82 Tiger Moths, due to concerns expressed by his instructors, he was assessed by the Chief Flying Instructor who formed the opinion "*It is most unlikely that this trainee would develop into an efficient service pilot. Recommend that flying training be discontinued.*"

Mac was posted back to No.5 ITS on 30 April 1942 and then No.1 Wireless Air Gunners School (1WAGS) at Ballarat, Vic on 28 May 1942, where he underwent training between 28 May 1942 and 28 December 1942. On 4 January 1943, following an assessment by the Chief Instructor that he was not making good enough progress to be worth further training, the Director of Training recommended Mac's Wireless Air Gunner training be terminated and that he be

transferred to a Bombing and Gunnery School, for training as an Air Gunner. Accordingly, Mac was transferred to No.3 Bombing and Gunnery School at West Sale, Vic on 10 January 1943, where he appeared to finally find his niche, qualifying for his Air Gunners' Badge on 5 February 1943 and assessed as *'Average pass – fairly good type.'*

Mac was promoted to Sergeant on 4 February 1943 and on 6 March 1943, he left Australia by ship from Melbourne, arriving in the UK on 17 April 1943 and reported to No.11 Personnel Dispatch and Receiving Centre RAAF at RAF Charmy Down in Somerset before being posted to No.29 OTU on 4 May 1943 and No. 1660 Conversion Unit on 12 July 1943, where he qualified as a Mid-Upper gunner (MUG) on a Wellington bomber. The Chief Armament Instructor's remarks were *"Worked hard during the course and showed a general interest in all subjects. Co-operated well and should be a useful crew member."*

Following his promotion to Flight Sergeant on 4 August 1943, Mac was posted to No. 106 Squadron on 17 August 1943, followed by a posting to No. 630 Squadron on 15 November 1943.

At No. 630 SQN, Mac was in the Lancaster crew of RCAF pilot Donald 'Don' H Cheney DFC. In February 1944, the crew were all posted to No. 617 Squadron. At this time, Don Cheney had already completed 22 operations with 106 and 630 squadrons.



*Pilot Don Cheney (front centre) and the crew of his Lancaster at 617 SQN. From left to right: Wireless Operator Reg Pool, Navigator Roy Welch, Flight Engineer Jim Roshier, Don Cheney, Rear Gunner Noel Wait, Bomb Aimer Len Curtis and Mid-upper Gunner Arthur 'Mac' McRostie. Image Peter Cheney.*

Cheney's crew became accomplished in the dropping of the 12,000lb 'Tallboy' bombs that had recently become available. On 25 July 1944, one P51 Mustang, one Mosquito and 16 Lancasters were tasked to bomb a V-2 rocket site at Watten. The following description of events is taken from John Nichol's *'After the Flood – What the Dambusters Did Next'*:

*The German flak was intense, and Don Cheney's Lancaster's took a succession of hits - 'you could hear it pinging off the side of the aircraft' - and was badly damaged. The aircraft was awash with leaking hydraulic fluid and a cloud of blue, acrid-smelling cordite smoke from the flak shells that were exploding so close to them that they could hear the 'Boom!' and feel the plane shudder from the blast. One engine was knocked out and the hydraulic system was so severely damaged that the gun turrets were inoperative, the bomb doors couldn't be closed and the landing gear couldn't be lowered.*

*The intercom was working, fortunately, but, when checking in with each member of the crew, Cheney was unable to obtain a response from the mid-upper Gunner, 'Mac' McRostie and sent the wireless*

*operator, Reg Pool, back to investigate. Pool was back within a few seconds, looking very shaken. 'Mac's gone!' He shouted in Cheney's ear. 'Gone where?' Cheney said puzzled. 'He's bailed out! I got to the rear door just as his flying boots disappeared outside!'*

*Cheney put his aircraft into a gentle banking turn away from the target, and sure enough, 3000 or 4000 feet below them, clearly outlined against the green fields, he saw a parachute gliding gently down. There was nothing to be done, so Cheney kept turning and set course for home. Part of the Perspex above the cockpit had been blown out and there were numerous holes in the wings and fuselage, but there was no fire and none of the remaining crew had been wounded.*

*As they reached the French coast more flak came up. 'We took such evasive action as we could,' Cheney says, 'with so much of our "laundry" hanging out, but fortunately the flak bursts drifted past harmlessly and we began a steady descent in order to increase airspeed and get out of enemy territory as soon as possible.' As he was doing so, Flight Engineer Jim Rosher tapped him on the shoulder and pointed upwards.*

*There, not more than 15 feet above them and sliding gently to port was 'the most beautiful Spitfire I have ever seen!' Cheney says, smiling at the memory. 'The Spit slid back and forth above and below us for some time until we were well over the English Channel. Then he perched off the starboard wing tip for about five minutes, grinning and giving us the thumbs-up; then, with a saluting gesture, he peeled off to starboard and was gone.'*

*Cheney considered landing at one of several airfields near the coast, but decided they could make it back to their own 'roost', and calling for 'special consideration' from the tower, he was cleared to come straight in. As they made the final stages of their approach, they managed to blow down and lock the landing gear using the emergency air bottle, avoiding the need for a more dangerous 'crash landing'. They touched down and coasted to a stop. They were escorted to the nearest dispersal pad by a retinue of fire trucks and ambulances and, still fearing a fire or explosion as soon as they came to a halt Cheney ordered the crew to evacuate the aircraft.*

*Once safety on the ground and away from the aircraft, Cheney turned to look at his Lancaster. They had been flying P-Peter - not their regular aircraft but 'borrowed' from a comrade who was on leave while their own was undergoing a service check - and the flak storm they had flown through had left it riddled with nearly a thousand holes.'*

Mac was captured by the Germans and remained a prisoner of war until liberated by Russian troops on 22 May 1945. In a statement he provided after his return to the UK, dated 26 June 1945, Mac described the circumstances of his capture:

*'Landed by parachute okay, was slightly stunned was helped by a Frenchman to rid my flying clothes and was then taken prisoner by the Germans.'*

Don Cheney wrote a statement after returning to base on 25 July 1944. The following is taken from that statement:

*Flight Sergeant McRostie was mid-upper Gunner in the aircraft piloted by myself on operational sortie over enemy territory on the morning of July 25th 1944.*

*As we carried out our bombing run on the target, at approx. 0910 hours, we were engaged by extremely heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire from the enemy defences. The aircraft was hit in many places and one engine immediately caught fire. When the bomb was released I immediately put the aircraft into a dive to get clear of the area, and the Flight Engineer succeeded in putting out the engine fire and feathering the propeller. During this time there was absolutely no evidence of panic from any of the crew on the intercom. And I gave no order to any of them, except several necessary instructions to the Flight Engineer. When, a few seconds later, we were clear of the enemy fire, I was informed by my wireless Operator that the mid-upper Gunner had abandoned the aircraft, and the rear gunner reported that he had seen the parachute opened.*

*The Wireless Operator told me later that he had seen the rear door open, his attention having been called to this by a draught of air up the fuselage, and that he was just in time to see the mid-upper Gunner leave the aircraft.*

*At the time we were using our emergency intercom system, as our regular system had become unserviceable before we reached enemy territory. The intercom was therefore much more faint than usual and it is quite possible that Flight Sergeant McRostie misunderstood something that I said to the Flight Engineer, as an order to abandon aircraft. At no time however did I give such an order.*

*After examination of the mid-upper turret on our return, we found several holes near it, and it is very possible that this Gunner may have been wounded. There is no further evidence of that possibility however.*

At the time of his capture, Mac was due for promotion from Flight Sergeant to Warrant Officer. AMO A.1322 of 43, Paragraph 15 provided that "airmen with aircrew personnel taken prisoner of war are eligible for time promotion "provided that nothing of an adverse nature is known and there is no evidence that the member was captured due to negligence or misconduct." In December 1944, it was determined that as his conduct of baling out without instructions appeared to be negligence or misconduct, his promotion would be held until his repatriation.

Subsequently, no action was taken against McRostie following a recommendation from the Group Captain for the Director of Personnel Services that 'a Court of Inquiry need not be taken when the Air Officer Commanding is satisfied that no blame attaches to the individual and that the Court of Inquiry would serve no useful purpose.' This was signed off by Flight Lieutenant Needham for Air Vice Marshall, Air Officer Commanding on 18 January 1946

It appears the circumstances surrounding Mac baling out of the aircraft on 25 July 1944 may have weighed heavily on him for many years. Amongst documentation provided by Mac's relatives to the Air Force Association (SA Division) after his death in 1998, aged 81, was correspondence between Mac and his pilot Don Cheney, including a Christmas card from Don Cheney, dated 11 January 1988, thanking Mac for a Christmas card and note. The card from Don Cheney contained the following that is believed relevant:

*You can be sure that none of us ever for a moment felt that you owed us an apology for your sudden departure on June 25/44. Indeed we understood completely as we were really badly shot up and there was no communication with your turret position on the intercom. I sent Reg Pool back to check you out but just too late as your heels were just going out the door.*

*You will be interested to know that the aircraft DV 393 was junked for parts and two days later we were assigned a new one JB 139 (V). It is still on the bottom on the Bay of Douarnenez off the town of Douarnenez in Brittany near Brest. They were indeed the good days Mac and we all felt indestructible. However, a great tragedy to lose Reg, Roy and Noel who lie side-by-side in Douarnenez overlooking the sea where they came down.*

This appeared to be the start of ongoing communication between the two of them and they both attended the 617 Squadron 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at Woodhall Spa, UK, in 1993, the first time they had come face-to-face in almost 50 years. Following Mac's death in 1998, in a card Don Cheney wrote to Mac's widow, Phyl, dated 14 November 1998, he wrote the following:

*I have always been so thankful that we all got together at the Squadron reunion at Woodhall Spa in May/June '94 and that I had been able to give Mac a loving hug after all those years. I have some wonderful memories of him - his flashing brown eyes, quick wit and rascally sense of humour. I'll never forget holding his arm as we approached the 617 Officers Mess at Marham while the thunder and lightning flashed and boomed around, and he leaned toward me and said in his particularly special way: "Don, lets sprint!" How quickly the years pass and how I hurt inside every time an old colleague passes on. I thought of Mac and the others on Remembrance Day last Wednesday, November 11 as I spoke to 350 young students at a local school..... My memories of Mac and the fun as well as the terrible fear we faced together will not fade. May he rest in peace and in honour...*

During WWII, approximately 51% of aircrew in bombers were killed during operations, 12% were killed or wounded in non-operational accidents and 13% became POWs or evaders. Only 24% survived the war unscathed (Imperial War Museum). As a Mid-Upper Gunner, Mac manned the turret for the entire trip, sitting on a seat that was little more than a sling, that had to be disconnected when getting in or out of the turret. He was the primary observer on the lookout for enemy fighters or other bombers getting too close. It was clearly a frightening place to be. Mac was not an inexperienced newcomer to the role when he baled out of Lancaster DV 393 on 25 June 1944, having been on 32 sorties over France and Germany, including 11 sorties over Berlin, between 1 July 1943 and 20 July 1944

With the benefit of hindsight, some would be critical of Mac's actions when he found himself unable to move the turret due to mass hydraulic failure, unable to contact the pilot, the floor awash with hydraulic fluid, the noise of exploding flak, the acrid smell of cordite and light coming through numerous holes in the fuselage. However, he was not the subject of a Court of Inquiry and no formal findings were made against him.

While it was sad that Mac appeared to carry the weight of his decision to leave the aircraft for over forty years, it was tremendous that his pilot from all those years ago could reinforce to him that the crew felt no need for an apology, completely understood why he did what he did and that Mac could then stand alongside his surviving colleagues for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 617 SQN in 1993.



*Some 617 SQN veterans standing in front of an Avro Vulcan bomber. Based on comparisons to WWII vintage images, it is believed that the person second from the right is Mac McRostie. Image origin unknown and had 'Mac McRostie' written on the back.*

**Sources:**

Arthur McRostie memorabilia.

617 Squadron Operational Record Book 1943-1945

National Archives of Australia – Service Record 27306 Arthur George McRostie

<https://dambustersblog.com/category/don-cheney/>

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