

## SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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### FLGOFF JOHN COLIN AYLIFFE



*Photo of John Colin Ayliffe as a trainee at No 1 Initial Training School, Victor Harbor. (NAA)*

Born on 24 November 1919 at Peterborough, John Colin Ayliffe was educated at St Josephs Convent School, Peterborough, from 1925 to 1935. Prior to World War 2, he was employed as a clerk in the South Australian Railways.

He enlisted in the RAAF at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, on 6 December 1941 and completed initial training at No 4 Initial Training School, Victor Harbor, from December 1941 to April 1942. He completed basic flying training at No 1 Elementary Flying Training School, Parafield, from April to Jun 1942, obtaining 60 flying hours on DH 82 Tiger Moth aircraft.

He was then sent to Canada to complete his flying training through the Empire Air Training Scheme. Departing Australia on 29 July 1942, he attended No 3 Service Flying Training School at Calgary from September 1942 to January 1943 obtaining 144 hours on Cessna Crane training aircraft. He received his Flying Badge on 31 November 1942. He was then posted to No 3 Operational Training Unit, Patricia Bay, in Canada, where he converted on to medium range twin engine aircraft obtaining 105 flying hours on Oxfords and Hampdens.



*Course photo from No 3 Service Flying Training School, Calgary, Canada. SGT John Ayliffe is in the back row, 4th from right.*

Ayliffe was then posted to complete further operational training in England prior to commencing operations. He attended No 9 Operational Training Unit at RAF Aldergrove, a long-range fighter training unit that trained aircrew in coastal strike operations in England from Dec 1943 to March 1944.

He was posted to No 455 Squadron as a pilot on 25 March 1944, where he completed an operational tour from April 1944 to May 1945. During this period, the squadron was based at RAF Langham in Norfolk and RAF Dallachy in Scotland, providing easy access to the North Sea.

455 SQN and 489 SQN (RNZAF) formed what became known as the ANZAC Wing in Coastal Command. The squadron became famous for its fast low level strikes against German shipping along the Norwegian coastline particularly in steep narrow fjords that were heavily fortified. The missions were dangerous and the squadron suffered losses, losing 91 personnel during the war.



RAAF 455 SQN Beaufighters engage targets in Orsta Fjord on 5 December 1944. Cannon fire from a Beaufighter raking across the water with a ship mast visible at the bottom of the photo. A Beaufighter can be seen egressing the target at the top of the image. (AWM)

Ayliffe flew 69 non-operational flying hours and 198 operational hours on Beaufighters at 455SQN. He flew 47 operational missions during his operational tour with most being dangerous maritime strike missions against German ships. For example, on 13 June 1944, he participated in a 12 ship E-Boat (fast German patrol / torpedo boats) patrol along the Dutch coastline. He later recalled flak striking his aircraft between the fuselage and engines and upon landing found over fifty flak holes in the fuselage.

On 5 December 1944, he participated in a 17 ship strike on German shipping in Orsta Fjord. After firing his cannons and seeing a fellow Beaufighter aircraft beside him explode in mid air at low level on the strike, he recovered to Scotland escorting a fellow Beaufighter that was limping home heavily damaged. The second aircraft had to ditch off the Shetland Islands and Ayliffe, noticing the crew were able to escape to a dinghy prior to the aircraft sinking, maintained watch over the downed aircrew until air-sea rescue arrived.

The Times and Northern Advertiser, Peterborough, SA reported on another mission that took place on 8 January 1945:

#### ***John Ayliffe in Attack on Fjord in Norway:***

*"Beaufighters of coastal command went into Lyse Fjord, Norway, on January 8 and attacked shipping with rockets and cannon. They left a medium sized merchantman on fire and a smaller merchant vessel with smoke rising high into the air. A tug was also left on fire and a barge it was towing hit. An Australian crew, who attacked the smaller merchantman with rockets, saw their missiles pass right through it and come out on the other side. Other crews had hits both above and below the waterline with rockets.*

*F./Lt. R. C. McColl, of Koorawatha, N.S.W., said "the leader had quite a job getting down on his target as they were putting up quite a bit of flak. First 20m.m. cannon and then powerful rockets struck both the merchant vessels and they were both smoking."*

*W/O. G. F. Hammon, of Midland Junction, W.A., and W/O. J. C. Ayliffe, of Peterborough, S.A., were among others who took part in the attack.*

*Three strike forces of Mosquitos and Beaufighters swept over the Fjords of Norway again next afternoon in snow and ice and delivered one of the most damaging attacks made by the command on enemy shipping off the Norwegian coast in recent months. When the flame and smoke of rockets and cannon shells from the aircraft had cleared the last crew to leave the target area saw a modern cargo liner lying on its side burning, a small modern oil burning merchantman disappearing under the water with only its bow above the surface, a large sized ship ablaze with smoke rising 150 feet into the air and two smaller merchant ships hit with rockets and cannon fire. Many R.A.A.F. men again took part."*

Commissioned as a Pilot Officer on 1 February 1945, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for action with 455 SQN against German shipping. The Citation read:

*“Warrant Officer Ayliffe has rendered excellent service having completed very many sorties including numerous strikes on German shipping. In these operations, he has displayed the greatest keenness to engage the enemy and has invariably pressed home his attacks with the utmost determination. On several occasions, his aircraft have been badly damaged by enemy fire but each time he has flown back to base. Warrant Officer Ayliffe has set a splendid example of devotion to duty.”*



*Image of John Ayliffe as a Flight Sergeant at 455SQN taken in Norfolk on 6 July 1944.(AWM)*

The Times and Northern Advertiser, Peterborough reported on the awarding of the Distinguished Flying Cross on 11 May 1945:

### ***John Ayliffe Gets D.F.C.***

*“We received a big surprise and a pleasant thrill on Tuesday when Mrs Ray Ayliffe walked in with the following telegram from her son: “My love and greetings on Mothers' Day. Have received commission. Have received decoration D.F.C.— John Ayliffe.”*

*John Ayliffe is another of our young airmen who has covered himself with glory and brought fame to our town. His is the third D.F.C. to be awarded to Peterborough boys. Squadron-Leader Kel Barclay and Flying Officer Roy Drew, being the others.*

*Flying Officer Ayliffe was in the S.A. Railways when he enlisted in the Air Force, after a short training in Australia went overseas to Canada and finished his flying course before going to England.*

*The news coming to us on VE-Day made us even more happy and we wish John all the best in his career and join with all their friends in offering sincere congratulations to Mr and Mrs Ayliffe on their son's success.”*

Completing his operational tour when 455 SQN was disbanded in May 1945, Ayliffe became one of the longest serving Beaufighter pilots of the squadron. Promoted to Flying Officer in August 1945, Ayliffe departed England in late October 1945, arriving in Adelaide in January 1946. Discharged from the RAAF on 6 February 1946, he returned to work with the South Australian Railways after the war.

John Colin Ayliffe passed away in Adelaide in January 2022, at the age of 102. One of the longest serving pilots of 455 SQN, he certainly lived up to the Squadron motto of ‘Strike and Strike Again’. We believe he was the last South Australian based 455 SQN aircrew veteran.

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