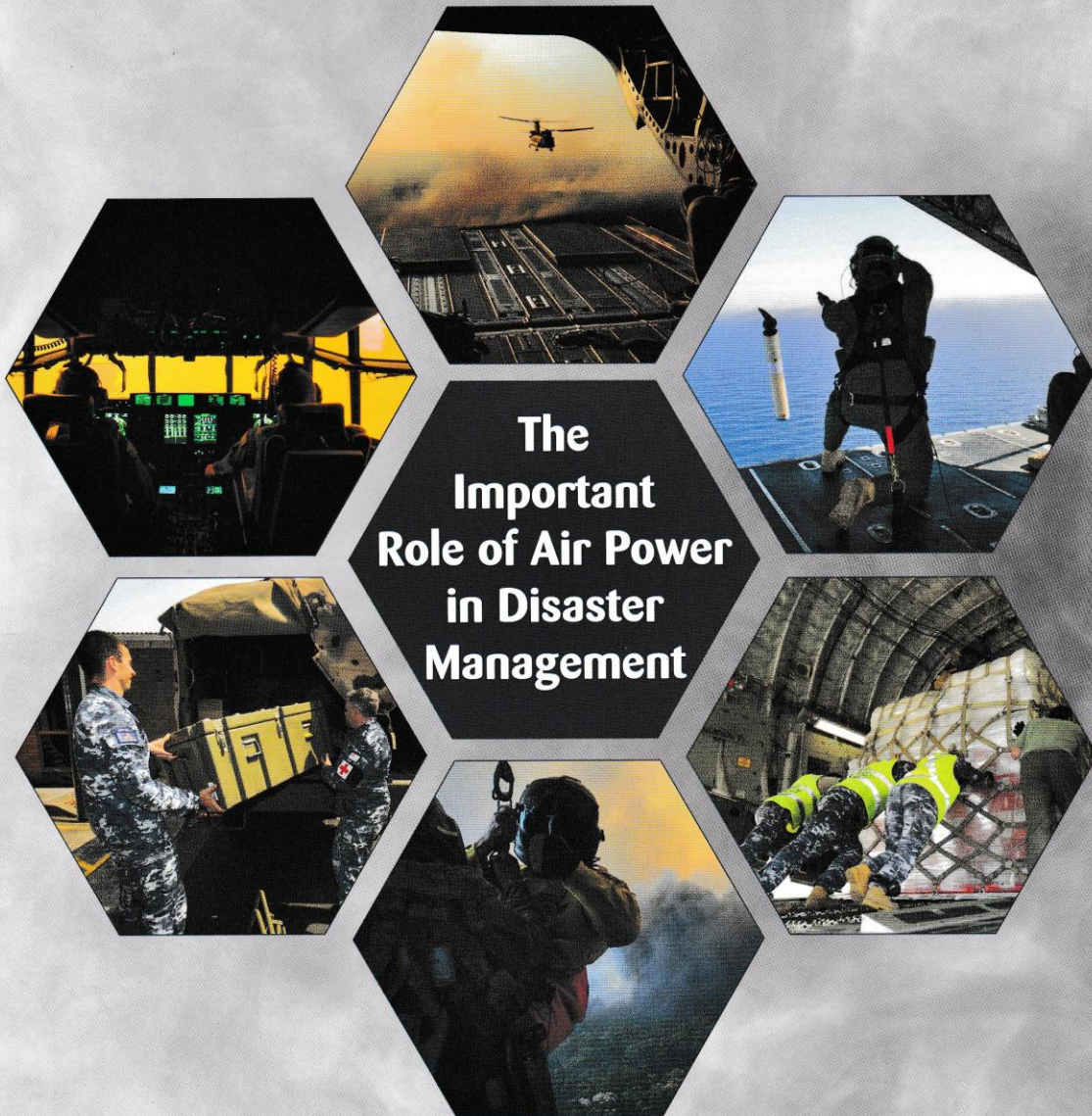




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Alfred Ball – Halifax ‘Spoof’ Pilot

by Charles Page



Flying Officer Alfred Ball was tragically killed just before the war ended, and one day before his 21st birthday. Yet, although he and his crew lost their lives in their counter-measures Halifax, they probably saved many aircraft and their crews.

Alfred Desmond John Ball was born in Perth on 11 April 1942, and was educated at Perth Boys School, and Senior Technical School. After completing an accounting and secretarial course, he was taken on as junior clerk at the Chief Secretary's Office, Perth.

With the RAAF in mind, 'Alf' joined Air Training Corps 75 Squadron, Perth on 5 January 1942, and was soon promoted to Corporal. On 25 May 1942, he enlisted in the RAAF (s/n 427182), and reported to No.5 Initial Training School,

Clontarf, WA, followed by training on Tiger Moths at No.1 Elementary Flying Training School, Parafield. He was next posted to No.7 Service Flying Training School, Deniliquin, where he trained on Wirraways, and was awarded his 'Wings' on 28 July 1943.

Alf was given pre-embarkation leave in Perth and on 12 September 1943 embarked at Brisbane, bound for UK. He arrived on 19 October and was posted to 11 PDRC, the holding unit at Brighton. His flying training continued with a posting to 14 Advanced Flying Unit at Dallachy, Scotland, where he flew the twin engine Oxford. Alf then progressed to Wellingtons at 27 Operational Training Unit, Lichfield, and was based at the satellite airfield Church Broughton. It was here that Alf's crew formed up: navigator Flt/Sgt Neil

Vernon Evans, bomb aimer F/O Murray Frank, wireless operator W/O Ronald Reginald Taylor, mid-upper gunner Flt Sgt John Mickle Tait, and tail gunner Flt Sgt Maxwell James Hibberd.

After Air Crew Training at Acaster Malbis, Yorkshire, Alf and his crew were posted to 1652 Heavy Conversion Unit (Halifax MkIII), Marston Moor, Yorkshire. There they were joined by flight engineer Sgt Frederick Brookes. However, crew training was delayed when Alf suffered a bout of pneumonia, and it was not until 16 February 1945 that Alf and crew were posted to 462 Squadron, Foulsham, Norfolk.

Alf and his crew made several cross-country training flights before their first operation on 10 March to Munster. However, they were forced to return to base with an engine failure. Their next Op, on 13 March, was a special duties flight to Frankfurt. These flights usually involved acting as decoy or dropping 'window' chaff, or spoofing radar or radio. They flew a similar trip to Wiesbaden the next day, and another to Hanau on 16 March, encountering severe icing. On 24 March they flew a special duties flight to Cologne, but were attacked by a FW 190 fighter. The fighter closed to 400 yards, but Alf eluded the fighter by evasive action and tail gunner Hibberd fired 800 rounds, claiming hits on the fighter.

During a week's leave Alf stayed in Hammersmith, London with the Dixon family, who kept an open house for service personnel. After an early 21st birthday party at the Dixons, Alf and his crew returned from leave and



Group portrait of members of 462 Squadron RAAF, Alfred Ball front row third from left. AWM P03415.001.

were sent on their fifth operation, a special duties flight to Leipzig on 10 April 1945. One of ten aircraft from the squadron, Alf and his crew took off in Halifax NA240 (squadron code Z5-V) at 1910 hrs. They were tasked with radio counter measures for the main bomber stream, and carried specialised devices including Airborne Cigar (radio jammer), Piperack (radar jammer), Carpet (Morse jammer), and Fishpond (fighter warning). These devices were operated by a special German speaking crewman, F/O John Heggarty. The Halifax also carried a small bomb load and incendiaries. The main stream bombers were to bomb the railway yards at Leipzig, and Alf and his crew were to fly ahead and operate counter measures.

By 2200 hrs Alf had positioned Halifax Z5-V at 14,000 feet, near the front of the stream, when they were hit by heavy flak in the starboard wing, amidships, and behind the rear turret. Tail gunner Maxwell Hibberd recalled seeing the flash behind the turret, and then being hit by splinters. The Halifax came down near the village of Zaasch, just north of Leipzig. Local farmer Herr Krone, later recalled, 'It was on fire and exploded in the air, scattering burning wreckage over a large area. The majority of the remains landed some 200 metres north of the village cemetery.'

Seven of the crew were killed, with only Hibberd surviving. He had

baled out and landed in a wheat field, unconscious from a head injury. He recovered next morning, gathered up his parachute, and hid in a haystack until nightfall. Only two days before, he had been dancing in the Trocadero, London, and now he was in a German haystack. In the evening he set out to evade, but was hampered by an injured leg and stopped for help at a farmhouse. However, the farmer called local police, and he was taken to SS HQ at Delitzsch, where he saw identity discs from his crew. He recalled no other crew member baling out, and thought that the extra equipment in the fuselage may have made this difficult. Hibberd was taken to Stalag VII G and later force marched to the Elbe, where he was liberated by the Allies. He returned to Brisbane in July 1945 aboard HMT Andes.

Alfred Ball and his crew were buried in a communal grave, without rites in the Zaasch village cemetery. His CO described Alfred as a most capable and determined pilot, and tail gunner Hibberd thought him mature beyond his years, and always thinking of his crew. Letters of condolence were sent to his family, his fiancé Jennifer Constance Little, in Adelaide, and the Dixons in London. Jennifer Little travelled to Perth in 1946 and stayed with the Ball family for several weeks.

In October 1947 Alf and his crew were reinterred in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery. They were all identified and buried in individual graves. Alf's

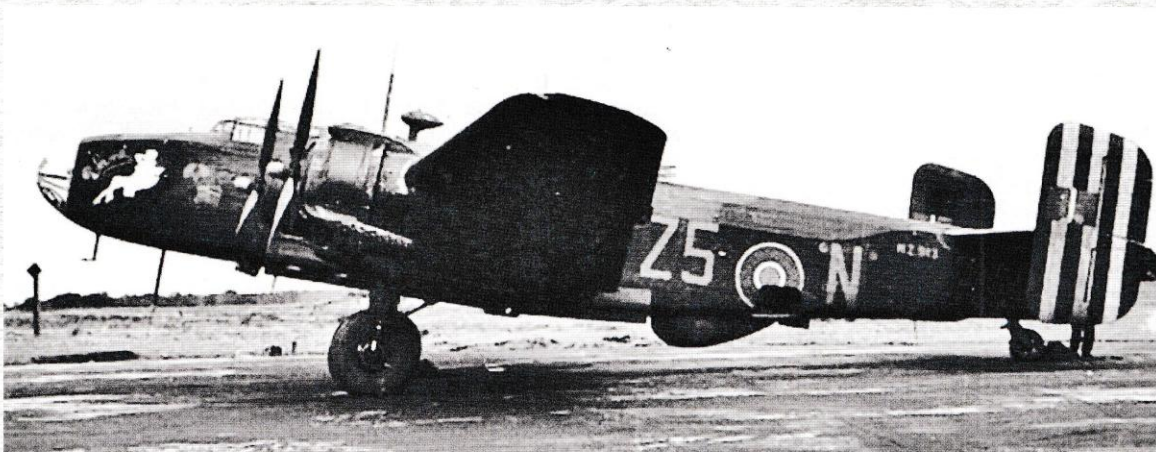


Alfred Ball. AWM: P05102.001

headstone reads, 'Peacefully he rests, Always in our thoughts. Mum, Dad, Toots and Mal.'

Main picture: Alf Ball and Jennifer Little (Alf Ball Collection, courtesy Dorothy Dawson and 462 Squadron.com)

Sources: NAA service records, casualty files: Ball ADJ, Hibberd MJ Australian War Memorial, Commonwealth War Graves, www.462squadron.com Wings of Valour – Charles Page



Handley Page Halifax Mk III 'Jane', flown by Alf Ball. Aviation Heritage Museum, WA.