



Bomber Command 2011 Commemorative Day **- Deputy Chief of Air Force: Air Vice Marshal Geoff Brown AO –**

Sunday 5 June 2011

(Check with delivery)

Welcome Bomber Command Veterans & their families, VIPs, Senior Officers

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining with me here today as we commemorate the service of the men and women who served in Bomber Command during World War II. We are here to pay homage to their courage, praise their achievements and, sadly, to remember the sacrifice of over 55 000 members who perished over the course of that conflict now more than 65 years ago.

I would like to extend a particular welcome to those veterans of Bomber Command who are attending the service today. As a young pilot just starting out in my Air Force career, it was always a highlight for me to be able to talk with veterans. It gave me much greater understanding of their experience, and a far better appreciation of the importance of their contribution to the Air Force, and to Australia as a whole. That same sense of privilege and gratitude is still with me today. Just to fly in one Bomber Command mission was an impressive enough accomplishment; to have flown repeatedly on operations speaks of steadfast dedication and resolve.

During the years 1939 to 1945, Bomber Command conducted one of the longest continuous campaigns of World War II—the strategic bombing offensive against Nazi Germany. This long and hard-fought campaign aimed to reduce Germany's warfighting potential through the destruction of its industries and infrastructure, the destabilisation of its Government and the weakening of the morale of its people.

To this end, over 125 000 British and Commonwealth aircrew flew on long, dangerous missions in heavily laden bombers over hostile territory. They battled both the elements and the enemy's intensive air defence measures comprising anti-aircraft batteries, radar surveillance, searchlights and lethal fighter aircraft, in order to reach their targets, carry out their mission and make it home again. Today, when we consider not only the immensely difficult operations undertaken by Bomber Command, but also the appalling casualty rates the crews suffered, we are left with a profound feeling of admiration for their self sacrifice, moral fibre and deep sense of duty.

While the missions of Bomber Command were mostly associated with attacks on targets within Germany itself, it is important to remember that Bomber Command used its considerable capability to influence the course of the war through operations in other areas. During the Battle of Britain, for example, when a German fleet was massing in French harbours ahead of invading south-east England, Bomber Command launched an intensive campaign aimed at disrupting these preparations. In this they succeeded, destroying 12 per cent of the fleet and forcing the dispersal of the remaining vessels.

Bomber Command also mounted ongoing raids aimed at protecting the vulnerable Atlantic convoys from the ravages of U-boats and surface raiders. Attacks on docks and repair facilities, and on the enemy vessels themselves, significantly diminished the ability of the German Navy to sustain its naval blockade of the United Kingdom. And as D-day approached, Bomber Command also performed outstanding service by preparing the battlespace in and around the invasion area. Later, they interdicted supply lines into Normandy and conducted pinpoint bombing attacks on defensive strong points around Caen.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there are three points I would like to make today. First is the legacy that the men and women of the Command have left to the Air Force of 2011 and, I believe, to the future generations of Australians in years to come. As many of you know, this year marks not only the fourth Bomber Command commemoration ceremony, but also the 90th anniversary of the formation of the RAAF. The theme we selected to mark this milestone focuses on the three pillars of **Tradition, Evolution and Innovation**. This theme was chosen for several reasons, not the least of which was

recognition of the enduring influence that past achievements have had on making the Air Force of today. The Bomber Command experience is one such influence that is particularly important to the modern Air Force, and must remain part of our collective memory.

Just under 40 000 RAAF members made the long voyage to the United Kingdom to serve alongside, and within, the Royal Air Force. While many went to other commands, approximately 10 000 personnel joined Bomber Command. Of these men, 3486 died as a result of their service. The number of RAAF members with service in Bomber Command represented less than 2 per cent of Australians in uniform, but their sacrifice was 20 per cent of Australia's war dead.

The bomber offensive was indeed the longest and most costly of all WWII campaigns. I find it extremely difficult to appreciate fully the depth of courage it took for the aircrews to rise up time and time again to maintain the offensive—the determination to press on to distant targets in aircraft damaged by shrapnel and stalked by night-fighters. It must have taken a particularly hard-edged attitude to keep pushing on with mind, body and aircraft, night after night. That example of devotion to a mission, above and beyond the normal sense of duty, is not lost on the Air Force of today. Bomber Command set a high standard in terms of dedication, and that is part of what today we call our values and traditions. This is an enduring legacy we have a particular duty to remember and aspire to. It is an example which has been enshrined since 2005 by the reforming of Nos 460 and 462 Squadrons—both distinguished 'Australian' units within Bomber Command—as part of the modern RAAF.

The second point I would like to highlight today is the personal aspect of Bomber Command. At the heart of any worthwhile endeavour, and the core strength of any military operation, are the people in uniform. It is as true today as it was in World War II, and it is especially true of the men and women of Bomber Command—a generation of truly outstanding people. I would like to emphasise that it was not just the aircrew who were at the centre of the offensive. It took the combined efforts of a whole complex organisation—from planners to intelligence officers, maintenance engineers to parachute packers, armament fitters to radar technicians—to keep Bomber Command

flying. The duties of the ground staff were not without cost, as 1479 men and 91 women died while on duty with Bomber Command and, remarkably, a further 52 of the ground staff were made prisoners of war.

My last point today is to highlight what is almost certainly a unique aspect of the Bomber Offensive. I refer to the high cost it demanded of its aircrew in the training process. In no other wartime enterprise was the cost of training so high. Of the 55 000 British and Dominion aircrew killed in the European Air War, over 8000 perished during training. The cost in human lives just to be able to mount the bomber offensive was, in itself, a sacrifice of immense magnitude.

The death of SGT John Sheridan, a young Australian still under training, was something of a double tragedy that illustrates the tenuous hold aircrew had on life. John was undergoing operational conversion as a navigator on Handley Page Hampdens at No 91 Operational Training Unit when he and his crew were tasked to take part in the first 'Thousand Bomber Raid' on the night of 30-31 May 1942. As inexperienced as they were, John and his fellow crew members on Hampden L4173 flew to Cologne and bombed their target, before setting course for home severely damaged by enemy action, with a crewmember badly injured and one engine lost. The young inexperienced pilot badly overshoot his landing, only to have the second engine fail at that critical moment. The aircraft consequently crashed, and both John and the pilot were killed. Their first mission, not yet qualified and the only Hampden bomber to be lost that night. Such was the short swift life of a Bomber Command airman.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it was Bomber Command who opened the first British front against the Nazi regime and remained at the forefront of the war in Europe to the very last days. Theirs was a long war, and it was one of bloody and unremitting endurance. On behalf of everyone gathered here today I wish to say thank you to the veterans of Bomber Command. Thank you for your service to our nation, your contribution to the freedom and protection of the human rights of the people in the occupied territories, and for your willingness to sacrifice your life on our behalf.

Lest We Forget.