

# PATHFINDER



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## D.C.T. BENNETT: AIRMAN EXTRAORDINARY

Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett, the man who led the famous Pathfinder Force of World War II after which this newsletter is named, was arguably the most proficient and innovative aviator ever produced by the Royal Australian Air Force. Strangely, he receives little recognition in the RAAF of today, and few serving members have probably even heard of him. This article describes why he deserves to be better remembered, while pointing to the possible reasons he is not.

Donald Clifford Tyndall Bennett joined the RAAF on 16 July 1930 and began pilot training at Point Cook, where he graduated second in theory and first in practical flying. Through a scheme operating since 1926, under which a proportion of each Point Cook course was passed across to the Royal Air Force on short service commissions, Bennett went to England in 1931. There he flew biplane fighter aircraft and flying boats, in all logging 1350 hours on 21 different aircraft types.

In August 1935 Bennett left the RAF as a Flying Officer. He did so holding a first-class civil navigator's licence, a wireless operator's licence, three categories of the ground engineers licence, a B class commercial pilot's licence and a flying instructor's certificate. That year he also wrote *The Complete Air Navigator*, which became the essential textbook on air navigation and remained in print for over 30 years. Bennett himself was just 25 years old.

In January 1936 Bennett joined Imperial Airways. He operated the European routes and flew the Handley Page 42 to India and Kenya and Empire flying boats from Southampton to Egyptian and South African ports. In 1938 he published *The Air Mariner*, another book concerned with the handling of flying boats. That same year he was placed in command of a small four-engined aircraft named *Mercury*, which was launched from the back of a flying boat. In this he successfully made the first commercial trans-Atlantic flight while setting a new record for the east-to-west crossing of the North Atlantic. In recognition he was awarded

the Johnston memorial trophy and the Oswald Watt gold medal. In October 1938 Bennett flew *Mercury* non-stop from Scotland to South Africa setting a long distance record for seaplanes. The next year he took part in proving the concept of air-to-air refuelling, which was intended to make possible non-stop Atlantic commercial flights.

In July 1940 Bennett was appointed flying superintendent of the Atlantic Ferry Service established to bring American aircraft to Britain. In mid-winter he personally led the first flight of seven *Hudson* aircraft to make the hazardous crossing. In September 1941, Bennett rejoined the RAF as an acting wing commander and within three months was given command of 77 Squadron equipped with *Whitley* bombers.

He consistently flew operations. In April 1942 he took over command of 10 Squadron equipped with the *Halifax*.

When attacking the German battleship *Tirpitz* in Trondheim Fjord, Norway, his aircraft was shot down.

Bennett evaded capture with several of his crew and reached neutral Sweden. After release from internment and return to Britain he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

Bennett's greatest achievement was yet to come. In July 1942 he was given the rank of acting group captain and directed by the formidable Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris to form and lead what was to be known as the Pathfinder Force within Bomber Command. The establishment of such a force designed to find



and mark targets for night bombing raids was deemed essential if Bomber Command were to continue its offensive. Few aircraft were reaching let alone hitting their nominated targets and, with a loss rate of four to five per cent of sorties dispatched, Bomber Command was achieving very little at great cost and was close to being dissolved. The appointment of Bennett, with his superlative navigational and technical skills, was crucial to Bomber Command's eventual contribution to allied victory.

Pathfinder Force, with its ability to guide bomber formations to their targets through the use of radar and pyrotechnics, greatly improved accuracy and therefore the effectiveness of the area bombing campaign. Bennett saw the potential of the then underestimated *Mosquito*, and this magnificent aircraft (able to carry a 1814 kilogram load to Berlin) was used principally as the leading aircraft of the Pathfinder marking forces. Frequently, and obviously against regulations, he would fly a *Mosquito* himself to the target to observe the marking procedures and the subsequent attack carried out by the main force of Bomber Command.

In January 1943, the Pathfinder Force was designated 8 Group of Bomber Command and Bennett was promoted to acting air commodore. At the same time he was appointed Commander of the British Empire. In December 1943, at the age of 33, he was promoted to air vice-marshal—the youngest officer to hold such rank in either the RAF or the RAAF. In 1944 Bennett was appointed CB and to the Russian Order of Alexander Nevesky. He was also elected a fellow of the Royal Aeronautical and the Royal Meteorological societies. Not bad for the Queensland-born son of a stock and station agent and grazier who left Brisbane Grammar School without distinction.

Still, the end of the war held a sour end for Bennett. Of all the senior RAF commanders he was not knighted, for he possessed a further and dysfunctional talent: he made enemies easily. He had few, if any, of what today are called 'people skills'. Bennett exhibited an impatient, dictatorial and pedantic style of command and having had a strict Methodist upbringing he

never drank, smoked or was heard to swear. Such characteristics in the then masculine world of military aviation may have contributed to making him a difficult colleague.

Harris said of Bennett: 'He could not suffer fools gladly and by his own high standards there were many fools... Being still a young man he underrated experience and over-rated knowledge.' At the same time, however, Harris acknowledged that Bennett was the most efficient airman he had ever met. While he was certainly arrogant and abrasive, many who served with him held him and his many skills in awe. His reputation for never asking anybody to do something he could not do himself was fully warranted.

Bennett's career after the war embraced both politics and civil aviation. He won a second Oswald Watt gold medal for making a survey flight to South America in 1946, but otherwise his efforts in both fields were a disappointment. His term as chief executive of British South American Airways ended in acrimony and his dismissal in 1948; his political views became progressively unsavoury as he flirted with the far right. He formed his own air transport company, which returned good profits during the 1948–49 Berlin Airlift and until 1951, and he then formed a company supplying sports cars in kit form, which he owned until 1983. When he died in 1986 in England, he was still remembered as a superb aviator. The title one biographer gave him was 'Pathfinder Bennett—Airman Extraordinary'. How remarkable then that this famous figure had his start in flying with the RAAF.

*Other groups quote their heroes and crack squadrons but for Pathfinders anonymity was the key word, Bennett refusing to have a public relations officer in the group. There were, of course, outstanding personalities in Pathfinders, but giants appear as tall men when all men are tall.*

- Gordon Musgrove,  
*Pathfinder Force* (1976)



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