In 1926, the RAAF entered an agreement with the British Government to train 10 Australian pilots per year at Point Cook. Those pilots would then serve as RAF officers on a short-service commission. At the end of their designated short service, the officers were free to return to Australia and serve in the Citizen Air Force, the fore-runner of today’s Air Force Reserve. However, many of the Australian officers continued their careers with the RAF and made valuable contributions at all levels of the Service during World War II. Here are the stories of three of those pilots.

Leslie Redford Clisby was born in 1914 at McLaren Vale, SA and grew up in Adelaide. An active sportsman, Clisby’s hobby of rebuilding motorbikes led him to join the RAAF as a mechanic in 1935 and train as a pilot the next year. Commissioned in the RAF and posted to No 1 (Fighter) Squadron, Clisby quickly mastered fighter tactics in the RAF’s newest and fastest fighter—the Hurricane.

Following the outbreak of war in September 1939, Clisby’s squadron deployed to France. Seven months later, Clisby shot down two German fighters in two days. The German blitzkrieg invasion began on 10 May 1940, resulting in intense air battles. Over the next five days, Clisby flew aggressively, often attacking even when he was outnumbered more than three to one. On 12 May, in a melee between Clisby’s squadron and 90-odd German fighters, Clisby was credited with shooting down three Messerschmitt Bf109 fighters and three Henschel Hs126 reconnaissance aircraft before running out of ammunition. For his achievements that day, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

Two days later, Clisby’s flight of five Hurricanes attacked a formation of 30 Messerschmitt Bf110 fighters, with Clisby claiming two of them within minutes. However, he did not return from this mission and was listed as Missing-In-Action until his remains were found the next day in the burned-out wreckage of his aircraft. He was buried at the Choloy War Cemetery in north-east France.

In his few months of combat flying, Clisby showed courage and aggressive leadership. At the time of his death, he was the highest scoring pilot in his squadron, credited with downing 10 enemy aircraft. His true score was probably higher, as many of the squadron’s records were lost during the retreat from France. At a desperate time for the RAF, Les Clisby fought with dedication and bravery.

Hughie Idwal Edwards came from Fremantle and, as a young man, played Australian Rules football for South Fremantle. In July 1935, he enlisted in the Air Force for pilot training at Point Cook. On graduation, he accepted a short-service commission in the RAF flying Blenheim bombers. In 1938, he was medically grounded after an aircraft accident but, by sheer determination, regained his fitness after two years of rehabilitation and returned to flying. By June 1941, as commander of No 105 (Blenheim Bomber) Squadron, Edwards flew missions against enemy shipping in the North Sea, earning the DFC. The following month, Edwards was awarded the Victoria Cross for leading a dangerous, low-level attack on the German city of Bremen.

Following a short tour at an operational training unit, Edwards returned to No 105 Squadron, which was now flying Mosquito bombers on low-level daylight precision attack missions against targets in occupied Europe. For leading the successful attack on the Philips factory at Eindhoven in December 1942, he was awarded the
Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Promoted to Group Captain, Edwards was appointed commander of RAF Binbrook, the home of the Australian No 460 Squadron, and commenced flying Lancaster bombers. Post-war, he served in a range of posts in the RAF and was promoted to Air Commodore.

After retiring in 1963, Edwards was appointed Governor of Western Australia in 1974 and knighted the following October. Sir Hughie Edwards, VC, DSO, DFC was the most highly decorated Australian in World War II. His determination and courage, while leading at the squadron and formation level, brought out the best in those around him.

Donald Clifford Tyndall (Don) Bennett was born in Toowoomba, QLD and after schooling in Brisbane, was accepted for pilot training in 1930. After commissioning in the RAF, Bennett flew biplane fighters and flying boats in several squadrons and qualified as a flying instructor. Leaving the RAF at the end of his four-year commission, he published the book The Complete Air Navigator, which remained the standard text on this subject for the next 30 years. In the following years, Bennett flew the world’s commercial air routes, specialising in long distance flights. In 1938, he made the world’s first commercial, east-to-west, trans-Atlantic flight in a small four-engined flying boat, carried aloft on the back of larger flying boat. The next year, he took part in air-to-air refuelling trials. In 1940, Bennett became the initial chief pilot of the Atlantic Ferry Organisation, a company that flew US and Canadian built military aircraft across the Atlantic to Britain.

Rejoining the RAF in 1941, he initially set up a navigation school but, by December, was made commander of No 77 (Bomber) Squadron. When his Halifax was shot down over Norway during an attack on the German battleship Tirpitz, Bennett and several of his crew evaded capture and returned to Britain via Sweden. For this mission, he was awarded the DSO. In July 1942, Bennett was selected to create the Pathfinder Force—a force to find and mark targets for night bombing raids. His rare combination of navigation skills, flying accuracy and technical knowledge made him a superb commander of the new force, which expanded to eventually include 19 operational squadrons. As the force grew, Bennett remained its commander and was promoted accordingly. At the age of 33, Bennett was made acting Air Vice-Marshal, the youngest officer ever to hold that rank in the RAF.

After the war, Bennett returned to civil aviation and remained in England. In his wartime service, his influence as a senior member of Bomber Command was immense. His ideas made the Bomber Offensive in Europe more accurate and therefore more effective, thus shortening the war and saving lives.

Australian pilots, trained at Point Cook but commissioned in the RAF before World War II, made a significant contribution throughout the war. By July 1938, when the last Point Cook graduates sailed for England, 149 pilots had transferred to the RAF. By the start of the war, they had the experience to serve as leaders at all levels of the RAF—squadron, wing and higher. They created a tradition that continued when the graduates of the Empire Air Training Scheme reached RAF squadrons after the outbreak of World War II.

**Key Points**

- Between 1926 and 1938, 149 Australian pilots transferred to the RAF after training at Point Cook.
- This pilot training scheme was an example of a coalition partnership in which both partners gained.
- This scheme also demonstrated the feasibility of the huge Empire Air Training Scheme that followed in World War II.