

Wing Cmdr Peter Isaacson, AM, DFC, AFC, DFM

lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is a highly decorated Royal Australian Air Force pilot who survived two tours in Bomber Command in Britain in World War II, the second one in a Pathfinder squadron. He and his Australian crew were then asked to fly a new Lancaster by themselves all the way to Australia, but for the first time ever, taking a westbound route across Canada, the USA, and ^{several} island stops in the Pacific. After spending the rest of the war demonstrating this Lancaster all over Australia and New Zealand, Peter began his own publishing company ^{in Melbourne} and by the time he retired in 1997 had become a legend in Australia in printing and publishing.

The idea for flying the Lancaster to Australia originated in R.A.F. Headquarters in London early in 1943, and Peter Isaacson had been selected as pilot as he was known personally to

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the Air Officer Commanding R.A.A.F. H.Q. However, the C.O. of the Pathfinder Group, Air Commodore Don Bennett, was adamant at not releasing Peter until he had completed his tour, and so although told on February 16th 1943 he was to take this Lancaster to Sydney, Peter did not fly his last mission until the night of March 29th/30th.

for the long journey ahead.

Peter flight-tested his new Lancaster at Avro's Woodford factory early in May, and then flew it to Colerne to be fitted with his Australian crew, plus a new rear-gunner (to replace an Englishman) and a filter to look after the Lancaster en route, they set off on May 21st to fly firstly to Prestwick, to refuel, and cross the North Atlantic. Then began an epic journey in the self-same mould of those pre-war intrepid trail-blazers to Australia - the difference being Peter was flying westbound (not east bound) in order to avoid Japanese held territory in South-East Asia.

Soon after the start, the auto-pilot failed to work and so Peter flew "Q for Queenie VI" all the way by hand, without having a co-pilot to assist him. They usually flew at night, and so they left Prestwick at 22.10 on May 22nd 1943, landing 15 hr 15 mins later at Dorval, Montreal. It was reminiscent of

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Alcock and Brown's famous first Atlantic crossing — far dense icing cloud extended from sea level up to 19,000 ft. Peter flew at 19,000 ft for spells, but came down to 7,000 ft to relieve the crew having to be on oxygen at the higher levels. Navigation was not easy, but then Peter's crew was a highly experienced Pathfinder team.

After Montreal, it was to Uplands (where Peter reminded the instructor who nearly failed him as a pilot that instructors could be wrong too!) and Toronto where Canadian Lancasters were being made, and Peter's Lancaster received a routine servicing. Lord Burghley (Britain's Controller of Overseas Supplies) and Gp. Capt. Wincott (RAF Liaison Officer) joined them there, ^{to fly to Sydney}, plus an American pilot to help with radio transmissions across the northern USA to San Francisco.

It took 13 hrs across to California, then a 12½ hr flight to Honolulu. Peter then took off for Canton Island ^{immediately} and ran into an extremely violent tropical storm. The Lancaster was thrown about in the turbulence, and lightning danced all over the aircraft. All the radio aids burned out, and suddenly all four engines cut out. Peter glided

the aircraft as slowly as possible, but they were right down to 3,000 ft over the Pacific before his Flight Engineer managed to start one engine, then gradually the rest. However it took them another hour to get a radio working, and a bearing to the nearest atoll with an airstrip to get them to

- Palmyra

From there, Peter flew at 1,000 ft over the Pacific to avoid the storms, stopping at Canton Island and Fiji, landing at last on Australian near Brisbane

sail at Amberley RAAF station and finally Sydney

the same evening. They were met by "Ministers, Brian Hats, Press and speeches", as Peter put it.

Peter and his crew then displayed "Q for Queenie" all over Australia and New Zealand for the next 16 months, giving short flights to almost everyone of note - from the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Governor General, Ministers, and VIPs, to thousands of schoolchildren, (often 40 at a time) as well as ~~100 of~~ everyone who bought ~~American~~ War Bonds and wished to fly in the Lancaster.

Never before or since, has a four-engined bomber "buzzed" so many cities, or "beaten up" so many schools, camps, RAAF stations, and isolated villages. What annoyed Peter, however, was that everywhere they landed, his crew always wanted

a cup of tea before continuing!

On Oct 22nd
1943

~~During this time~~ ~~21st~~ Peter made his most legendary flight of all — after "beating-up" parts of Sydney, he descended to 100 ft over the water and flew ^{eastbound} ~~under~~ Sydney Harbour Bridge (and was captured on film). It was a toss-up whether he was court-martialled — but instead he was awarded the Air Force Cross for the epic flight to Australia!

Peter Isaacson was born in London on July 31st 1920, his Australian father having come to England during the Great War as a soldier, and later married his English mother. Both parents had however, been descended from Baltic and European origins.

The family moves back to Melbourne in 1926, and Peter attended Brighton Grammar School and Melbourne University, before leaving at 16 to start work for a newspaper group.

In mid-1940 he was selected for the R.A.A.F. Air Crew Reserve, and in December began a flying training course in Australia, finishing advanced pilot training in Canada at Uplands. From there it was to England, to 27 O.T.U at Leicfield and then 460 Squadron (R.A.A.F.) near York.

Peter had already flown two operations — the famous "1,000 bomber raids" — while at O.T.U., and with 460 Squadron and a mostly Australian crew, he went on to complete 29 in all.

After 22 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal for "showing fine offensive spirit and great determination", and commissioned as a Pilot Officer.

Peter then volunteered for the Pathfinders, and in 156 Squadron went on to complete 44 operations before the flight back to Australia. When he joined the squadron at Warboys in January 1943, he helped convert two of their pilots onto Lancasters, and subsequently became close friends of both — Alistair Lang and Lighton Vernon-Roe (son of Sir Alistair Vernon-Roe, the first man to fly in England, and founder of the firm that made the Lancaster).

The three of them, ~~together with another Australian pilot~~, were known by their C.O. as the ^{Terrible} ~~Fearsome~~ ^{Foursome} "Threesome", as they got up to all kinds of pranks which although often foolhardy, did much to lift the morale of the squadron at a time of increasing losses. ^{also} The presence of a pretty WAAF Intelligence Officer had

them all rushing back after operations to see who could be first to be interrogated by her?

Near the end of the tour, Peter's Lancaster was over Berlin on the night of March 1st/2nd and had just released its load of markers on the aiming point when an ack-ack shell exploded near the tail, and a load of incendiaries from a Lancaster above hit them amidstships, wounding the gunner, destroying his turret, and jamming the control cables to the tail. They did not explode, but left gaping holes in the fuselage where they exited. The Lancaster immediately went into a steep dive, everything loose cascading into the nose. They all thought this was the end, but Peter planted his feet on the instrument panel to try to pull the control column back, and the Flight Engineer, and ~~the~~ ^{Navigation} Bomb Aimer came to pull too. After dropping from 17,000 ft the Lancaster slowly came level again below 3,000 ft, and they attempted to plot a course home. At low level, down to under 1,000 ft now, they inadvertently flew right across the centre of the heavily defended Ruhr, blinded by searchlights and hit repeatedly by flak — in this maelstrom to ^{all of} somehow creep back to Warboys. Their C.O. was so astonished at the damage, that he opened the Officer's Mess bar for them at 5 am in the morning! And Peter

received an immediate D.F.C. and his radio operator and navigator the D.F.M., for bringing the Lancaster back safely.

Sadly, during the early part of May, Peter's friend Highton Verdon Roe and his crew perished over Duisburg, and Alastair Lang became a P.O.W. when his Lancaster exploded over Dortmund.*

1945
October 28th

Sunday
Morning Duevis.
He died on
the 2nd of October
at Collingwood.

*

Peter retired from the R.A.F. in Australia on February 28th 1946, and bought a local newspaper, beginning a career in publishing and printing that was to last 50 years. His company, Peter Isaacson Publications eventually grew to employ 370 staff in Australia and New Zealand, publishing over 60 titles. He also started a company in Singapore, Asian Business Press, that employed 142 staff and published 14 titles. Always a very "hands on" character, Peter won many awards, for his own editorial columns, and always stood up for minorities, for the Aborigines, for people of all religious faiths, and for the role of the R.A.F. Bomber Command in Europe. ^{The denounced intolerance and bigotry.} He ran his businesses firstly to become, and remain the most respected in Australian and Asian publishing; secondly for the benefit of his employees, and only lastly to make money. He always put all the

profits back into the business.

He founded in 1969 what later became the Pacific Area Newspapers Publishing Association, and was made an Hon. Life Member in 1987. He became Chairman or President of many local Melbourne and national associations to do with newspapers and publishing, helped raise funds for charities, and for the upkeep and expansion of the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance — an impressive war memorial.

Peter was admitted to the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for 1991, for "services to the print media, and the community", before finally selling off his group of companies — by now the largest remaining independent one in Australia — to Tony O'Reilly's Australian Provincial Newspapers.

Wing-Cmdr. Peter Isaacson, A.M., D.F.C., AFC,
D.F.M., ^{married} his wife, Anne, ~~she has~~ ^{they have} in
Melbourne in 1950, and two sons, Tony and Tim.
