

I never knew my Uncle Cecil O'Brien for he was missing in action over Germany and presumed to be dead, before I was born in country NSW in the autumn of 1944. Cecil, who was born in Sydney in 1916, was the youngest of three boys and the son of John Francis O'Brien and Mary Julia Mann. John, senior, was from a pioneering Irish background and Mary Mann was born in Mousehole, Cornwall in 1886 and came to Australia aged four years with her family on the ship *Oruba* in 1890.

The three boys, John, who was my father, George and Cecil grew up in the garden suburb of Daceyville in Sydney's Eastern suburbs, not far from famous beaches such as Bondi, or Maroubra, perhaps less well known, but the place they most often went to swim. The eastern beach suburbs of the city are milder in winter and a lovely afternoon breeze makes them pleasant in the heat of summer. Not too far away was the Sydney Cricket Ground and, most exciting of all, Kingsford Smith Airport. The boys were active and swam and loved to play cricket in the local park. It was during one such game in 1930 that George was struck on the head by a cricket ball and later died in Sydney Hospital. The family was bereaved again by the death of their mother, Mary, to cancer, in 1932.



It was with some trepidation that my grandfather watched as Cecil signed up with the Airforce Reserve on October 11, 1941. He had married his fiancée Norma Sumner in April that year. My father John signed up some months later after some deliberation for he was also married, a father of one son, and a school teacher. He went on to serve with 466 Squadron as a navigator, after training in Australia and Canada, and happily returned to civilian life at war's end.

The brothers enthusiastically answered the call to young men to join the Empire Training Scheme (EATS) by which Australia agreed to train and send 36% of the pilots, observers, wireless operators and gunners required by the RAF to fight the war. Approximately 27,800 men were trained by the RAAF in Australia, mostly at an elementary level. Soon after joining the Reserve Cecil was recruited by Air Crew 2 and completed his elementary flying training in

the outer suburbs of Sydney, country NSW and Queensland. A week before his 26th birthday on July 13, 1942 Cecil was awarded his flying badge. By November Cecil was on his way to the UK on board a troop ship and attached to the RAF.

Letters to his father in Sydney that have survived for over 60 years have enabled me to gain an idea of what life was like for my Uncle during his year in England as he trained with Bomber Command to become a well qualified pilot. Although at no time could he reveal to his father where he was situated, or the finer details of his training, further

research has helped me to decipher the abbreviations on his service record papers and reveal where he was attached and posted.

On disembarkation the men were sent to 11 PDRC at Bournemouth in SW England. They were issued with kit, given a general review and instructional course and then immediately sent on 14 days leave as part of the Dominion Troops Scheme. They were chomping at the bit to get flying again. *'I am going into bombers and hope to get the best little plane in all the world which of course is the Mosquito,'* Cecil wrote to his father. But he was cooling his heels as the guest of an Australian woman, Mrs. Milne, in her large and comfortable home, Broadkeys, at Lake Windermere, and left to admire the beautiful English countryside swathed in light drifts of snow. The lads were entertained by a special dance held for them, good food, a *'wonderful room with a feather bed,'* and tobogganing in the snow.

Back at the original camp at Bournemouth after the leave, and two days at Ealing, Cecil was required to complete a Commando course which seems to have been in the North, at Whitley Bay. Cecil expressed his relief to be back to what was a well organized billet after contracting a severe cold in the chilling weather of NE England. Meanwhile John had commenced his training in Australia and Cecil was waiting patiently for the day when his brother would arrive in England. For the Australian airmen letters from home and the occasional parcel from the Australian Comfort Fund, or home, were much appreciated and looked for. Such a parcel might contain items like fruit cake, cans of peaches, tins of cream, chocolate, tobacco, shaving cream, toothpaste and a brush, paper and envelopes.

Letters tended to come in batches. There would be no mail for weeks and then an avalanche of letters. Part of the problem was that that the men moved on as they trained and the mail had to follow. This resulted in airmen spending many a spare moment writing replies. John O'Brien senior sent Cressy Comfort Fund Canteen Orders because he read in the paper that England was short of food, although Cecil reassured him, *'believe it or not there is plenty of food. Certain items are scarce but there is more than plenty for everyone. From the stories we heard we thought everyone would be perpetually hungry.'* Cecil did ask for sweeteners for his tea for sugar was in short supply. Norma numbered all her letter to Cecil but they tended not to arrive numerically.

In March, after completing a course on the links trainer Cecil and his cohorts were granted three short periods of leave enabling them to visit Reading, Birmingham and beautiful Winchester, while they waited for a training post to become available. It was one thing to ship in air crew but quite another to have them continually training in the air. On March 22 the group was sent to Anstey near Leicester to 9EFTS to train on Tiger Moths. For reasons not explained this did not work out and the men were returned to base at Bournemouth. Another posting was found with 50 Group Pool on April 9, with 18 EFTS, where the lads threw themselves with gusto into the 6 day week of training on old Tiger Moths. They regarded this as fun as they were fully aerobatic. Cecil's morale lifted as he was busy again, *'This is a grand place. We are well billeted and well treated in a lovely spot. The country around here is beautiful with its spring mantle.'*

The group was separated at the end of this training and Cecil found most of his cobbles were sent to other stations, except one Australian who had been with him all along. They were posted to 15 (P) AFU at Ramsbury from April 16 to May 25 for intensive training on Airspeed Oxfords. *'We touch on quite a bit of new work, mostly wireless aids, such as Beam approach and Homing at night etc. I must mention my respect and liking for the 'Pommy' instructors. There is no bull about them at all and they are most courteous and friendly. Not in a condescending way, they just treat us as pals which make learning so much easier.'* Equipped with hydraulic undercarriage there was no winding up as Cecil had to do with the old Anson in earlier training. At this base there was time enough to visit the local village and explore the country side. But there was an element of home sickness in letters home when Cecil wrote that *'the time can't come soon enough for me to be on my way home.'* This was constant message in his letters over the year of training. He expressed his desire to have the war over and be home again soon.

By the end of May, with a good assessment and 300 hours of flying in his log book the boys were with 1518 BAT flight at the famous Scampton base continuing intensive training on Oxfords and logging up hours of night flying. The operational station was home to 617 Dambuster Squadron and the boys were told in real terms what it was like to fly a raid. *'This is a wonderful place,'* wrote Cecil to home. They were provided with first class billets and mess. On May 27 the King and Queen visited to award Guy Gibson his VC and Cecil had a good view of the proceedings.

Cecil got an above average assessment at the end of his course and returned to the Satellite base at Ramsbury on May 31. While waiting for a posting his duties were odd flying duties and duty pilot. Cecil wrote to his father commenting on night flying saying that *'with the modern aids flying the kites was a piece of cake.'* The posting came through to 29 OTU at Bruntingthorpe, Leicestershire, on June 29. The base was much dispersed and Cecil and friends found themselves having to walk miles as they began each day at 6.30 am with PT. As the daylight of summer continued till near midnight the lads had trouble falling asleep. They were used to going to bed in darkness because the Australian summer sun slips below the horizon early in the evening and darkness falls quickly. To get to meals on time they went to town and bought themselves bikes. *'There is a fair bit to learn and our crews to select but it won't be a hell of a while now. I'm afraid there isn't much I can tell you about it except that I will be in heavy stuff for ops,'* Cecil warned his father

By July 27 Cecil was happier at a new station in the midlands. Unfortunately the records do not give any details but presumably he was still with 29 OTU at this new base. What is known is that he was flying a plane that was very heavy at the controls and may have been a Manchester. Cecil had selected some of his crew. The first was an Australian wireless operator named William Simpson, from Guyra, NSW who, coincidentally, just happened to be a relative of a maternal Great Uncle. He chose an English navigator and his pal, Gerald Sudds, as bomb aimer. The air gunner was expected to arrive the following week

A lot of night flying followed and Cecil said he had *'seem more dawns in the Air force than I have seen in the rest of my life.'* The training continued full time with no day off in a month as the work was intensified in the lead up to the bombing of Berlin. There was time spent waiting for kites be serviced and for the weather to clear and time spent on long range country flying. Surrounding this dome were farms with heavy crops and herds of cattle grazing contentedly. *'The cattle look beautiful and seem pretty hefty. I'd like to cut a steak off one of them,'* wrote Cecil. Food was an ever important subject. *'We have just returned from a Satellite dome (possibly Ramsbury) where we could occasionally get eggs and chips for tea from a café near the gates. We usually get good breakfasts and lunch on camp but tea is usually terrible and as we were night flying we were not wanted in the afternoon.'*

As September began Cecil heard that his brother John was training in Toronto, Canada. The invasion of Italy has begun. Twelve letters arrived from Australia and Cecil was looking forward to leave coming up at the end of his operational training. The hazards of night flying became real for Cecil when he was lost one night quite close to a balloon barrage area and another time he just saw another aircraft in time to avert a collision. *'I put my plane into a violent dive and busted a few pipes, and my rear gunner's head, but other than that everything went very well and we passed out with very favorable reports.'*

Some well earned leave was taken as guests of Bomb Aimer Gerald Sudds and his parents at Applegarth Farm, Sevenoaks, in Kent. *'Eggs and bacon every morning, lots of good food and a feather bed. It was such a break from service life.'* On their return there was no transport to meet them and they were sent to the wrong station and had to spend a night under canvas before they were picked up. A week of commando training was set down for them at HQ 51 base before the new posting to 1661 Conversion Unit based at Winthorpe, Nottinghamshire, came through on October 3.

Boosted by the change Cecil wrote enthusiastically of the *'beaut 4 engined Lancaster, the best heavy bomber in the world. It is streets ahead of anything else in the heavy class and we are fortunate to be posted to them. Also we are going to the best group in bomber command and with any luck may be attached to an Aussie squadron which is perhaps the best in the group. If we can make ourselves the best crew in the squadron we would be the best crew, on the best bomber, in the best squadron, in the best group, of the best Airforce in the world. The best crew in the world. What an aspiration!'*

Cecil found the aircraft relatively easy to handle and most maneuverable. *'They are really a lovely aircraft. I am amazed at what well over 20 tons of aircraft can do'.* Food parcels had arrived from Australia. There were three cakes from Norma and a parcel from work colleagues, tins of fruit from the Sumner family and Saxin tablets to replace sugar in tea. It was now just over a year since Cecil had left Australia and he was expecting to be commissioned as an officer before Christmas

By December 12 the men were posted to 467 Squadron at Waddington air base. This was the most comfortable camp to date. They had centrally heated billets with showers and

ablutions attached. The mess had billiards tables and a camp cinema with a change of programs three times a week. There was a sunray lamp in the officer's mess, a little touch of luxury. A telegram had arrived from John saying he had arrived in England to begin service. He was stationed at Driffild with 466 Squadron. Cecil travelled to the base for a reunion with his brother. They spent a day and night together and John had chocolates and soap from America for Cecil. They parted with John intending to join Cecil at Waddington when his leave came up. When Cecil returned to base another parcel containing a Christmas cake and chocolate had arrived from Australia, sewn into a calico bag to protect it on the journey.

The crew had their photograph taken as a group and Cecil posted it home to his father and wife Norma. *'I'm sorry I won't be home for Christmas but I will be thinking of you all and hope to be home for the next,'* he wrote to his father. Instead of signing his letter with the usual, *'Cheers,'* he wrote an affectionate, *'love to all.'* Christmas day was rather festive at Waddington and the crews were on general stand down from 10am. They helped serve the airmen their dinner then retired to the officer's mess for drinks before a meal of turkey and pudding. A dance was held before Christmas and there was generally a round of entertainment on off nights which helped to make spirits bright. Cecil reported feeling in the pink and that everything was ok.

Found among my mother's papers following her death in 2008 were letters from Cecil to my father, John, of 466 Squadron. As Cecil was writing to his brother, now stationed in England, he was able to express himself without the censor to strike out any information. He wrote on December 28 that he had done two trips. One was to Berlin on December 16 and the other to Frankfurt on 20th. The dentist u/sed Cecil for the next Berlin raid because of a bad toothache. *'I did a cross country exercise one night and it ached like buggery all the way round.'*

Writing on a Sunday which must have been at the end of December Cecil told his brother he was due for leave about January 4. As it turned out he left on January 6. He planned to go down to Cornwall to his mother's birthplace Mousehole. *'I've done three trips now. Two to Berlin and one to Frankfurt. The last Berlin was a bit shaky, the winds reared round and we got over Kiepzig and had a hot time there with flack. We were followed by fighters for a while shortly afterwards but they weren't in the show to shoot as I was weaving like buggery. We were late at Berlin and the attack had finished and we had plenty of attention. We were hit by one lot of flack and didn't know how lucky we were until the next morning when we found a hole in the oil tank and an engine strut almost severed besides a few other holes. I should have been in the last two shows but have been unlucky with kites and didn't get off.'* Cecil's commission came through that day of letter writing, January 3, 1944 along with a food parcel from Norma. It contained a Christmas cake and a big tin of sweets.

The trip to Cornwall to his mother's birthplace did not happen for Cecil found he could not afford such a long trip after having to go to London to arrange for his officer's uniform. Instead he travelled to Applegarth Farm with Gerald Sudds. Upon his return he

did two more trips with 467 Squadron. Writing to John again on a Sunday,' *We have done two trips since I got back to Berlin and Magdeburg. Both as uneventful as a trip can be which isn't very. These long stooges are grim. We were shot at and followed by the Gerry fighters but came back without a scratch. I have yet to see anything like Magdeburg. The cloud had broken through and the whole area was a mass of coloured target marker planes explosions enclosed in the brilliant white fires of burning incendiaries. I was going out tonight but a snow storm decided against it.*' Cecil's final word to his brother who was yet to begin his tour of operations was, '*Be careful.*'

On January 27 1944 another major raid on Berlin's western and southern districts was planned. Cecil was on his fourth trip as the sole pilot, but his sixth trip in total. His first two trips to Berlin and Frankfurt were as 2nd pilot with F/L D.S Symonds and P/O D. Harvey at the controls, as was the custom for the initial raids. The Lancaster ED539 PO.V MK111 was reported missing on January 28 1944. In Australia John O'Brien received the dreaded telegram, not knowing until he opened it which of his sons it related to.

1944	This Telegram has been received subject to the Post and Telegrams Act and Regulations. The time received at this office is shown at the end of the message.	COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT. TELEGRAM	The date stamp indicates the date of reception and lodgment also, unless an earlier date is shown after the time of lodgment.	Office Date Stamp I. C. B.
Office of Origin.	No. of Words.	Time of Lodgment.	No.	
M 432 MELBOURNE 130/1 5-20 P				
POSTAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT 2970				
DELIVERY PERSONAL ... MR J. F. O'BRIEN				
WILLS CRESCENT DACEYVILLE NSW				
20250 PILOT OFFICER C O'BRIEN MISSING STOP REGRET TO INFORM YOU				
THAT YOUR SON PILOT OFFICER CECIL O'BRIEN IS MISSING AS RESULT AIR				
OPERATIONS ON NIGHT 27/28 JANUARY 1944 STOP KNOWN DETAILS ARE HE				
IS MEMBER OF CREW LANCASTER AIRCRAFT DETAILED TO ATTACK BERLIN				
GERMANY WHICH FAILED TO RETURN TO BASE PRESUMABLY DUE TO ENEMY ACTION				
FOR REQUEST YOU INFORM NEXT OF KIN MRS CECIL O'BRIEN 262 RAINBOW				
STREET DOOGEE IMMEDIATELY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THIS OFFICERS WISHES				
NOTED IN HIS RECORDS STOP THE MINISTER FOR AIR JOINS WITH AIR				
BOARD IN EXPRESSING SINCERE SYMPATHY IN YOUR ANXIETY STOP WHEN ANY				
FURTHER INFORMATION IS RECEIVED IT WILL BE CONVEYED TO YOU				
IMMEDIATELY				

The tattered and folded nature of this small document is evidence of the many times over the years my grandfather opened this to read it. It was as if the profound shock of his loss was and experience that he relived many times.

Cecil's brother, John, did not know his sibling was missing until a cable from his family in Australia on February 2 informed him of the loss. John took leave and travelled to Waddington where Mrs. Kenrick, a friend of the Group Captain's wife at Waddington was about to write to John in case he had not heard the news. The only information Waddington had was that no radio communication was received from the plane once it left base and no other aircraft reported seeing any incident involving ED 539. There followed an agonizing wait for official confirmation that Cecil was indeed dead and that did not come until a letter was received from the Department of Air on March 6, 1945. Further details were received in an aerogram from Mrs. J. Doncaster, the transcript of which is as follows;

*AIR MINISTRY
Casualty Branch
73-77, Oxford Street,
W.1.*

4th June 1946

Madam,

I am directed to refer to your letter of the 3rd May 1946, regarding your son, Sergeant F.H.Doncaster, and to inform you with deep regret that the confirmation of his death has been obtained from captured German documents which state that his aircraft crashed at 8.38pm on the 27th January 1944, 'Berlin-Kopenick, 239 and 254 Wendenschloss Road or Street. No information as to his place of burial is given, and every effort will be made by the Royal Air Force Missing and Enquiry Service to ascertain these details.

I am to express the sincere sympathy of the Department with you in your loss.

*I am Madam,
Your obedient Servant,
A.W.Livingston
For Director of Personal Services.*

*Mrs J.A.Doncaster
16, Top Row.
Beacon Hill Newark*

A letter from the Department of Air was sent in 1945 expressing sympathy but giving few details.



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

TELEPHONES:
GENERAL MESSAGE EXCH. MU.9981

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS:
"AIRFORCE MELBOURNE."

Casualty Section,
DEPARTMENT OF AIR,
391 Lit. Collins St.,

150867

MELBOURNE. C.I.

IN REPLY QUOTE...RAAF.166/31/143(23A)

122-6-4045

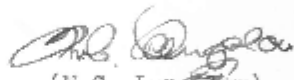
Dear Sir,

It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that the death of your son, Pilot Officer Cecil O'Brien, has now been presumed, for official purposes, to have occurred on the 28th January, 1944.

The operation in respect of which your late son was reported missing took place on the night of the 27/28th January, 1944, and Overseas Headquarters, Royal Australian Air Force, London, has presumed that the casualty occurred on the 28th January, 1944.

The Minister for Air and members of the Air Board desire me to express their profound sympathy. It is hoped that the accompanying enclosures will contain information of assistance to you.

Yours faithfully,


(M.C. Langslow)
SECRETARY.

Enc.4.

Mr. J.F. O'Brien,
4 Wills Crescent,
DACEYVILLE, N.S.W.

The final letter from the Department of Air gave details of the crash and was received in

May 1948. The letter is attached as a separate file.

Thus it was that the boy from the Eastern suburbs of Sydney, who so longed to go home again, was never to have that opportunity and, neither did his mate from the Guyra bush. We are proud that he rose to the demands of the training and the task of flying with 467 Squadron. We are sure that the families of all the crew killed in action that January night have mourned, as we have, over the years, the loss of their sons

May they rest in peace.

The crew of ED 539 PO.V lost over Berlin 28-1-1944 were;

Pilot Officer Cecil O'Brien, 420250 RAAF aged 27. Son of John Francis and Mary Julia O'Brien; husband of Norma Ellen O'Brien of Maroubra, NSW Australia. No known grave. Commemorated at Runnymede.

F/S William John Simpson 421693 RAAF aged 23. Son of William Henry and Mary Ellen Simpson of Guyra NSW Australia. No known grave. Commemorated at Runnymede.

F/O Gerald Henry Sudds Bomb aimer 136393 RAFVR aged 22. May have been born in district of Malling, Kent in December quarter 1922. Son of Mr and Mrs Sudds of Applegarth Farm, Sevenoaks, Kent. Berlin War Cemetery, 1939-1945. Grave 5-K-36.

Sgt Harold Boardley Navigator 159485 RAFVR aged 22. May have been born at Mutford in 1922? No known grave. Commemorated at Runnymede

Sgt Douglas James Coombe Flight Engineer 1582983 RAFVR age 19. May have been born at Blaby in June 1924. Berlin War Cemetery 1939-1945. Grave 5-K-37.

Sgt Francis Herbert Doncaster Rear Gunner 1013809 RAFVR age 23. Born Newark in June 1920. No known grave. Commemorated at Runnymede.

Sgt Joseph James Melling Mid Upper Gunner. 1017778 RAFVR age 27. May have been born at Barnsley, Yorkshire in March quarter 1917. No known grave. Commemorated at Runnymede

Photograph of crew follows.



Crew of flight ED 539 PO.V 467 Squadron

Front row left: Sgt William Simpson Wireless Operator: F/O Gerald Sudds Bomb Aimer:
P/O Cecil O'Brien:

Remainder of crew, not identified,
Sgt Harold Boardley, Navigator
Sgt Douglas Coombe Air Gunner (maybe airman on first right second row?).
Sgt Francis Doncaster
Sgt Joseph Melling.

Colleen Baines
Sydney
Australia
28 May 2009