

Francis (Jim) Cahir
Niddrie, Victoria
RAAF 1942-46

Jim Cahir believes his Irish mother's great love for Australia influenced his decision to enlist. The hours he spent going through his father's World War I memorabilia may have also played a part. Jim joined the Army in January 1942 before the RAAF took him up on his preference to enlist as aircrew in August that year. After training as an air gunner, he sailed for the United Kingdom in June 1943 and joined 466 Squadron RAAF in October, aged 20.



On the night of 20 December 1943, 647 bombers left England to bomb Frankfurt-on-Main in Germany. It was Jim's third operation. He was the mid-upper gunner in the seven-man crew of the Halifax bomber. After they dropped their bombs they turned for home, with Jim and the other gunner peering into the darkness for German night fighters. "Then all hell broke loose," Jim remembers. "With a loud thump, the whole of the starboard wing burst into flames and both engines looked like two raging bonfires. A huge hole appeared in the fuselage and all within just a few minutes."

As the bomber rapidly entered a spiral dive, the crew had seconds to get out. The pilot, Flight Sergeant Patrick Edwards, a 21-year-old from Newcastle, NSW, yelled at his crew to bail out as he struggled to keep the burning bomber under control. He sacrificed his life to save his six crewmen and friends. Jim has always remembered this sacrifice and named his eldest son after Patrick.

Although Jim can't remember pulling the ripcord of his parachute, he landed safely near the village of Belterhausen, north of Frankfurt in Germany, and started walking to put some distance between him and the crash site. On the run for two days, a farmer and his dogs caught Jim hiding in a barn. Jim's money and rosary beads were taken as he was jostled on the way to the local lock-up. While he was being interrogated by the local police, an old man approached Jim and secretly dropped into his hands the broken set of rosary beads that he had picked up from where they had been thrown. Jim still has them to this day.



Jim was punished with solitary confinement for not answering questions and has never forgotten the horror of spending Christmas Day 1943 alone. Not long afterwards, Jim was reunited with five of his other crew members and moved with four of them to Stalag IV B at Muhlberg on the Elbe River in eastern Germany. Jim was there for 17 months but says it could have been 17 years. It was the uncertainty of their indefinite sentence that weighed heavily on the prisoners. They drew strength from the nightly bulletins delivered by 'news couriers' – men who broke curfew to relay news about the war, which they transcribed from secret radio broadcasts.