



St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

PERCIVAL JOHN HAMILTON ROWAN

29 JANUARY 1916 TO 10 MAY 1940



May 10, 1940 marked the end of the phony war and the beginning of the Fall of France. German armies swept into France and the Low Countries. Neville Chamberlain resigned and was replaced as Prime Minister by Winston Churchill. And St George's College suffered its first war-time fatality.

Percy Rowan attended Christ Church Grammar School from 1927 to 1932, but he did not immediately come to the College. Like Len Laver, he had not matriculated, and it was not until 1935 that he entered St George's.

Despite poor eyesight, Percy was accepted for enlistment in the RAAF in 1937. It was a great adventure for him. He wrote: *I fly solo now. That, however momentous an achievement it might be to an 'Ab Initio,' is but the beginning really. I have had plenty of thrills, but have survived them all. It's a great life. Well, I must close now. Wishing you are happier than I – and that's saying a lot!*

Among the more unusual RAF emblems, 40 Squadron's badge contained what looks remarkably like a witch's broomstick. The broom was chosen to immortalise the frequent exhortation of Major 'Mick' Mannock, the famous World War I pilot who served with the squadron, to "sweep the Huns from the air!" The squadron's motto is rather more classically phrased: "Hostem acolo expellere" - To drive the enemy from the sky.

Disbanded in 1919, No. 40 was re-formed as a bomber squadron in 1931 and in the Second World War operated in several theatres: flying Blenheims and Wellingtons from bases in England it bombed targets in France, the Low Countries and Germany; flying Wellingtons from bases in the Middle East it bombed targets in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, Rhodes, Crete, Greece, Pantellaria, Lampedusa and Italy; and flying Wellingtons and Liberators from a base in Italy it bombed targets in Italy and the Balkans.

In December 1939, 40 Squadron had moved from its base at Betheneville in France to RAF Wyton, where it was re-equipped with Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV high speed light bombers. The base was 2km north of the picturesque English village of the same name, which Percy would soon have learned to pronounce as "Witton." He would have known the county as Huntingdonshire but it is now part of the flat terrain of Cambridgeshire, with its proximity to the east coast making it an ideal location for the allied air forces. By 1944 there were 24 Cambridgeshire airfields from which RAF and USAAF bombers flew in increasing numbers into the skies of occupied Europe and Germany.

Germany's blitzkrieg strikes on 10 May 1940 jolted the RAF into frenzied activity. The Luftwaffe had a day-one plan to capture The Hague, the Dutch seat of government, and to do so they had to control the surrounding airfields of Ypenburg, Ockenburg and Valkenburg. In this first day of chaotic fighting the Dutch Air Force lost half its 144 combat aircraft. The first bombs had dropped at Ypenburg at 4am and by mid-day the base had been captured by paratroopers reinforced by troop landings. But the Dutch fought back, and at 3.10pm the first RAF planes

arrived to bomb the field, causing heavy German losses of men and equipment.

In its very first bombing mission of the war, 12 Blenheims from 40 Squadron were despatched to bomb Ypenburg airfield. At 3.55pm Pilot Officer Percy Rowan and his two crew took off as part of this force in Blenheim L8828 BL to target the Ypenburg airfield. Most of the bombers successfully attacked the primary target, but three aircraft failed to return. Percy's Blenheim was shot down by a fighter over the North Sea, off Rotterdam, with the loss of all crew. Weeks later, his body was washed ashore at Rozenburg on June 2 and was initially buried on the spot, but on March 15 1941 he was reinterred at the Rozenburg General Cemetery, 19km west of Rotterdam. He is reputed to have been the first Western Australian to have been killed in the war. Sergeant George Beardwood (navigator/bomb aimer) from Lancashire and Corporal T.F.S. Clark (air gunner/wireless operator) from Caithnessshire were also washed ashore and buried in different cemeteries.

Just two days before Percy died, Viscount Portal (then Commander in Chief of Bomber Command) signalled: "I am convinced that the proposed use of these units is fundamentally unsound...we shall be lucky if we see again as many as half the aircraft we send out each time." The confirmation of his prophetic words was the terrible toll on day-time bombers with little fighter cover, and the eventual decision to send bombing raids only a night.

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"He was of a quiet and delightful disposition, and possessed great spiritual courage."

The Dragon, 1940 (attributed to Josh Reynolds)