



St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SYDNEY LAWRENCE ROWE

13 APRIL 1916 TO 4 MAY 1944



Sydney Rowe was the son of Harold V. Rowe, Surveyor at the Sons of Gwalia gold mine, and his wife, Ivy. Born in Bullfinch, he initially attended Eastern Goldfields High School but in 1930 he gained a position at Perth Modern School, where he completed the last four years of his secondary education.

Syd was not a leading student, and after entering St George's College and The University of Western Australia in 1934, he struggled with his course. His deep interest in the geology of the goldfields led to success in that part of his studies, but from family correspondence it seems he would have preferred to pursue a career in music.

On 1 February 1942, Syd joined up by enlisting with the RAAF in Perth. He and five close friends trained together as pilots, went overseas together and all joined Lancaster crews. In Syd's case it was 103 Squadron RAF (Bomber Command), which had been reformed in 1936 and flown Fairey Battles, Wellingtons, Halifaxes and, finally, Lancasters. No doubt Syd took part in raids alongside Lancaster M2 ("Mike Squared"), the most famous – or at least, the luckiest – of all Lancasters. It flew a record 140 sorties, the first 66 of them with 103 Squadron.

Syd took off on the night of 3 May in Lancaster ME673 for a bombing raid on France, just prior to the D-day landings in Normandy. He was the pilot, and the only Australian on board. The rest of his RAF crew were Sergeant Jack Henry Sallis (engineer), Flight Sergeant Ernest George Housden (navigator), Flight Sergeant Edward Arthur Metcalfe (bomb aimer), Sergeant Kenneth Robert James Warren (wireless operator / air gunner), Sergeant Phillip Arthur Staniland (mid-upper gunner) and Sergeant Dennis John Coldicott (rear gunner).

Their target was a complex called Maily-le-Camp where the Germans had assembled a force of hundreds of tanks, guns and vehicles that could not be allowed to reinforce their Normandy defences. It was a brilliant moonlit night for the 362-strong Bomber Command force, of which 346 were Lancasters from No. 1 and No. 5 Groups. The squadrons flew from their home bases to assemble over Reading, form up into their battle order and head east across the Channel to landfall over the French coast, about 15km north of Dieppe. From there they flew to a staging point that had been marked by bright yellow flares, 22 kilometres north-north-west of Maily, near the village of Germinon. They would be called to the target once the Pathfinders had marked the precise bombing points with their inextinguishable flares.

At this point, it all started to fall apart. The first bombs were scheduled to fall on the German camp at 1 minute after mid-night. But though the target was precisely marked the bombing controller, Wing Commander Deane, found that he could not transmit the order calling in the waiting Lancasters because his wireless channel was being drowned out by an American forces broadcast, and his back-up transmitter was wrongly tuned. Eventually the deputy controller took over, but in the meantime the Luftwaffe had had plenty of time to scramble, and to find the Lancasters flying an anti-clockwise circuit in their holding pattern.

They were sitting ducks. No. 5 Group was called in first, and so suffered lower losses. No. 1 Group had to maintain its holding pattern for nine to

15 minutes longer as its squadrons were progressively called in. By now, the night fighters were among them. 460 Squadron – the RAAF squadron that had lost Ted Parsons in 1942 and Michael Barrett-Lennard in 1943 – saw five of its 17 Lancasters go down, a 29 percent loss. No. 5 Group overall lost 28 of the 173 Lancasters it had despatched. All up, 42 Lancasters were lost, or 11.6 percent of the force. But the real metric is the human loss, with more than 250 young men being killed.

Many Lancasters were pursued and shot down by German fighter planes before being able to discharge their bomb loads, recalled RAF Sergeant Jack Marsden in a BBC story. Terrible explosions filled the air as Lancaster after Lancaster was blown out of the sky. The devastation of raking gunfire and exploding bomb loads is evident from the comparison of 250+ fatalities, with just 60 aircrew who managed to parachute to safety. The night-fighter attacks continued over the target and on the return route.

Apart from the appalling losses, the raid was reasonably successful. Some 1,500 tons of bombs were dropped with great accuracy. 114 barrack buildings, 47 transport sheds and some ammunition buildings in the camp were hit; 102 vehicles, including 37 tanks, were destroyed.

The Lancaster piloted by Syd crashed in the suburbs of Chalons-sur-Marne. None of the crew survived. Syd is buried in the Eglise Saint-Loup churchyard there, along with his crew.

Syd was a gregarious young man, clearly quick to make friends and determined to keep them. In the parlance of the day, he was described by his mother as having three loves – *the first and greatest was his fellow men*. The demonstration of his comradeship came in the hundreds of letters his parents received after his death, many from people they had never heard of.

In death, Syd was reunited with his five close friends from Australia, all of whom had become Lancaster pilots. All six were killed in bombing raids on Germany and France within three months of one another.

“In his Air Force uniform he waved goodbye with the same cheerfulness of heart which characterised his whole life. He had a capable mind, but he was not a great talker, preferring action to conversation.”

The Dragon, 1946 (attributed to Josh Reynolds)