

THE OUTSTANDING & WELL DOCUMENTED 'SPECIAL OPERATIONS' SECOND WAR D.F.C. & SECOND AWARD BAR GROUP AWARDED TO THE NAVIGATOR OF 'CINE-LANCASTER "WHOA BESSIE" 463 SQUADRON, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE, FOR HIS GALLANTRY DURING THE ATTACKS AND SINKING OF THE GERMAN BATTLESHIP TIRPITZ, SEPTEMBER & NOVEMBER 1944, FILMS OF THE ATTACKS, TAKEN FROM HIS AIRCRAFT WERE WIDELY PUBLICIZED AT THE TIME AS WERE THE DEEDS OF THE CREW. BY THE END OF HIS 2 TOURS WITH 463 SQUADRON, HE HAD COMPLETED 46 OPERATIONAL SORTIES, 12 OF THESE ON 'SPECIAL OPERATIONS'



DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS, G.V.I.R., REVERSE OFFICIALLY DATED 1945, WITH SECOND AWARD BAR, THIS OFFICIALLY DATED 1945; 1939-45 STAR; AIR CREW EUROPE STAR, 1 CLASP, FRANCE AND GERMANY; DEFENCE AND WAR MEDALS 1939-45; AUSTRALIA SERVICE MEDAL, THE SECOND WAR, THE LAST THREE OFFICIALLY ENGRAVED LATER ISSUES '20610 BOARD R. W.'

D.F.C. London Gazette 16 January 1945:

'For a high standard of navigational accuracy in attacks on targets.'

The original Recommendation states: *'Flying Officer Boards is now on his second operational tour. He has participated in numerous attacks against a wide range of targets. He has maintained the highest standard of navigational accuracy and a praiseworthy fortitude in the face of danger. In September 1944 he was navigator in an aircraft detailed to attack the battleship Tirpitz. In appalling weather he navigated his aircraft to and from the target and the success of the operations was largely due to his determination and skill.'*

D.F.C. Second Award Bar London Gazette 22 May 1945:

'For fortitude and gallantry in flying operations against the enemy.'

The original Recommendation states: *'Since the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross, this officer has continued to maintain a high standard of efficiency, courage, and tenacity. He has operated over many of the most heavily defended German targets and has obtained some excellent photographs. The successful filming of the attacks against the German battleship Tirpitz were largely attributable to his skill, determination, and devotion to duty. he has always shown himself to be a navigator of outstanding skill.'*

Robert William Board was born at Sydney, New South Wales, on 6 March 1917, and was granted a temporary Commission in the Royal Australian Air Force on 23 June 1941. Qualifying as a Navigator, he was posted to 463 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force on 18 March 1944, serving two operational tours with this squadron, before transferring to 11 P.D.R.C. on 18 February 1945.

Whilst still with 463 Squadron, Service papers note 'Special Duty', Bomber Command from 12 September 1944. This special duty was when Board and his crew volunteered to crew a specially-equipped Lancaster used by the R.A.F. Film Production Unit. This 463 Squadron Lancaster, named 'Whoa Bessie', would attack targets with the rest of the Squadron, filming the attack as they did but then circle the target area at lower altitude to obtain film of the result. A highly dangerous assignment. The crew found International fame and were much lauded at home, when they successfully filmed the sinking of the German battleship Tirpitz in November 1944, a film that survives to this day. For his gallantry during the attacks and filming of the sinking of Tirpitz, Flying Officer Board was awarded the D.F.C. and bar.



Details of 463 Squadron's service, much of which can be downloaded, can be found on the outstanding Australian War Memorial website:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U59448>

By the time he left 463 Squadron, board had completed 46 Operational sorties, 34 of these in a normal Lancaster, 12 with the Film Production Unit Lancaster. Board was presented with his

D.F.C. by H.R.H. the Governor-General of Australia at Government House, Sydney, on 9 August 1946.

The Australian War Memorial also holds in its collection numerous photographs, interviews and films relating to the crew of 'Whoa Bessie' (details/links below) and also a press release, dated 5 March 1945, and entitled 'Cine-Lancaster Crew Complete Four'. This release states the following:

"Five members of the crew of the Australian Lancaster from which the R.A.F.'s great "knock-out" blow on the Tirpitz was filmed – a film which has now been seen in cinemas on both sides of the World – have completed their tour of operations in Britain and are being posted back to Australia for duties there.

In Britain, they served with an R.A.A.F. squadron of R.A.F. Bomber Command. The cameraman flying with the crew filmed many targets, but best remembered are the records produced of the R.A.F.'s three heavy bomber attacks on the German battleship Tirpitz. On the third and last of these, in Tromso Fjord, Norway, it was Lancaster's gunner F/Lt. E. H. Giersch, of Brunswick, Victoria, who first reported that the battleship had heeled over, mortally damaged by bombs.

A quiet celebration was held in the mess recently in honor of the crew. The crewmen returning to Australia are F/Lt Bruce Buckham, D.F.C., of Penhurst, New South Wales; F/Lt Giersch, F/O R. W. Board, D.F.C., of Rose Bay, N.S.W., Navigator; P/O L. G. Manning, Air Bomber, of Nelson's Bay, N.S.W. and F/O D. W. Proctor, Rear Gunner of Sydney. P/O E. J. Holden, Wireless Operator, of Glen Iris, Victoria, will remain for a time in Britain. The remaining member of the crew is an R.A.F. man.



The crew completed one period of duty, attacking mainly German targets as a normal Bomber Command crew, then volunteered to carry on with flying the specially-equipped R.A.A.F. Lancaster used by the R.A.F. Film Production Unit, which not only bomb the targets, but also, by flying low around the area, obtain photographic records of the attack...

F/O Board, the Navigator, was recently awarded the D.F.C. for his skill, particularly on such trips as one attack on the Tirpitz, when the force flew first to Russian bases, attacked and returned after 11 ½ and 14 ½ hour flights in poor weather conditions....”

The attack on the Tirpitz filmed by the crew of ‘Whoa Bessie’ can be viewed here

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C189542>

As can a detailed interview with ‘Whoa Bessie’s’ Radio Operator:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C87859>

And a radio interview with the aircrafts pilot regarding filming the Tirpitz:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C276371>

Photographs of the crew of ‘Whoa Bessie’, including various of F/O Board:

https://www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search?query=WHOA%20BESSIE&collection=true&facet_type=Photograph

And from the Imperial War Museum collection;

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060021127>



THE MEDALS

Most usefully, the Australian Department of Defense (Air Force Office) have added all correspondence relating to Board's medals into his service files and these confirm the date of the late issue of the three named medals and how they were named:

On 26 June 1978, Flying Officer Board applied to the R.A.A.F. Medals Section, via the Returned Services League of Australia, for three WW2 medals he was entitled to but had never been issued with. He stated he was in only possession of the Distinguished Flying Cross/Bar, Air Crew Europe Star and 1939/45 Star, which had been issued to him at the time.

The medal office claimed the three missing medals had been sent to Board on 1 April 1955 and had not been returned. However in a letter dated 24 August 1978, they accepted Board's claim they had not been received and his three missing medals; Defence and War Medals 1939-45 and Second War Australia Service Medal would be forwarded to him "when they had been received from the engravers".



Therefore, the group of medals for sale fits exactly as they were issued to Flying Officer Board: Distinguished Flying Cross/Bar Air Crew Europe Star and 1939/45 Star (both small ring original issues) as issued to Board circa 1946 and the Defence, War Medals 1939-45 and Second War Australia Service Medal, all officially engraved and issued in 1978 to complete Board's entitlement

In 1989, one of Board's sons applied for a full set of replacement medals via the Air Force Office, claiming the originals (set for sale here) could not be found. He was advised that he would need to send a Statutory Declaration to the Office in order to make the application but in the event, this was never sent in, the medals presumably having been located.

Sold with Copy service papers, which confirm above regarding issue of medals, 'Cine-Lancaster Crew Complete Four' press release and transcript of interview with 'Whoa Bessie's' Radio Operator (PDF's all on CD). Medals sold by DNW in 2021, however at this time, Board's service records and details of the issuing of his medals were unknown as was much of the research on Board's service. Stars were miss described as later issues.