

Mel G Quinn's Story:

THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BERLIN AIRLIFT REMEMBERING AUSTRALIA'S SOLE CASUALTY

By Mel G Quinn

Fit Lt Mel Joseph Quinn (RAAF) was killed, aged just 26, when the Dakota IV aircraft he was piloting crashed on 22 March 1949 near RAF Lubeck in Germany. He was nearing the end of a return flight to Berlin as part of "Operation Plainfare" - the Berlin Airlift. His two RAF crew members F/O Reeves and M/S Penny died in the same incident. Mel was survived by his British wife Margaret and me, his son born seven months later.

The Berlin Airlift

Following World War II, Germany (and Berlin) was partitioned into four zones occupied by the USA, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Almost immediately, at the start of the Cold War, the Soviets began a campaign to persuade the Allies to vacate Berlin. Eventually, on 24 June 1948 they blockaded all land accesses to the western zones of Berlin, leaving open only three narrow air corridors. Just two days later Britain and the USA began the Berlin Airlift to supply the entire needs of over two million West Berliners by air. The Airlift reached its peak in the "Easter Parade" of 1949 when no less than 1398 flights were completed in 24 hours carrying 12,940 tons of freight to the city. On that day a plane landed or took off in Berlin every 30 seconds.

The Airlift ended on 12 May 1949 when the Soviets finally recognised that their blockade would not succeed. By then 2.3 million tons of coal, food, clothing and heating fuel had been carried on 277,569 flights - an incredible achievement given the relatively basic nature of the planes and navigation systems available at the time.

The RAAF contributed 10 experienced crews to fly Dakota's from Lubeck in West Germany to Gatow in Berlin. Their 2,062 missions are commemorated today on a memorial at Lubeck airport. Sadly 78 allied airmen were killed on the Airlift including Mel, the only Australian among those who are honoured on the Airlift memorial outside Tempelhof airport in Berlin.



Fit Lt Quinn's Story:

Mel was born on 18 June 1922 in West Maitland, New South Wales and baptised in St John's Cathedral West Maitland, the son of Matthew and Mary Quinn.

The family later moved to Muswellbrook and then to Sydney where Mel attended St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill and gained a reputation as a powerful stroke in the school rowing eight. On leaving school in 1939 he worked at Mark Foy's department store in Sydney and soon joined the RAAF Reserve as the first step in fulfilling his dream of becoming a pilot.

In July 1941, aged 19, Mel left Mark Foy's, enlisted in the RAAF and began flying training. He secured a commission as a Pilot Officer in June 1942 and by November that year his flying training was complete. He embarked on the long voyage to England to join the war

effort and on arrival attended a Personnel Reception Centre in Bournemouth. It was here, in January 1943, that he met his future wife Margaret not long after her mother had been killed in a German bombing raid which demolished the family hotel.

Mel's flying duties resumed with fighter training on Spitfires before he joined 453 Squadron RAAF, first at Hornchurch and then at Ibsley. His active service as a fighter pilot began on 1 August 1943 with a patrol to protect shipping in the English Channel and an offensive sweep two days later. His log book shows that he then regularly took part in dangerous missions patrolling the shipping lanes, escorting shipping convoys, protecting bombing formations and supporting rescue attempts in the English Channel. However, things didn't always go to plan - Mel's log book for a patrol on 4 September notes "cock up - navy missing!". Mel's romance with Margaret flourished but they were to be parted in March 1944 when he was posted to Asia - first to India and then to Burma.

On arrival in Bombay, Mel undertook training on various aircraft including Hurricanes, Thunderbolts and P47's before resuming operations with 30 Squadron RAF. These posts proved to be Mel's last in the war. He returned to Bradfield Park in Australia and was demobilised in December 1945, still only aged 23.

8 months later Margaret took the brave step of setting sail as one of the early "Ten Pound Poms" to join Mel in Australia. On 31 August 1946 she left Southampton aboard the Stirling Castle and joined the Quinn family who by then had moved to the Sydney suburb of Clovelly.

The couple were married at Sydney Cathedral on 26 October 1946 and set up home in Bondi. Photographs and letters from the time show how happy they were together but Mel had found it difficult to settle back into work at Mark Foy's after the excitement of flying. He had seen his brother's career prosper (Noel Thomas Quinn would eventually retire from the RAAF as an Air Commodore with a DFC) and decided to follow his example. He re-enlisted and returned to Bradfield Park in November 1946 before joining 37 Squadron RAAF at Schofields, New South Wales in May 1947. This time he was flying C47 transport planes.

When Mel was posted to England for special training with RAF Transport Command in the autumn of 1947, it must have seemed a wonderful opportunity for the newly weds to visit English friends and relatives again. However the posting was to end in tragedy.

Initially Mel trained on Dakota aircraft at North Luffenham and Netheravon. Then, in August 1948, he joined 46 Squadron RAF at Honington and embarked on "Operation Plumber" in support of the Berlin Airlift. The Australian Women's Weekly for Christmas Day 1948 devoted a whole page to the Australian Airlift crews who would have "a busy Christmas Day" thousands of miles from home. It explained that Plumber Flight "rushes spare aircraft and engine spares wherever they are needed in Germany" and noted that Mel had already made 20 such trips while developing a "great admiration for the operation of the Airlift".

A move to 24 (Commonwealth) Squadron RAF at Bassingbourne in January 1949 led to more Dakota missions in the UK, including the privilege of flying Lord Tedder (Marshal of the Royal Air Force) between several RAF bases. This was to be followed by Mel's final posting on 16 March 1949 to join 27 Squadron RAF at Lubeck in Germany and take part in the Berlin Airlift.

His plane crashed just 6 days later on its 8th return flight to Berlin while making an approach to Lubeck in very poor weather. Mel, Australia's sole casualty on the Airlift, was killed instantly and was buried with full military honours at Ohlsdorf Cemetery in Hamburg. The investigation team 'failed to establish the cause of the accident.'

A life mourned

Devastated by Mel's death, Margaret stayed in England to complete her lonely pregnancy at her brother's family home. I was born in October 1949 and named Mel after my father.

Margaret's life became very different from the one she must have anticipated as a pilot's wife. She never remarried. As she explained to an English newspaper in 1999 "I could have married but I felt it would have been betraying Mel if I had." Although she received a widow's pension, money was in short supply and she needed work which would also allow her to look after her young son. She initially became a housekeeper in London but after a while decided to visit Mel's family in Australia. She returned after about a year to settle near her own family in England.



On her return, Margaret took a range of demanding jobs which she juggled with her role as a mother to me. When her first granddaughter was born on 12 May 1975- the anniversary of the ending of the Airlift - she felt it was a lovely reminder of the husband she still missed so deeply. Despite her loss, she was proud to know Mel had died for a worthy cause. As she once said, "If they hadn't gone in and supported the Berliners like that the whole of history would have been altered."

Through her resourcefulness, Margaret rebuilt her life but sadly it has taken its toll. When she retired she moved close to me and my family but her health declined steadily. Aged 89 , she now lives in a nursing home. We visit her regularly and try to keep her happy but she is frail.

Welcome support

Over the last fifty years or so Margaret has been sustained by two wonderful organisations - the Stiftung Luftbrückendank and London Legacy.

The Luftbrückendank Foundation was formed in Berlin on the 10th anniversary of the Airlift.

As Willy Brandt, then governing mayor of Berlin, explained its aim was to keep 'in mind those pilots who lost their lives while they helped to preserve the freedom of Berlin' and to 'manifest (Berliners) thanks for those unforgettable deeds'. Since then the Foundation has provided necessary financial support to the widows and involved the dependents in various anniversary celebrations. At one such event I was privileged to meet 10 of the Australian Airlift veterans who had also been invited to Berlin. It was an emotional moment when one veteran said that he felt the missing member of their mess had returned and an honour for me to cheer them when they paraded in Berlin's Olympic Stadium. I know that it has been a great comfort to Margaret to see, through the Foundation, that her sacrifice has not been forgotten.

