

# Jeffery David Crosbie

## A

### Tribute

Jeffery was born on Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> August 1922 at home in 92 Boundary Road in Midland Junction, Western Australia. (*Boundary Rd re named & numbered to 59 Morrison Rd.*)



He was the youngest child by 6 years of William Robert Crosbie & Annie Agnes Crosbie nee Clyne. His step siblings were Sylvia, Leonard, and Robert with the full siblings being Douglas and Isobel.

Though the enrolment records appear to be lost it is known from his sister's stories that he attended the Midland Junction State School which was located about 500 metres down the street from his house, however it is suspected that he did his primary years with the catholic nuns at St Bridget's School on the Great Northern Highway junction with Morrison Road. This suspicion is based on a photo shown later as a 8-10 year old in what appears to be a school uniform, though the quality is bad there is a school photo of a slightly later period which shows several boys in what appears to be the same uniform at St Bridget's School. Service records confirm that he attended Midland Junction State School 1934-1936, whilst there are pictures of the school located in the Midland Public Library none of the class photos feature Jeff as he was called within the family, though he is mentioned in the newspaper report on the school swimming sports. "Midland Junction Central School swimming sports held on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1936 at the Guildford Reserve Pool, J. Crosbie under 13 diving 1<sup>st</sup> place". At that time swimming in the Swan River around the Guildford/Bassendean area was the norm for everyone, there being no man made pools available locally. His schooling continued at Perth Boys School 1937 where he finished his formal schooling at the age of 15. Like all young boys of the time he enjoyed an outdoor lifestyle though here he is partly on his best behaviour or managed to not create a family story that has stood the passage of time.



Summer holidays were no doubt a highlight as the family loaded up the old Rugby vehicle and headed down to Rockingham by the sea. It was a lengthy journey over very poor roads, in places more like tracks, according to his sister Belle "it took all day".

Midland was a railway town with the largest employer being the Western Australian Government Railways through their train network and the fact that Midland was the major workshop for the building and repair of rolling stock and the maintenance of the steam engines. Midland Railway Company also had a workshop and administration office in the town. Basically it was a Labor town though Jeff's father was not of that political view being the Swan Road Board secretary for many years and on several occasions Mayor of Midland.

I have found no mention in the Newspapers of a J. Crosbie being involved in any sporting or social group which is not to say that he wasn't active in these types of endeavours as we do know he was like most young folk of the time interested in swimming most likely in the river nearby. Tennis was another interest aided by have his own tennis court adjacent to their house on Morrison Rd.

What Jeff did immediately on leaving school is not known though he certainly does not show on the employment lists for the workshops that are available to date. That said on his Mobilization Attestation Form of 1941 he gave his occupation as "Junior Worker WAGR" that is the WA Railways. However on his enlistment form to the RAAF it states that he had been employed for 12 months with the WAGES (western Australian government electricity station) repairs electric light meters at the power station. (perhaps an army misprint). Further the document says he had attended the Perth Technical College two nights a week throughout 1940-1941 studying Trade Mathematics and Technical Electricity.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1941 under the name of David Jeffery Crosbie he enlisted with the Australian Military Forces at Claremont WA and given the number W 22973 (W indicates the State of joining i.e. Western Australia). He was single living at 59 Morrison Rd. Midland Junction his designated next of kin was his father and he followed the Presbyterian Christian denomination. By 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1942 he was taken on FTD (full time duty) and posted to Bunbury WA attached to a unit of the 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment. It was in the idyllic summer months that Jeff was introduced to the regime and discipline of army life, no doubt a lot of marching, weapons drills and usually ordinary bulk cooked food plus hordes of flies during the day complemented by an equal number of hungry mosquitoes at night. By the 21<sup>st</sup> April he evidently survived the indoctrination sufficiently to be detached from this initial deployment and was posted to the 10<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion and placed into A

Company. After a short stint in the metropolitan area which no doubt included some extra training and leave to again sample mother's cooking Jeff was transferred to the 25 Reconnaissance Battalion based at Gingin, WA, arriving on base on 16<sup>th</sup> June.

Late July 1942, 25 Recce Bn. transferred to Northampton, WA. One month later Jeff was sent to the ATTD (army trade test depot) for a trade test. It took until 17<sup>th</sup> November for the results to be notified in which the army decided Trooper David Jeffery Crosbie would be suitable for training as an electrician which is what he had applied to do in May 1942.

In fairness even though it took more than a year to decide which field Jeff would be most useful to the war effort the military forces were under extreme stress with most of the regular troops occupied in the Mediterranean and the remainder fighting a rear guard action throughout Malaysia and the Indies. Singapore had surrendered as had the Netherlands East Indies leaving the Japanese moving towards Port Moresby and mainland Australia.

5<sup>th</sup> May 1942 as was the custom under standing orders for mobilized service men Jeff wrote his Will in it he appointed his mother Annie Crosbie and sister Mrs D Duttson as executors and left all his assets solely to his mother, A. A. Crosbie.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> March 1943 Jeff was discharged from the Australian Military Force then immediately re-enlisted with the RAAF (Royal Australian Airforce). We don't know why, his army record gives no hint of any disciplinary occasions, the air force was actively recruiting young men to fill their needed expansion. Certainly many troops transferred to the Airforce from the Army about the same time. Perhaps Jeff was advised that there would be more scope for an electrician in the RAAF, possibly the fact that his eldest brother Len was a career RAF (Royal Air Force) and his brother Doug was also seconded to RAAF had a strong influence on his decision. What was the girlfriend suggesting?

Jeff's transfer to the RAAF number 436683 was formally completed on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 1943 at the No.4 Recruitment Depot, Perth. He was classified as an Air Craftsman Class 2 due to his previous military service and described as being of fair complexion with hazel eyes and fair hair carrying no scars and 5'9" (173cm) tall weighing 146 lbs (67kg) with a chest measurement between 35-38 inch (95-98cm), vision 6/6 both eyes. A3B medical rating. These physical aspects contributed significantly to which branch of the RAAF he was destined for.

Immediately upon enlistment he was attached to the No 4 Recruitment depot in Busselton where he remained for six weeks before joining the No. 5 Initial Training School at Clontarf WA on 12<sup>th</sup> April, upon completion of this course with the rank of Leading Air Craftsman, Jeff was allocated to the No.1 Wireless/Air Gunner School based at Ballarat, Victoria on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1943. This no doubt exciting transfer was probably the first trip he had undertaken outside his home state. The Ballarat School morphed into the No 1 Bombing and Gunnery School with Jeff being further moved into the Air Gunner segment. Most of the time the course was basically spent in a classroom environment with little hands on teaching. Having completed the requirements of this school he was transferred to the RAAF Air Gunnery School based at West Sale, Victoria, where the flying and firing at ground objects and towed drogues took precedence. No doubt the boys embraced this facet of training with vigour and bragged about their success or near misses. Elevated to the rank of Temporary Sergeant on 9<sup>th</sup> December Jeff graduated from West Sale on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1943 with a report card that read; 'very good character and a proficient air gunner', he had fired 1600 rounds at toed targets from a flying aircraft. Granted leave Jeff returned to Perth for Christmas with orders to report to the No 5 Embarkation depot Perth on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1944.

What he did during his leave is not known other than spending time with family and catching up with friends. I suspect this was in some respects an awkward leave for Jeff with his old acquaintances not having any understanding of what he had been doing or what he might be doing in the future. He knew that he was trained for some quite dangerous situations as indicated by his calling on his sister Belle unannounced just before he was due to return East. She spoke of asking him why he wasted part of his leave visiting when they had only seen each other the day before, with a shrug "what I will be doing is dangerous and I may not return". A sobering thought for both of them.

Jeff reported to No 1 Embarkation Depot in Canberra on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1944 presumably having grabbed a lift on a transport plane out of Perth via Adelaide as aircrew are naturally averse to travelling by land if it is at all avoidable.

Throughout all his postings including his last one all the base adjutants have signed his Conduct Sheet with 'no entry recorded', indicating that he just quietly went about his business without attracting the eye of the disciplinarians or maybe just was smart enough not to get caught.

Canberra was the home depot base for the Netherlands East Indies Air Wing which was made up of Dutch military people who had escaped or avoided capture by the Germans and the Japanese though mainly from the Indonesian Archipelago region. The Dutch did not have enough men to operate a fully functional and effective squadron of bombers so had negotiated with the Australian Government to supply men from the RAAF which they did. The result was that nearly all of the ground staff covering many facets of an operational squadron were from the RAAF and at least one RAAF air gunner per operational bomber. To achieve their required numbers of gunners the Dutch selected RAAF men from the Canberra base which was a staging depot for men from other States and from a Melbourne base. Jeff was picked to join the 18<sup>th</sup> Squadron NEI-RAAF operating Mitchell B 25 medium bombers based at Batchelor in the Northern Territory as a tail gunner, no doubt for his ability and smaller size that was essential for a tail turret position.



22<sup>nd</sup> January 1944 via a transport plane Flight Sergeant Jeffery David CROSBIE reported for duty at the aircrew headquarters tent of 18 Sqn NEI-RAAF at Batchelor, Northern Territory. The Squadron was under the control of Wing 79 in the North West area of Australia.

One can only guess at what he was feeling as he walked through the camp which was full of noise with aircraft coming and going, being armed or serviced with engines run up and guns tested. Batchelor Base at the time was a large strategic affair with many different squadrons and plane types operating from the immediate surrounds, it included units of the USAAF, RAAF, local Communications supply aircraft as well as transport and replacement aircraft activity. It was a big establishment in numbers of personnel ranging from ground based guards through various armourers, fitters, mechanics, fuellers, intelligence, photography, medical folk, cooks, yardmen and more. There was not a female person for 20 miles and they were nurses attached to the Adelaide River hospital. The biggest shock should have been the multitude of languages spoken and the wide variety of different shaped and coloured men when compared with the folks of Midland Junction where they were all mainly Anglo-Saxon. Jeff was allocated to an American style 6 man tent attached to the area reserved for the Dutch Officers and aircrew. No record of who his tent mates were has come to hand though from diaries of others they were predominately Australian. The tent accommodation was fairly basic with the 'beds' strengthened with wood scrounged over the years by others to improve on the camp stretcher style, they always had the sides rolled up to catch any breeze and often had an old piece of canvas stretched over the roof part to funnel dew and rain water into a drum for fresh water. Saved carrying water from the ablutions block, for luxury they had electric light in all tents unless there was a suspicion of a Japanese raid and there was a Coolgardie safe a contraption of a frame covered with hessian that when kept wet very nicely cooled whatever were the contents usually water & beer.

It must have been hard understanding and relating to men who were Dutch nationals and fair skinned and to the Indon men from Java, Sumatra, Borneo who were also Dutch nationals but spoke their own dialect as well as Dutch.

Within 14 days of arrival Jeff flew his first operational mission on 5<sup>th</sup> February that of doing a daylight search patrol under the captaincy of Lt. Kiewiett, they were airborne 6 hours 40 minutes and reported no sightings. Something of a relief to have finished the first real flight over enemy influenced territory I imagine.

Then on the 17<sup>th</sup> after several familiarisation flights a first night raid taking 7 hours 20 minutes under Lt. Theunissen to bomb Amboina. It went according to intelligence expectations with no need for Jeff to fire his tail guns though he was required to be debriefed thoroughly as it was the job of the tail to report where the bombs landed and what if any damage was inflicted. Often the bombs hit well wide or beyond the target causing little damage. When he was eventually dismissed for the day it is reasonable to assume he was very tired with the tension and strain of being alert for so long a period and headed for a shower before turning in. On the plus side a morning shower would have been a delight as they had a roofless enclosed area sealed with a concrete pad with 6 shower heads spread along the walls, at that time of day the water would have been warm as it came from a large tank some distance away through steel pipes laying on the surface of the ground. I've been told that later in the day the water was nearly boiling and the opposite at night very cold.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> a day raid from Batchelor to Mina River with the full squadron targeting a strategic bridge over the river. This was an all-out effort into enemy territory with the squadron enjoying the added protection of a fighter cover and success in destroying the bridge. Jeff flew with Sergeant/Major Holswilder this time and they scored a direct hit. The balance of February was spent flying with various pilots and crews on training sorties utilising the guns for practice until the 29<sup>th</sup> when another search operation designated "Jackass" of 6 hours 50 minutes took place without incident there being no enemy sighted with visibility at 30 miles under Lt. Lukkien piloting plane number N5 163. They carried 4 x 300 pound bombs just in case they located a potential target plus the usual complement of ammunition. Upon return after de-briefing it is possible the crew ate at the Dutch Sergeants



mess as the food being of Asian style had been found to be better tasting than the staid repetitive RAAF style.

No flying activity is recorded in Jeff's logbook until the 11<sup>th</sup> March. Whether he was occupied doing ground based duties is not known though this is still very much the "wet" season and not very conducive to successful flying. On the ground there would have been hordes of flies and other biting insects to contend with as well as the heat and humidity, at night mosquitoes were rampant, great care was taken to remove any found inside the mosquito net before settling down to sleep in the tents open to any faint breeze that helped cool the inside.

Usually at the morning parade duties were assigned for the coming 24 hours so if you were on standby you had to hang about the camp in full gear just in case a mission was called. If a night flight was on the cards depending often on the weather over a target area then you went to bed fully dressed waiting for the guard to come and shake your shoulder always saying "you fly now". If nothing was planned then dismissal meant you were free to attend to personal activities such as clothes washing, mending, reading, playing cards etc. given his interest in electrics maybe assisted in the maintenance of aircraft circuits.

One story Jeff may have witnessed relates to an Officer who bought an Oboe with the intention of teaching himself to play. After lunch one day after several practice attempts he opened his case and proceeded to assemble the Oboe when he heard a pistol shot, upon looking up noticed a hole in the tent just above his head, getting the message he quietly repacked the Oboe and never practiced again. Indicating the tension the men were under?

For all of March Jeff flew always in N5-171 with Lt Johaan Deknatel who was very experienced as were his crew, it's comforting to hope they welcomed him as a crewmate as they settled into regular operations somewhere to the north of Australia. They did 6 daylight flights bombing usually from about 7,000 feet, apparently met little resistance as Jeff's log says "nil rounds fired". On the last night of March in company with other 18 Squadron aircraft on a bombing attack against Penfoei they encountered heavy flak, more than they commonly had come to expect. N5-171 was hit lightly with holes punched through the fuselage and wings, fortunately no one was injured and no fire started, however as they landed the tip of the wing fell off. That was one Op they walked away from. The damage was soon patched and wing repaired as N5-171 flew again 2 days later bombing Koepang on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> April however cloud cover obscured the target so they brought their bombs home.

Payday was regularly held when some drew money to spend or send home, there was not much to buy other than tobacco and perhaps the odd razor blade or soap. Batchelor being what was considered an "active" base the men were entitled to 2 bottles of beer per man per week though sometimes there was no beer due to supply problems so they received 2 bottles of "lolly water" instead, what today we call soft drink very sweet and made in Darwin. The beer was manufactured by Carlton United Breweries at their Cairns plant, a long haul to Batchelor.

Throughout April Jeff flew 5 night bombing operations to the areas of Koepang, Penfoei followed by 3 day raids to Soe & Dilli and one gunnery practice firing off 120 rounds with No stoppages. This is in addition to the very hurried re-deployment of the whole air wing of the Squadron to Potshot near Exmouth WA because intelligence reports indicated a Japanese fleet of capital ships was sailing south to invade Australia, turned out to be a false alarm. Because of the expectance of meeting enemy fire the tail gunners were required to be at "action position" from take-off till landing. This meant that all search patrol were performed kneeling in the turret which was very hard on the knees, probably didn't help concentration either.



Johannes Deknatel and his tent



Jeff flew in her nicknamed "the Mississippi Dream"

Batchelor had two separate airstrips with the main one being the crossed by the railway line and the Gould strip a short distance south with the Dutch camp between the two strips. 18 Squadron's B25's used the later whenever the wind was favourable to avoid congestion and closeness to their facilities.

There was a big difference in the pay rates between the NEI & RAAF according to a veteran with the NEI being highly paid for all hours flown plus a base pay whilst the RAAF men only had a flat rate. Apparently the NEI lobbied for the pay to be equal without gaining any traction, it does explain why the Dutch loved to fly at the slightest opportunity. 24<sup>th</sup> April Jeff wrote the only letter we still have to his brother Doug and in it he mentions that he has located his brother in law George McGregor the Adjutant of 31 Squadron RAAF billeted about 2 miles away, *"have seen him briefly twice but he is coming over to see me tomorrow night. Tuesday night is beer issue for us (2 bottles a week) & I think I can get another two so as to make his trip over our beautiful gravel roads worthwhile."* He talks of a mascot/protector *"Bingley3 is eligible for his wings now but I'm not sure how to get him some, he's marked in my logbook every flight he has done. What rank do you think I should bestow on him?"* The film tonight was *'The Man from Down Under'*, general opinion up here is not high, it was supposed to typify the average Australian but makes us out as a crowd of illiterate people whose main sayings are *'Gore blimey & struth.'* He finishes with words that are very poignant and telling of the stresses of separation and war, *"Oh what do you know I haven't got a girlfriend now."*

Film nights were a regular event they sat under a tree using a 16 mm projector focused on and old whitish sheet strung between two poles. Apparently some of the films were very ordinary but it gave the men something to fill the time with before a general lights out. Some had pets with them like a small dog or a joey that had wandered in and been adopted. One veteran told me his tent had a possum which lined up every night at beer o'clock, they gave it the cap full which it duly lifted up with its paws and drank the lot not spilling a drop. That particular possum went south inside his jacket on leave to Melbourne where it stayed.

2<sup>nd</sup> of May was the last operation with Lt Deknatel as he had completed his tour of operations and after leave transferred to the 120 Transport Squadron of the NEI.

To come back to base after an operation either day or night but especially night to find mail left on your bed was a great morale booster as a rule, as was finding a food parcel which was exceptionally welcome. This was shared with member of your tent.

By now Jeff and all the crews had experienced the unmistakable truth that on some operations planes were seen to be lost during attacks on various targets. Once the loss was verified there was no church service though rather the men cracked a bottle of beer saluted

the missing and reminisced about things they had done together. In the case of the RAAF boys his things including bedding was gathered up and returned to the quartermaster store with personal items forwarded on to the designated next of kin. The Dutch actually auctioned off the men's gear at often inflated prices with the proceeds being given to the families post-war.



RAAF tail gunners April 1944 at Batchelor, Jeff is 4<sup>th</sup> from left back row.

As a measure of the danger of what they did only 8 survived the war.

Jeff flew an operation on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of May before being permanently added to the crew of the Mitchell B25 D model designated N5-176. This plane was the latest model and had been flown out from the USA by Albert Visser and his four other NEI crew, they had trained together for the best part of a year and were very comfortable with each other's abilities and histories. It must have been difficult for Jeff to build any rapport under this circumstance especially given the language or slang they used and the fact the mess arrangements were separate.

They set out on a bombing operation on the 11<sup>th</sup> May which was the first for the new blokes returning with mixed success as the debriefing report says 2 bombs hit the target Penfoei barracks, the other 2 did not fall. Presumably a mechanical problem which was reasonably common. Out again on the 27<sup>th</sup> bombing Soe town a flight of 6 hours again hit the target though being a town probably not hard to hit something. A change of pace on the 29<sup>th</sup> they spent 2.5 hours practicing bombing and fire control.

One of the very few advantages of being a tail gunner according to Roy Porter who served with Jeff is that if the plane is going down all that was required was to unclip the canopy and jump out. You had no chance of being hit by the plane though this assumes you'd managed to retrieve your parachute from the passage way and buckled it on. Unlike the American movies they were not attached to the man's backside. That would be too convenient.





The tail gun of a Mitchell B25 as can be seen the inside is very constricted and required the gunner to kneel down sometimes for hours whenever near a hostile zone in order to be able to operate it. He was also the spotter for bomb results.

There was no heating in fact the turret was barely windproof so when you add the need to wear a heavy jacket plus the required flying kit of;

Mae West life jacket, a .38 Smith & Wesson pistol and spare ammunition, emergency rations kit, fishing kit, hat, jungle knife and head covering mosquito net plus the parachute things were cramped. It might have been OK to handle all this stuff on the ground but a different question on a bucking plane that was diving out of control.

Jeff was due and had been granted leave from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> May obviously he was not allowed to take it as he was flying during that fortnight. There is a story that can't be proved within the family that the reason for not going on leave was because another tail gunner had not returned from his leave, the story also says that whoever it was visited Jeff's parents who at the time were in Melbourne to apologies as "it should have been me". What is not known is whether he in fact survived the war.

Batchelor and all the North of Australia had now settled into the "dry" season so the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> May 1944 dawned with hardly a cloud, virtually no humidity and a slight southerly breeze, all the makings of a great day. After breakfast at the morning parade flight IV consisting of 4 aircraft was ordered to do "skip bomb" training using the bombing range centred around Bare Sand Island in the Bynoe Bay area about 50 miles north of the base toward Darwin. Skip bombing was a technique used against ships which involved flying at about 12 metres above the sea with a fully opened throttle using 2 planes in line astern. At a certain point relatively close to the target a bomb was dropped and "skipped" along the water toward the target. A direct hit was excellent though a near miss also did considerable damage to the target through the concussion waves often splitting the hull.

Jeff gathered his gear as did Albert Visser (Capt.), Robert Brousche, Johann Burghard, Robert Fruin and Liem You Hein the other crew members of N5-176 and reported to their plane which was already fuelled, armed and had 3x250 pound bombs slung in the bomb bay. About 09.30 hrs local time the 4 planes N5-188, N5-185, N5-176, N5-171 had taxied to the assembly point near the end of the Batchelor strip and proceeded as follows according to the Control Officers Watch Log

*"These aircraft were airborne between 300004Z and 300018Z and proceeded individually to Range "L" to carry out skip bombing exercises where they formed pairs to make bombing runs. N5-176 paired with N5-188 and conducted three bombing runs at mast height (one being dry). On the fourth run N5-176 came in to bomb at a distance of 600 yards from N5-*

*188 instead of 100 yards and on a slightly different course, causing the port wing of the aeroplane to be hit by a column of water caused by the explosion of the bomb realised by N5-188. Various members of the other three aeroplanes saw the port wing blown from N5-176, which turned on its back immediately and crashed into the shallows of the South West corner of the sand bank. The aircraft is reported a total loss and all crew members presumed killed as surveillance by the remaining craft showed no sign of survivors.*

## LEST WE FORGET

Several hours later a light plane landed on the beach but only found some debris and noted sharks in the water.

Whilst with 18 Squadron Jeffery Crosbie had only flown 68.30 hours daylight and 48.15 hours night operations and 46 hours non-operational time.

Below are replicas of the medals Jeff was entitled to with Bill Crosbie holding the originals. Also depicted is the Mothers and Widows badge that was given to Anne as his mother now held by Ralph.





N5-176 in foreground

Crew

Albert Anton VISSER born 1916 Soerabaya, Java

Robert BOUSCHE born 1922 Semarang, Java

Liem You HIEN born 1920 Tijilatjap, Java

Johan Frederick BURGHARD born 1916 Dampit, Java

Robert FRUIN born 1921 Medan, Sumatra

Jeffery David CROSBIE born 1922 Midland, Western Australia

