

100yo RAAF airman recalls hunt for WWII U-boats in Vickers Wellington

By Gavin McGrath World War 2

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A RAAF 458 Squadron Vickers Wellington MkXIV refuelling and rearming ahead of a sortie. (Supplied: Australian War Memorial, accession no. ME1771)

Long hours of boredom broken up by moments of terror.

Such was life aboard a Wellington bomber hunting for the elusive U-boats in the Atlantic Ocean in 1945 during World War II.

John Herbert "Bert" O'Leary celebrated his 100th birthday in Melbourne in January.

But 80 years ago, he was a young warrant officer working as a wireless operator and tail gunner aboard a Vickers Wellington.



Bert celebrated his 100th birthday in January. *(Supplied: 458 Squadron Association)*

Much of his time in the air was spent trying to find lone-wolf submarines trying desperately to avoid detection.

"The U-boats would come to the surface at night-time to refuel," Bert said.

"Our job, which was like looking for a needle in a haystack, was to fly around the Atlantic in a certain pattern and try to come across a U-boat that was on the surface."



Originally developed as a medium bomber, the Vickers Wellington also hunted submarines. *(Supplied: Australian War Memorial, accession no. P09483.003)*

On the rare occasion a German raider would appear on a bomber's radar system, things would instantly become tense.

"We had a dirty big searchlight (a Leigh-Light) in the middle of the Wellington, the idea was to lower that and try to make sure that you weren't homing in a trawler or something else," Bert said.

"When you lowered it down, the whole plane shook like crazy, I kid you not, that was the most fearful experience you could possibly imagine.

"The idea was ... to fly over the top of the U-boat and drop a depth charge (explosive) near it.

"The depth charge had to be fired up and ready to explode. It's a scary business knowing you have a fired-up explosive in your aircraft with you."

458 reunion in Malta

The Royal Australian Air Force's 458 Squadron was formed at Williamstown, New South Wales, and served in Europe, the Middle East and Mediterranean Sea.

This year, the 458 will commemorate the end of the World War II with a reunion in Malta.

Mr O'Leary, one of three known living 458 Squadron veterans, said he would not attend as he was now in a nursing home.

The two others are Bill Wake, another wireless operator-air gunner, and ground crew mechanic Charles Humbles, both of whom live in the United Kingdom.

"I would have liked just to talk to some other guys, I suppose, I can't imagine anything better than just saying hi," Bert said.

"I am told there's no-one else in Australia, so it might be a lonely conversation."

Bert said it was important to remember not only what happened eight decades ago, but also the people who were involved.

"Not to glamorise it, the last thing you want to do is glamorise it," he said.

"It has to be remembered we were just ordinary blokes from civilian life ... we put our lives on the line, but we learned stuff to.

"When you're growing up as a teenager, you think you're immortal. It didn't take long for me to realise that it ain't so. I learned to value each day and that's still with me today."

Bert enlisted in the RAAF at the age of 18, and admits he was naive.

"In those days, it was just par for the course, if you were not in an occupation necessary in ordinary life, you would be called up into the militia, or you joined the army, or the air force or the navy," he said.

"I don't really know why I chose the air force at the time, I think it seemed a bit more glamorous, but (being part of a bomber crew) was not glamorous at all."

Life in Gibraltar

Each Wellington's six-man crew consisted of a pilot, co-pilot, navigator and three wireless-air gunners.

Bert's skipper was experienced former commercial pilot Ken Rosen, the co-pilot was Sydney Cookes and the navigator Daniel Roberts.



Warrant Officer John Herbert "Bert" O'Leary, pictured in 1944. (Supplied: 458 Squadron Association)



Bert O'Leary (kneeling in front) with the rest of his flight crew in 1944. (Supplied: 458 Squadron Association)

But his best mates were fellow wireless-air gunners Syd Hamilton and Frank Reed.

"We alternated between three spots — the radio, or the wireless as we called it, the radar, and the tail gun," he said.

"After about 40 minutes we changed positions, the gunner would go to the radar, the radar to the wireless, and the wireless back to the gunnery position. We worked it out between ourselves.

"It (the Vickers Wellington) was very, very reliable. I don't know if it was true or not, we were told it would even float if you went down on water."

While the 458th served throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean after transferring from Britain, Bert spent his entire tour of duty based at Gibraltar.

"We couldn't get out of it quickly enough. It was the most claustrophobic place because most of the civilians, particularly the women folk, had evacuated," Bert said.

"There was nothing to do except sightseeing or go into town."

Close encounter with a U-boat

Over the course of its war service the 458th was decimated. Of the 1,764 men who served with the squadron, 195 were killed.

By the time Bert was in Gibraltar, the threat of marauding Messerschmitts — planes that formed part of the backbone of the Germans' fighter force — and other Axis fighter aircraft had largely disappeared.



RAAF 458 Squadron launched sorties against U-boats in the Atlantic from its base in Gibraltar. (*Supplied: Australian War Memorial, accession no. 128342*)

The one time he did see a U-boat, the submarine was trying to be found.

"It was quite spectacular, at the end of the war there was a U-boat that wanted to surrender," Bert said.

"This one was coming into Gibraltar and we had to escort him back, flying around all night for eight hours. I was told it was officially the last mission of the war.

"He (the U-boat) was on the surface, of course. We had to do that because it could have been a suicide mission. It wasn't.

"When she got in we were still spectators. We watched the commander come out and be greeted by the Gibraltar commander, shake hands, salute, and all that sort of stuff.

"After that, we slept for the rest of the day."



A Type VII U-boat, the most common submarine built for Germany's Kriegsmarine. (Supplied: UK Government/public domain)

With the benefit of hindsight, Bert admitted he was thankful his Wellington never stumbled upon a submarine willing to shoot back, let alone an enemy aircraft.

"At the time, when you're young and stupid, you don't think so," he said.

A near-death experience

The scariest thing that happened while Bert was overseas occurred during training.

"I nearly lost my life," he said.

"I was in Palestine, which was where we went to form the crew — you were given time to form one yourself and if you didn't make it the people in charge would form one for you.

"Anyway, [when] Frank and I looked at Ken Rosen and the experience he'd had, we said, 'That's the bloke for us.'"

Bert described the skipper as "a good-natured sort".

"One night, one of the (other) pilots needed to get his hours up — they would take off, fly around the airfield, and then get ready to land, and before they finished landing they would take off again," he said.

"They wanted a couple of wireless operators to go with them and that was me, with Syd."

But the training flight didn't go as planned.

"We looked out the window and saw the port wing and the port engine was on fire [and] we were absolutely helpless. We were in the hands of the pilot, of course," Bert said.

"He brought it in and he made a magnificent landing but, as she hit the deck, she burst into flames."

Fortunately, where Bert and Syd were down the back of the aircraft, there was an escape hatch.

"Syd opened that and I was pretty quick those days ... I ran 30 metres in record time, turned and saw the plane was engulfed in flame from tip to toe," Bert said.

Lives lost in training

All men on board survived that night, but many others lost their lives in training during the war.

"If you go to the War Memorial in Canberra and have a look at the number of people in the RAAF on the honour board who were killed in training, it's phenomenal," Bert said.

"You were taking young men who were amateurs out of civilian life and, after a very short time, putting him into aircraft which weren't all that great in those days. It's little wonder that a lot died in accidents in training.

"I was diagnosed with PTSD after the war, but I'm still here."