

# Chased by the Sun: The Australians in Bomber Command in WWII

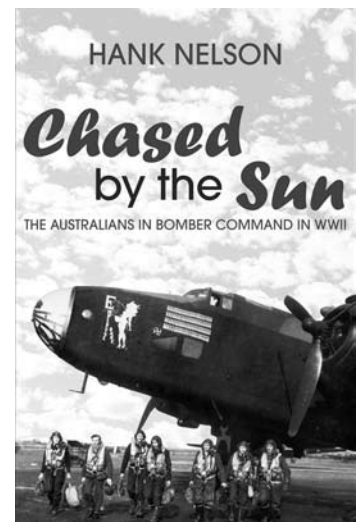
Hank Nelson

Reviewed by Alex Post

This is a paperback reprint of *Chased by the Sun*, which was first published in 2002. Written by a respected academic, it is a valuable historical work in the small body of literature dealing with Australia's participation in Bomber Command during World War II. The efforts of the Australians who served in Bomber Command represent the greatest contribution Australia made to the defeat of Germany. In making their contribution, these airmen faced greater constant danger and suffered greater losses than any other group of Australian servicemen in the Army, Navy or Air Force. They represented only two per cent of Australia's servicemen but accounted for 20 per cent of combat deaths. Yet, in spite of their extraordinary courage and achievement they have in large measure been forgotten by a nation that does not generally recognise the vital role these men played in the victory of the Western Allies over Nazi Germany. *Chased by the Sun* goes some way to redressing this disturbing neglect by recognising the qualities and experiences of the men who flew in Bomber Command.

As an Emeritus Professor of History at ANU, and with a research interest in World War II, Hank Nelson is well qualified to write about the Australian Bomber Command experience. He has obviously researched the topic widely, and as a result provides a wealth of information about the whole experience of operationally flying bombers in the European theatre of World War II. The information ranges from explanations of bombing theory and practice to the effects on the human body of flying at high altitudes in unpressurised aircraft – which also explains why some aircrew chose to breathe odourless oxygen from their face masks while still at low altitude where oxygen was not required.

The book takes the reader through the whole Australian aircrew experience from a personal perspective. Nelson relies heavily on the comments of the aircrew themselves—recorded in diaries, books, interviews and unpublished papers—to tell their own story, and this makes for a more than satisfying read. The book begins with the reasons men volunteered, why they were selected, how they were trained and how they travelled to Europe. Their impressions on arrival in Britain, the haphazard manner in which they formed themselves into crews, and the way they faced the daunting odds of surviving an operational tour are all well described. Their personal involvement with the English families that at times hosted them, and with the women of the WAAF and the wider community, adds to the personal perspective of the book and provides yet another view of the character of these Australian airmen. The experience



of air battle is vividly brought to life with a wide variety of personal incidents and events, as are the experiences of being shot down, captured by the enemy and interned in a prisoner of war camp. Finally, the return to Australia brings out the feelings of these important Australians toward the nation that sent them away to war.

The book often returns to the experience of two pilots from the Riverina area of NSW, Bill Brill and Arthur Doubleday. Although they appear frequently in the text they do not dominate the story, instead their service provides a central point of reference while the experiences of others describe the extremes that could occur. The poignancy of the story is heightened by reference to the stories of a number of men who did not return. By reading of their exploits, understanding the incredible task they had to accomplish and being exposed to their personal thoughts and impressions, the reader is likely to develop a sense of gratitude that Australia could call upon such men in difficult times. Indeed, it is to be hoped that Australia can still produce people of such quality and can still recruit them into its defence force today.

The book is well illustrated throughout with a large number of photographs and pictures that complement the narrative and add to the reader's personal connection to the characters who are telling their own stories.

Hank Nelson is to be congratulated for producing a valuable contribution to the literature covering Australia's involvement in Bomber Command during World War II and the heavy sacrifices incurred. He has written one of those books that draws the reader into the story and makes the book hard to put down. Most importantly, it makes the story of Australian aircrew in Bomber Command interesting and readily accessible for the widest range of readers. *Chased by the Sun* is a thoroughly interesting and enjoyable read. It is highly recommended for those with any interest in air warfare, or who have any respect for the courage and quality of the people who volunteered to fight this savage and deadly war as their country directed them to do. ♦

Hank Nelson, *Chased by the Sun: The Australians in Bomber Command in WWII*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2006, Softback, 319pp., RRP \$A35.00.