

Battle Order 204: A Bomber Pilot's Story

Christobel Mattingley

Reviewed by Dr John McCarthy

Christobel Mattingley's book is both a love story and a war story. *Battle Order 204* recounts her husband's experience as a *Lancaster* pilot from enlistment into the Royal Australian Air Force under the Empire Air Training Scheme, to his subsequent training both in Australia and the United Kingdom, and his operational career which ended violently when he was wounded in the head, arm and thigh during an attack on Dortmund on 29 November 1944. After bringing his badly damaged aircraft and crew back safely David Mattingley was awarded an immediate Distinguished Flying Cross.

This book is therefore not an academic examination of the strategic air offensive against Germany. For that it is still difficult to go past Sir Charles Webster's and Noble Frankland's four-volume official history. Nor is it a study of the part played by Australians as a whole in that campaign along the lines of Hank Nelson's superb *Chased by the Sun: The Australians in Bomber Command in World War II*. (reviewed in the Summer 2006/07 *Defender*). It is more a highly personal account of one young man's war with its attendant horror, humanity and inhumanity, of relationships and the loss of friends. *Battle Order 204* is largely based on diaries, log books, service records and letters home interspersed with reconstructed dialogues.

These elements give the book strength but also a weakness. Strength in the sense of immediacy, weakness in the tendency to take David Mattingley's contemporary personal record at face value or to allow it to be reproduced seemingly verbatim or simply paraphrased. Two examples make the point. We are told David was 'chuffed' in 1944 to see a *Fairey Firefly*, an aircraft still on the 'secret list'. The *Firefly* in fact was being delivered to squadrons from March 1943. Then we read 'On a dull day, with the aid of the Beam, he climbed through low cloud ceiling to a wizard new world of sun shining brilliantly on the fleecy cloud below'.

Battle Order 204 is thus a little over scattered with 1939-45 Royal Air Force aircrew slang. 'Wizard' is but one example, 'pukka', 'duff gen', 'stooging about', among others appear frequently. Fortunately Christobel Mattingley provides a glossary of such terms. Readers unaware of this war-time culture might find their meaning obscure.

David Mattingley joined 1 RAAF Initial Training School in June 1942. After passing no fewer than ten theoretical and practical flying courses he was posted to an operational squadron in September 1944. Aircrew must have been the most highly trained personnel ever to enter combat. Some 56,000 aircrew were lost while serving with Bomber Command. Christobel Mattingley writes with feeling of these young men. And bomber crews were composed of the very young. Christobel Mattingley's future husband was 22, one

member of his crew was just 18, another 19. If they survived they would perhaps have to prove little about themselves for the rest of their lives.

Survival though was often a matter of chance. Two instances are cited in this book of a relative and then a friend killed on their first operation. At the other end of the spectrum, Guy Gibson VC, DSO and Bar, DFC and Bar, leader of the Ruhr dams raid, survived three Bomber Command tours and a period on night-fighters, only to be killed after acting as Master Bomber for a main force raid and flying one of the safest aircraft on the RAF's Order-of-Battle, the *Mosquito*.

A point this book demonstrates is the evolving nature of the strategic air offensive. When David Mattingley began operating in late September 1944 the Bomber Command aircrew experience was markedly different than it had been a year before. In 1943 it would take on average some nine months to complete the 30 operations which constituted the standard Bomber Command first tour. Chances of completing it were not good. On German targets the loss rate averaged 5.4 per cent. The odds of any individual crew completing 30 trips were thus one in four. The chance of surviving two tours totalling 50 trips was virtually nil.

With shorter distances to fly over enemy-held territory, a large surplus of aircrew to requirements, the re-introduction of daylight raids and the resultant loss rate down to one per cent, David Mattingley and his crew operated in more favourable, though still deadly, conditions. After being on the squadron less than two months, Mattingley's crew was credited with eighteen operations. Their last was their 23rd (and the squadron's 204th hence the book's title). On 29 November 1944, 294 *Lancasters* and 17 *Mosquitoes* attacked Dortmund in bad weather. Marking of the target and thus bombing was scattered. Six *Lancasters* were lost. It was remarkable that David Mattingley was able to bring his aircraft back to base.

Christobel Mattingley's narrative of her husband's long and recurrent hospitalisation and subsequent recovery is deeply moving. It may remind us that courage is required long after a conflict is ended and that the ripples of combat extend to many others besides the combatant. Christobel Mattingley is donating her royalties from the sales of *Battle Order 204* to the Association of the Friends of Lincoln Cathedral. Many surviving members of Bomber Command recall its spire with affection and a sensation of relief. Many more saw it for the last time as they passed over to the North Sea to the enemy coast ahead. ♦

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