



AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA BALLARAT BRANCH

Newsletter

Spring 2025



PRESIDENT: Peter Dowling

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Sue Alexander

Email: ballarat.afa@gmail.com

SECRETARY: Sue Alexander

Phone 0419696091

Email: ballarat.afa@gmail.com

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We have nearly reached the end of another successful year, with our Christmas lunch just around the corner.

During the year we participated in two very successful functions in the May Heritage Weekend at the Airport and the Aviators Ball marking the Battle for Australia at the end of August.

Our membership has seen growth in 2025 and we have over 40 members, more than half regularly attending our lunches.

We have accumulated sufficient funds from our monthly raffle to fund replacement audiovisual equipment for Hut 48, being a larger television monitor. As almost all lunches feature an audiovisual presentation, this larger monitor will allow easier viewing for several members. The current AV equipment was purchased 5 years ago using a grant acquired through Catherine King's office.

We know that those who attend the monthly lunches look forward very much to the social outing and opportunity to mix and enjoy. The support of Victoria AFA in holding these lunches is greatly appreciated.

We look forward to a successful program of lunches and events in 2026 and hope you all enjoy the Christmas/New Year period with your families and loved ones.

Peter Dowling

President



IMPORTANT DATES COMING UP

Christmas Lunch

12 Midday

Park Hotel



January Lunch

The January lunch will be held at Hut 48 as usual, rather than the picnic at the Lake as it is too onerous for many of our members.

Social Luncheons

Social luncheons will continue throughout the year on every second Tuesday, commencing 12 midday.

Visit to Air Force Association Bendigo Branch

Reciprocating a visit from the Bendigo Branch to Ballarat towards the end of 2024, Ballarat Branch President Peter Dowling and Committee members Sue Alexander, Janet Bates and Keith Lanyon accepted the hospitality of Reinhard Goschiniak, John McCosker and Bendigo Branch members in October.

Many commonalities between the branches were noted, particularly the ongoing struggle to attract younger members to the branches. One point of difference was the number of raffle tickets bestowed upon each member and as Keith Lanyon found it impossible not to have the winning ticket for each draw, it is uncertain if we'll be invited back again!

However there was a noticeable strong spirit of collaboration and a collective willingness to work together as branches for common goals.



President Peter Dowling outlining Ballarat Branch activities and initiatives to Bendigo Branch (above) and lunch guests (below)



Bendigo and Ballarat Committee Members (above) and lunch with members (left)



Acknowledging Our Volunteers

In this edition, we acknowledge the volunteering efforts of 3 of our branch members.

Keith Pitman



Keith is a long-serving member of both the Ballarat Branch Air Force Association and the Ballarat RSL. Keith is still at nearly 90 years old to be found tirelessly raising money through Anzac appeals in April and November. He has personally raised in the tens of thousands of dollars over the years.

Janet Bates

Janet's personal interest is the 1WAGS website. Janet was a part of the original research team with Tom Roberts and Peter Schoutens, collating the information on the 6000 personnel who passed through 1WAGS during the war years.



Over the past 8 years, Janet has overseen the creation of the 1 WAGS website, ensuring the research is not lost and the ongoing updates and maintenance of the site. She keeps the site active and interesting with regular new feature stories and has ensured this website is now a valuable historical tool with over 2 million hits.

Janet's passion for research also leads her to supply many of the topics for the audiovisual presentations at our monthly lunch meetings.

In addition, Janet has provided backup for Keith in his fundraising activities and is also a familiar face in Ballarat local shopping centres.

Peter Dowling

Peter joined the Ballarat Branch at the end of 2018, having recently moved from Sydney. Peter was a member of the NSW Sunderland Branch for over 20 years, originally providing assistance to the ageing President, Treasurer and Secretary, all of WWII vintage. He ultimately assumed all 3 roles. During his time with the Sunderland Branch, his major achievement was the Sunderland Memorial Wall at Catalina Park, Rathmines NSW.

In addition, Peter ensured the continuance of the 10 SQN/Sunderlands Award Dinner each year. The award is currently known as the Dudley Marrows Award and in November this year it will be the 56th awards dinner. Peter will be attending as President of the NSW Sunderland Association, along with Rick Hattham, President of the Victorian Sunderland Association and other guests being descendants of Sunderland Air Crew.

Peter was recently awarded a Certificate of Appreciation from NSW AFA for his service, dedication and contribution to the Sunderland Branch.



2025 Sir Albert Coates Oration

On Wednesday 19th November, Keith Lanyon, representing the Air Force Association Ballarat Branch, attended the annual Sir Albert Coates Oration held at Federation University Australia, in association with the Albert Coates Memorial Trust, welcomed Richard de Crespigny AM as the 2025 Guest Orator presenting:-

‘Resilience – From Cradle to the Grave’

Richard de Crespigny was born in Melbourne in 1957 and at the age of seventeen joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). During his eleven years’ service with the RAAF he flew transport, jet and helicopter aircraft and served as Aide-de-Camp to two Australian Governors-General – Sir Zelman Cowen and Sir Ninian Stephen.

In 1986, he joined QANTAS, flying Boeing 747, Airbus A330 and A380 jet aircraft. Richard was the pilot in charge of the 2010 QANTAS Flight 32 when the Airbus A380 engine exploded shortly after take-off from Singapore. Despite severe damage to the aircraft, he landed the plane successfully back at Changi, with no injuries occurring.

In 2016 Richard was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his significant service to the aviation industry, both nationally and internationally, particularly to flight safety and to the community.

Richard has since authored two best-selling books that detail his experiences and the elements of resilience required to overcome life’s greatest challenges.

Qantas Flight 32



Richard de Crespigny am (L) and Keith Lanyon (R)

Qantas Flight 32 was a regularly scheduled passenger flight from London to Sydney via Singapore. On 4 November 2010, the Airbus A380 -800 operating the route suffered an uncontained failure in one of its four Rolls-Royce Trent 900 engines.

The failure occurred over the Riau Islands, Indonesia, four minutes after take-off from Singapore Changi Airport. After holding for almost two hours to assess the situation, the aircraft made a successful emergency landing at Changi. No injuries occurred to the passengers, crew, or people on the ground, despite debris from the aircraft falling onto houses in Batam.

On inspection, a turbine disc in the aircraft's number-two engine was found to have disintegrated, causing extensive damage to the nacelle, wing, fuel system, landing gear, flight controls, and engine controls, and a fire in a fuel tank that self-extinguished. The subsequent investigation concluded that the failure had been caused by the breaking of a stub oil pipe, which had been manufactured improperly.

The failure was the first of its kind for the A380, the world's largest passenger aircraft. At the time of the accident, 39 A380s were operating with five airlines: Qantas, Air France, Emirates, Lufthansa, and Singapore Airlines. The accident led to the temporary grounding of the rest of the six-plane Qantas A380 fleet. It also led to groundings, inspections, and engine replacements on some other Rolls-Royce-powered A380s in service.

The pilot in command of the aircraft, Captain Richard Champion de Crespigny, has been credited in the media as "having guided a heavily damaged double-decker jet to the safety of Singapore Changi Airport and averting what could have been a catastrophe". At the time of the accident, he had 35 years of flying experience. He was commended for debriefing the passengers in the passenger terminal after the flight, disclosing details of the flight and offering care for his passengers. In 2016, Champion de Crespigny was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for significant service to the aviation industry, both nationally and internationally, particularly to flight safety, and to the community.



Photograph by Mike Burdett from CROMER, UK - VH-OQA

Story adapted from Wikipedia.

Aviators Ball - August 23 2025



President Peter Dowling and Ballarat AFA members Ann and Rob Petter attended the Aviator's Ball on 23 August, to mark the Battle for Australia Day commemorations.

The Ball was extremely well attended and is now on the calendar of events for those enjoying a high calibre dance event. The Pacific Belles once again proved a highlight.

Our particular thanks go to Ann and Rob Petty, and their band of support workers, without whom the event could not be such a success.

Battle for Australia

The Battle for Australia is a historiographical term to describe battles that took place near Australia during WWII.

These battles took place between February 1942 and September 1945 in the Coral Sea, New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Australia and resulted in an Allied victory with the end of attacks following the capitulation of Japan.



An Australian propaganda poster released in 1942 was criticised for being alarmist when it was released and was banned by the Queensland Government.



Explosion of TNT laden MV Neptuna, Darwin 19 Feb 1942



Mules and pack horses along the Kokoda Track—photo by Thomas Fisher

B24 Liberator Memorial

At one of our recent monthly meetings, we viewed a short video featuring a very unusual retirement project, featuring Lyn Gorman and the B24-Liberator Memorial.

The project goes back to 1988, when an incorporated fund was established to create a national memorial to the aircraft. A search was begun to find a Liberator to restore and display.

Dave Miller, the memorial's future development co-ordinator, said that in 1991, the group found a Liberator fuselage that had been on a property in Moe for 47 years.

"The owner, George Toye, bought it as scrap in 1948-49. He stayed in it over seven or eight years while he built a home," he said. "It never saw active service. It was one of 50 used for training at the RAAF base in Tocumwal. We sourced the wings from PNG – they had come off a USAAF Liberator."

It took five days to remove the fuselage from the property, said Dave, an ex-production supervisor and quality manager who worked at Avalon Airfield for 32 years.

"It was amazing that people could see the potential back then, but once we'd acquired it, interest really grew because now we had something to work on.

"We went on a recruitment drive. We targeted people who had family connections to the Liberator, we looked for old log books, gathered photos."



In 2015, ex-academic Lyn Gorman visited the memorial. Her father had been a Liberator pilot and she became fascinated with the project. The committee ultimately convinced her to take on the role of president.

"We had a clear idea of the direction we wanted to go, and looked for experts in different areas and recruited them – square pegs in square holes," Dave said.

"Lyn was very keen on museum accreditation and drove the administrative work that was needed, but it was an intellectual minefield for me – I had to learn museum-speak."

The museum also holds a collection of other aircraft, photos, books and personal memorabilia dated from the late 1930s through to 1947, providing a fascinating insight to the wartime experiences of crew and pilots.

The memorial is on the corner of Geelong Road and Farm Road, Werribee.

Anyone with an interest in our Australian aviation heritage and in Liberators in particular, is encouraged to become a member.

Please contact:

Lyn Gorman - 61 488 588 011

liberator@b24australia.org.au



Pictured from left – Amelia Marra (Museums Australia), Ken Abbott vice-president Liberator Memorial, Simone Ewenson (Museums Australia), Lyn Gorman, Dave Miller.



By U.S. Air Force photos by Signaleer 8 December 2006., Public Domain



1 WAGS REPORT

Sponsored by APCO Alfredton



The 1WAGS site is currently featuring the story of John McCrae, a Canadian physician, soldier, and poet who wrote the famous World War I poem, "In Flanders Fields". The poem was inspired by the death of a friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who had been killed at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. Its powerful imagery of poppies growing over the graves of fallen soldiers helped establish the red poppy as a global symbol of remembrance. McCrae died in 1918 from pneumonia while serving in the war.

For our November lunch, we had the opportunity to learn more of McCrae's story, viewing the video "John McCrae's War: In Flanders Fields".



John McCrae circa 1914 - By William Notman and Son - Guelph Museums

McCrae was both in Guelph, Ontario and attended the Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute, graduating at 16. He was the first Guelph student to win a scholarship to the University of Toronto. After attending university for three years, however, he was forced to take a year off due to severe asthma. This illness recurred throughout his life.

He was a resident master in English and Mathematics in 1894 at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph. McCrae returned to the University of Toronto and completed his B.A., then returned again to study medicine on a scholarship.

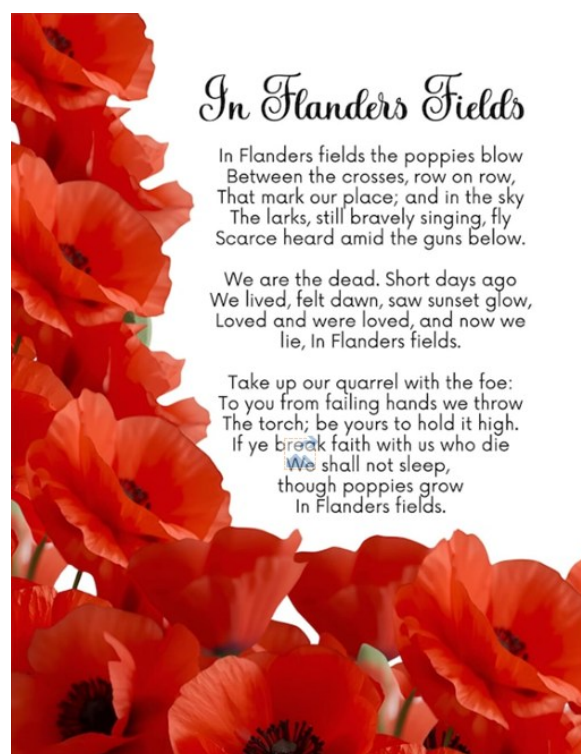
At medical school, McCrae had tutored other students to help pay his tuition. Two of his students were among the first female doctors in Ontario.

McCrae graduated in 1898. He taught at several universities and was resident pathologist at Montreal General Hospital. He became a member of England's Royal College of Physicians..

In 1905, McCrae set up his own practice although he continued to work and lecture at several hospitals. The same year, he was appointed pathologist to the Montreal Foundling and Baby Hospital. In 1908, he was appointed physician to the Alexandra Hospital for Contagious Diseases.

McCrae served in the Canadian militia in the Boer War, achieving the rank of Major. When Britain entered WWI, he enlisted at the age of 41. He treated the wounded during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, from a hastily dug 8-by-8-foot bunker in the back of the dyke along the Yser Canal about 2 miles north of Ypres. McCrae's friend and former militia member, Lt. Alexis Helmer, was killed in the battle, and his burial inspired the poem, "In Flanders Fields", which was written on May 3, 1915.

On January 28, 1918, while still commanding No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) at Boulogne, McCrae died of pneumonia with "extensive pneumococcus meningitis" at the British General Hospital in Wimereux, France. He was buried the following day in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission section of Wimereux Cemetery, just a couple of kilometres up the coast from Boulogne, with full military honours.



The RAF's Attempted Rescue of Charles de Gaulle's Family: The Walrus L2312 Mission and Its Historical Significance

In the tumultuous days of June 1940, as France teetered on the brink of surrender to Nazi Germany, a little-known but remarkable episode unfolded: a clandestine British-led air mission to rescue the family of General Charles de Gaulle from Brittany. This operation, involving a Royal Air Force (RAF) Supermarine Walrus flying boat (L2312) and a multinational crew, ended in tragedy but left a lasting imprint on the early history of the Free French movement and Anglo-French wartime relations. Over time, confusion has arisen regarding the aircraft involved—sometimes misattributed as a Sunderland flying boat—yet the true story, reconstructed from squadron records, eyewitness accounts, and postwar research, reveals a tale of urgency, secrecy, and sacrifice at a pivotal moment in World War II.

France in Crisis and the De Gaulle Family's Plight

The summer of 1940 marked a period of catastrophic military and political collapse for France. Following the German invasion in May, French and British forces were rapidly overwhelmed, culminating in the fall of Paris on 14 June and the government's flight to Bordeaux. Amidst this chaos, Charles de Gaulle, a relatively junior general recently appointed Under-Secretary of State for National Defence and War, emerged as a vocal opponent of surrender. On 17 June, as Marshal Pétain announced France's intention to seek an armistice, de Gaulle fled to London, determined to continue the fight.

De Gaulle's personal situation was fraught with anxiety. His wife, Yvonne, and their three children—Philippe, Elisabeth, and Anne—had left their home near Reims and taken refuge in Carantec, Brittany, with relatives. As German forces advanced, de Gaulle arranged for their evacuation, sending money and passports on 16 June. However, the speed of the German advance and the confusion of mass evacuations from western France (Operation Aerial) meant that the family's safety was far from assured.

Upon arriving in London on 17 June, de Gaulle immediately requested British assistance to extract his family from Brittany. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, sympathetic to de Gaulle's cause and aware of the symbolic importance of safeguarding the general's family, authorized a secret rescue mission. The urgency was heightened by the imminent German occupation of Brittany and the risk that the family could be captured or killed, with potentially devastating consequences for the nascent Free French movement.

Mission Planning and Secrecy

The planning of the rescue mission was characterized by extreme secrecy and a rapid chain of command. The initial request from de Gaulle was relayed to Churchill, who in turn instructed the Admiralty and the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) to arrange an extraction operation. Admiral Sir Martin Dunbar-Nasmith, Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches, received a high-priority call from the Admiralty on the evening of 17 June, instructing him to provide an aircraft for a secret mission to the north coast of Brittany.

A formal authorization, known as a "Form Green," was signaled to No. 10 Squadron RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force), then operating under RAF Coastal Command at Mount Batten, Plymouth. The order specified:

"One Walrus to proceed with Admiralty passenger from Plymouth Sound to north coast of Brittany at earliest 18/6. Passenger will give details of destination on arrival... Aircraft to be fully armed and to keep defensive watch at all times especially waterborne. Return to base on completion."

The mission's secrecy was such that even the commanding officer of No. 10 Squadron was not privy to its true purpose. Only the selected crew and the special passenger were briefed, and the details were withheld from most base personnel.

Although No. 10 Squadron RAAF was primarily equipped with Short Sunderland flying boats—large, four-engined aircraft capable of long-range patrols and carrying substantial payloads—the mission required a smaller, more discreet amphibious aircraft capable of landing in confined coastal waters or estuaries. The Supermarine Walrus, a single-engine biplane amphibian, was chosen for its versatility and the availability of an experienced Walrus pilot within the squadron, Flight Lieutenant John Napier Bell.

The Special Passenger

The mission's "Admiralty passenger" was Captain Norman Edward Hope, a British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, later MI6) officer fluent in French and Spanish. Hope, a petroleum executive with extensive experience in France and French Indochina, had been recruited into Section D of SIS, responsible for sabotage and subversion. His role was to direct the aircraft to the precise landing site, locate Madame de Gaulle and her children, and facilitate their extraction.

Hope's presence on the mission underscores its dual nature: both a rescue and an intelligence

operation. His instructions were to brief the crew only after take-off, maintaining operational security even within the squadron.

Key Participants

The Walrus L2312 mission brought together a multinational crew, each with a distinct background and record of service.

Flight Lieutenant John Napier Bell (Pilot):

Born in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1916, Bell joined the RAAF as a cadet in 1935. He became an accomplished seaplane pilot with the Royal Australian Navy. In 1939, he was posted to No. 10 Squadron RAAF, which was sent to the UK to collect Sunderland flying boats. Bell's experience with the Walrus made him the ideal choice for the mission. He was known for his professionalism and leadership, and at age 24 became the first RAAF airman killed in action during WWII.



John Napier Bell



Charles William Harris

Sergeant Charles William Harris (Observer/Flight Engineer):

Born in New South Wales in 1908, Harris was an engineer by training and joined the RAAF in 1934. He served with several squadrons before volunteering for overseas service with No. 10 Squadron. Like Bell, he became one of the first RAAF combat casualties of the war.

Corporal Bernard Felix Nowell (Wireless Operator/Mechanic):

A British RAF ground crew member, Nowell was attached to the mission as a wireless operator and air gunner, despite being colour-blind and normally restricted to ground duties. Born in Somerset in 1915, his willingness to volunteer for the hazardous mission reflects the sense of urgency and commitment among those involved.

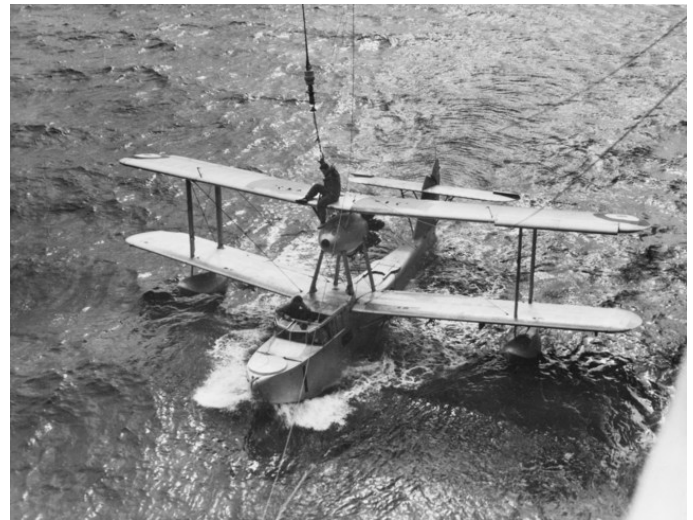
Captain Norman Edward Hope (Intelligence Officer) (see above):

Born in Cumberland in 1903, Hope's role was central to the operation's intelligence and diplomatic dimensions.

Execution of the Mission

On the night of 17 June 1940, the crew assembled at RAF Mount Batten, Plymouth. Last-minute modifications included the installation of a defensive machine gun. The crew was briefed by Captain Hope after take-off, maintaining operational secrecy.

The Walrus took off from Mount Batten at approximately 03:00 on 18 June 1940. The planned route was a direct crossing of the English Channel aiming to reach Carantec at first light. The intention was to land in the sheltered waters near Grève Blanche, close to the de Gaulle family's refuge.



A Supermarine Walrus (also known as the Seagull V) amphibious biplane being taxied by John Napier Bell in 1939.

The mission faced formidable challenges from the outset. The early morning of 18 June was characterized by thick fog over Brittany, severely reducing visibility. Navigational instruments of the era were rudimentary, and blackout conditions in both Britain and France further complicated orientation. The Walrus, though robust, was slow and vulnerable, especially when flying low over hostile territory.

As the Walrus approached the French coast, it is believed to have crossed the shoreline approximately 20 kilometers west of Carantec. Eyewitnesses and subsequent investigations suggest that the aircraft may have come under ground fire and some local accounts describe the aircraft as being on fire as it flew low over the village of Ploudaniel.

The risk of being mistaken for an enemy aircraft was acute, as German forces were rapidly advancing and French units were in disarray. The possibility of friendly fire cannot be excluded, and the precise cause of the damage remains uncertain.

At approximately 04:30, residents of Kerbiquet, (about 30 kilometers southwest of Carantec), were awakened by the sound of a low-flying aircraft. Witnesses reported seeing the Walrus circling and struggling in the thick fog. The pilot, Flt Lt Bell, attempted a forced landing in what appeared to be a flat field. However, the aircraft struck a talus (embankment), nosed over, and broke apart, bursting into flames.

Local villagers rushed to the scene, managing to pull the four occupants from the wreckage. All were dead or died shortly after the crash. The bodies were taken to the nearby town of Ploudaniel and buried in the churchyard, with the assistance of the mayor and townspeople. The graves were marked with simple wooden crosses and carefully tended throughout the German occupation.

Immediate Aftermath and Search Efforts

When no word was received from the aircraft after take-off, concern mounted at Mount Batten. On 19 June, a second rescue attempt was launched by sea: Motor Torpedo Boat 29 (MTB 29) was dispatched from Plymouth, carrying an interpreter (Belgian SIS officer Hendrik Van Riel) and a skiff. Their mission was to land at Carantec, locate Madame de Gaulle and her family, and investigate the fate of the Walrus and its crew.

Upon arrival, the MTB found Carantec already occupied by German forces. The interpreter was unable to locate the de Gaulle family or obtain information about the aircraft. The boat returned to England empty-handed. It was not until months later, when French refugees arrived in England, that news of the crash and the crew's burial reached the authorities and the families of the victims.

The Fate of Madame de Gaulle and Family

Unbeknownst to the rescuers, Madame de Gaulle and her children had already left Carantec. On 18 June, they drove to Brest, hoping to secure passage to England. Their car broke down, causing them to miss a ferry that was subsequently sunk by German forces with heavy loss of life. Eventually, they found space on the last ship to leave Brest—the Belgian vessel *Prinses Josephine Charlotte*—as part of Operation Aerial. They arrived safely in Falmouth on 19 June and were reunited with Charles de Gaulle in London on 20 June.

Identification and Commemoration of the Crew

The four crew members of Walrus L2312 were buried side by side in Ploudaniel Churchyard. Initial identification was complicated by the secrecy of the mission and the use of aliases (Hope was initially recorded as “Aviateur X” or “Sgt Bennett”). Over time, their identities were confirmed, and the graves were marked with

permanent headstones by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission after the war.

The local French community has continued to honour the memory of the crew, tending the graves and holding annual commemorations on All Souls' Day and Remembrance Day. The site has become a symbol of Franco-British-Australian solidarity and sacrifice.

The Mission's Place in the Early Free French Movement

The failed rescue of de Gaulle's family occurred at a critical juncture in the formation of Free France. On 18 June 1940—the very day of the crash—Charles de Gaulle delivered his famous “Appeal of 18 June” broadcast from London, urging the French people to resist the Nazi occupation and join him in continuing the fight. This speech, though heard by few at the time, became the foundational moment of the French Resistance and the Free French movement.

The attempted extraction of his family, authorized at the highest levels of the British government, underscored the importance attached to de Gaulle's personal safety and legitimacy. Had his family been captured or killed, the psychological and political blow to Free France could have been severe.

The use of an Australian-manned squadron (No. 10 Squadron RAAF) highlights the global nature of the Allied effort and the integration of Dominion forces into British command structures. The loss of Bell and Harris marked the first RAAF combat fatalities of the war, a fact commemorated in both Australia and the UK.

In short:

The rescue of de Gaulle's family in June 1940 was a covert mission carried out by British intelligence and Australian airmen, flying them from France to England. It allowed de Gaulle to lead the Free French cause without distraction, and it remains a remarkable episode of courage and coordination in WWII history.

Sources and Historiography

This reconstruction of the Walrus L2312 mission was compiled utilising AI and draws on a diverse array of sources:

- **Squadron Operational Record Books (ORBs):** Detailed logs from No. 10 Squadron RAAF and No. 15 Communications Flight RAF provide primary documentation of the mission's planning and execution.
- **Australian War Memorial and National Archives:** Official records, casualty lists, and postwar correspondence offer authoritative accounts of the crew and the aftermath.
- **Local French Records and Testimonies:** Eyewitness statements, municipal registers, and museum collections in Ploudaniel and Brittany preserve the local memory of the crash and burials.
- **Biographical Research:** Recent works by Kevin Baff, Alan Hall, and others have clarified the identities, backgrounds, and roles of the participants, correcting earlier errors and filling gaps in the narrative.
- **Secondary Histories:** Studies of Free France, RAF Coastal Command, and the broader context of the Battle of France provide analytical frameworks for understanding the mission's significance.