

**2794496 Flight Lieutenant Everitt Murray “Lofty” Lance, No. 9 Squadron,
Royal Australian Air Force
KIA: 7 June 1971**

Today, we remember and pay tribute to Flight Lieutenant Everitt Murray Lance.

Everitt Murray Lance was born on 29 April 1928 in Aliwal North, in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

Educated at Aliwal North High School, Everitt left in order to join the South African Navy at the age of 15. As cadet number 1305 he became a member of the Class of 1943/44 on the South African Training Ship *General Botha*, and trained in a variety of deck duties. In 1945 he joined Clan Line – a merchant, passenger and cargo shipping company – and was assigned to SS *Perthshire*.

Seeking greater challenges, Lance joined the South African Air Force and was accepted for pilot training. Due to his imposing height he soon acquired the nickname “Lofty”. Successfully completing pilot training, he was posted to No. 2 Squadron, known as the “Flying Cheetahs”.

The Korean War began in mid-June 1950 and South Africa committed 2 Squadron in August. The squadron left South Africa in late September and arrived in Japan the following month. It was given P-51D Mustang fighters by the United States Air Force, and the pilots, many of whom had flown Mustangs during the Second World War, needed little training before flying their first operations in mid-November.

During his time in Korea, Lance flew 75 sorties. He was awarded the United States Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with Oak Leaf Clusters. And he walked away from two crash landings after his aircraft was damaged by ground fire.

After returning to South Africa, Lance continued service as a flying instructor. In 1954 he left the South African Air Force and by early 1955 he had made his way to Canada, joining the Royal Canadian Air Force. Over the next five years he married an Australian woman, Margaret, and they brought two sons into the world.

In March 1961 Lance transferred to the Royal Air Force and he moved his family to England. Once again he was flying and training fighter pilots. Adding to his joy, that September his third child, a daughter, was born.

Lance loved flying and gained a strong reputation as a pilot trainer and unit safety officer. He added a further accolade to this impressive career in 1965 when he obtained his commercial pilot's licence.

In April 1969, nearing the end of his service in the RAF, Lance was accepted for a transfer to the Royal Australian Air Force as a general duties pilot. The RAAF was short on experienced pilots and Lance was one of eight RAF pilots accepted on short service commissions.

Lance was posted to No. 5 Squadron, RAAF, based at Fairbairn in the Australian Capital Territory. Lance and his family arrived in Australia and settled in the Canberra suburb of Hughes.

Initially flying fixed wing aircraft, Lance expressed interest in learning to fly helicopters. In August 1969 he attended a conversion course at Fairbairn learning to fly UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, known as "Hueys" and by the end of November had qualified as a helicopter pilot. He spent the next year with No. 5 Squadron as a pilot, a pilot trainer and unit safety officer.

During the latter months of 1970 Lance was given notice of his posting to No. 9 Squadron, RAAF in Vietnam. He flew out of Sydney on 18 November and arrived in Saigon the following day. He joined 9 Squadron and was soon flying operations in a variety of roles: piloting gunships, transport helicopters and medical evacuation helicopters.

At the start of May 1971 Lance was given recreation leave. He travelled to Penang in Malaysia where he was joined by his wife Margaret for several days. It would be the last time they would see each other.

In early June 1971, intelligence reports pointed to the return of *33 Regiment* People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and *D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion* to Phuoc Tuy province from their base in Long Khanh province.

Aware of the enemy movement, the Australians launched Operation Overlord, named for the invasion of Normandy. The operation began on 5 June, with the troop-carrying helicopters available to No. 9 Squadron ferrying men and materiel to the area of operations. Lance and his crew flew numerous sorties that day.

On the morning of 7 June, 5 Platoon of B Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment became involved in a protracted engagement with a North Vietnamese Army located in a well-sited bunker system.

The platoon soon ran short of ammunition and a resupply flight was dispatched. As the fight continued the Australians on the ground again ran short of ammunition. A second resupply flight was dispatched.

Flight Lieutenant Everitt Lance and his crew in a UH-1H Iroquois, call sign Albatross 06 (Zero Six) took off from Nui Dat with a load of ammunition and 3RAR's pad master joined the flight as air dispatcher, to offload the ammunition.

Just after 11 am, Lance brought his aircraft to a hover near a marker balloon that had been raised from 5 Platoon's positions. Before the ammunition could be roped down to the waiting infantrymen, the helicopter was hit – fatally damaged by multiple heavy machine-gun rounds. Lance tried to manoeuvre away, but the aircraft turned on its side and fell out of the sky.

From his position on the ground, Private Don Hannaford witnessed the final moments of Albatross 06 (Zero Six). He later recalled “the chopper rocked and spun wildly in the air for a few moments and I could hear the sickening hissing sounds coming from it and the rotor beat going out of sequence as the rotor commenced to slow. We were giving covering fire but we didn't know where it was eventually going to crash.”

The helicopter plunged into the jungle behind 5 Platoon's positions and burst into flames.

Flight Lieutenant Everitt Lance and Corporal David Dubber were killed in the crash and subsequent fire. The two remaining crewmen survived. Pilot Officer

Greg Forbes was initially pinned in his seat, which had been crushed inwards. He later recalled “I looked over at Lofty and it was very obvious he was dead.” The other surviving crewman, Corporal Peter Vidler, assisted Forbes from his seat, despite his own injuries.

Soldiers from 3RAR ran into the flames and, after directing Forbes and Vidler out of the aircraft, attempted to recover as much ammunition as they could before fire engulfed the helicopter. The men also managed to retrieve Lance’s body. Dubber’s body was recovered the following day.

Sergeant Jimmy Griffith was thrown from the helicopter as it hit the trees, falling 35 metres to the jungle floor suffering a badly injured back. He was recovered and evacuated by helicopter a short time later.

The battle of Long Khanh ended when the enemy force withdrew late in the afternoon after nearly 8 hours of intense fighting. Three Australian lives had been lost, and a further six were wounded.

Lance’s body was returned to Australia and was laid to rest with full air force honours on 16 June at Woden Cemetery in Canberra. He was 43 years old.

His name is listed on the Roll of Honour on my left, along with more than 500 others who died as a result of their service during the Vietnam War.

This is but one of the many stories of service and sacrifice told here at the Australian War Memorial. We now remember Flight Lieutenant Everitt Murray Lance, who gave his life for us, for our freedoms, and in the hope of a better world.

Michael Kelly
Historian, Military History Section
Australian War Memorial
Canberra ACT