



## STELLA BOWEN ARTWORK



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

STELLA BOWEN  
ART 26275

**The collection was donated to the Club by  
SQNLDR John Williams RAF Medical Branch (Rtd) and Mrs Diane Williams.**

**The original of this artwork hangs in the Australian War Memorial.**

*We thank SQNLDR Williams, who researched these Notes.  
The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading  
for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.*

## INTRODUCTION

The artwork *A Sunderland Crew Comes Ashore at Pembroke Dock* was donated to the United Service Club Queensland by SQNLDR John Williams RAF Rtd and Mrs Diane Williams, who also provided for the framing of the work.

### **Artwork details:**

Units: No 461 Squadron, Royal Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force  
Place: Pembroke Dock, Wales, United Kingdom  
Description: Oil on canvas  
Date painted: 1945  
Copyright: Expired, public domain

**From the AWM website, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C174756>**

Group portrait of the crew of Short Sunderland flying boat, 461 Squadron, RAAF at Pembroke Dock, Wales. Seen as crew come up the steps are: Fredrick (Derry) Syme (pilot), Ronald Warfield (navigator), Ron Tyson (gunner), Eric Genders (gunner) and Charlie Martin (third pilot), 'Spud' Murphy (wireless operator/air gunner), Bob Mead (wireless operator/gunner), Merv Pike (second pilot), Jock Beattie (RAF, first engineer), 'Curly' Rowland (RAF, second engineer) and John Bishop (RAF, wireless operator/gunner). The last three were RAF, the others RAAF. Sunderland flying boats, part of tender from which crew is landing.

## BACKGROUND TO THE ARTIST

Stella Bowen was born in Adelaide on 16 May 1893. She studied with Margaret Preston in Australia before leaving for England in 1914, after the death of her mother. In London she attended the Westminster School of Art, studying under Walter Sickert.

In 1918 Stella fell in love with the writer Ford Madox Ford, with whom she had one child (a daughter, Julie) in 1920 and together they moved to France. There they were caught up in the bohemian café lifestyle of Paris.

In 1923 Stella travelled to Italy, where the fresco painting of the early Italian primitives Giotto and Piero della Francesca reawakened within her the urge to paint and left a lasting impression as she adopted their style. Stella separated from Ford in 1927, and as a result of not earning enough income from her painting to make ends meet she took on writing and teaching work. During this time, she wrote *Drawn From Life: A Memoir*, for which she received rave reviews.

In 1943 Stella was offered a commission by the Australian War Memorial to be an official war artist. She was one of the first women artists to be appointed. Her commission began in February 1944. Prior to this she had been recording regular broadcasts for Australian audiences about her wartime experiences.

As official war artist her brief was to depict the activities of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) stationed in England. This also enabled her to pursue her interest in group portraiture. In the 20 months during which Stella worked for the AWM, she completed 49 paintings, with the last in 1947.

Once the war was over, Stella attempted to return to Australia and exhibit her work but her efforts were thwarted by a lack of funds, the rejection of her application for repatriation and, finally, ill health.

Stella Bowen died in England on 30 October 1947 of breast and liver cancer, having never returned to Australia.

## **FURTHER DETAILS FROM SQNLDR FBJ (JOHN) WILLIAMS RAF MEDICAL BRANCH (RTD)**

The area has for centuries been known as Little England Beyond Wales. Located at the southwest tip of Wales, it boasts the best dairy and arable lands.

After 1066, William the Conqueror gave his Flemish mercenaries (who were unpopular with the native Normans) their promised reward – this good farming land, after radically clearing the area of the original Welsh speaking stock. Continued migration of Flemish people to the area occurred for several centuries thereafter, usually after a transient residence in England and further strengthening the role of the contemporary English language in the south of Pembrokeshire.

In 1093 the massive castle at Pembroke was completed – part of an extensive series of forts and castles built by the Normans to keep out the disinherited and disenfranchised Welsh former residents.

The important place of Pembroke Castle, located on the banks of the harbour of Milford Haven, was confirmed in British history by the birth of Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Lord Nelson decreed that Milford Haven was one of the two best harbours in the known world. The other being Tricomalee in Ceylon. The development of the dockyard, Pembroke Dock, by Lord Hamilton occurred during Nelson's lifetime. Nelson's affair with Emma Hamilton is recorded by the names of several local landmarks and hostelrys.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century during WWII, RAF Pembroke Dock was the largest flying boat station in the world – with up to 99 aircraft. Besides the resident RAF Sunderland Squadrons, were RAAF 10 and 461 Sunderland Squadrons. These were subsequently joined by two Dutch squadrons that had escaped German invasion of The Netherlands. These aircraft had diverse roles, including air-sea rescue (ASR), anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and convoy duties. Many convoys formed in the harbour during the war.

All this activity did not go unnoticed by the Germans. The town of Pembroke Dock – itself with a population of 10,000 – suffered collateral damage, with 1000 homes destroyed and damaged. There were 17 large underground fuel tanks, and 11 of these were destroyed by German bombing – with a loss of 39 million British gallons of fuel (170 million litres). This was Britain's biggest fire since the Great Fire of London. 650 firemen were involved for nearly two months.

During WWII, my mother served in the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS) in Signals at RAF Pembroke Dock. In 1942 I was born in Steynton, a small village approximately 10km from the site of Stella Bowen's painting. One of the houses seen on the far bank of the harbour was subsequently owned by my younger brother.

## **NEWSPAPER ARTICLE, "NEWCASTLE HERALD NEWS", 10 APRIL 2013**

The service of 253 Australians who lost their lives flying in Sunderland squadrons in World War II has been remembered with the dedication of a new wall at Rathmines Memorial Park.

President of the RAAF Association of NSW Sunderland Squadrons branch Peter Jensen, 91, said his organisation had overseen the creation of memorials around the world to fallen comrades from 10 and 461 Squadrons.

But this memorial, the only one to name the fallen, may be the last, he said.

"Being coastal command squadrons, most of those people that did not make it to the end of the war have no graves," he said.

"But this is a place where we can pay our respects. We can't bring them back, but we can remember them."

## **[461 Squadron]**

At the end of July 1939, a group from 10 Squadron left Rathmines for England to train on eight new Sunderland flying boats they would fly back to Australia.

When World War II was declared, the Australian government ordered the squadron to remain in England and help with the British war effort. It would be the only Australian squadron to serve continuously throughout the war.

It lost 189 men, including the first two Australian casualties of the war.

The 461 Squadron wireless operator Mr Jensen was one of the six squadron veterans who attended the dedication of the wall.

During active service Mr Jensen sank a German U-boat in the Bay of Biscay and dropped a dinghy to save survivors.

He also remembers standing on the wing of his sinking aircraft and watching five German aircraft circling overhead.

“One off them peeled off and came down and we thought ‘this is it’ but he dipped his wings – which is a salute – and they left us to live,” he said.