Bomber crashed way into history

Lance Collis Badman

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F you visit Lance Badman's soldier-settlement farm in Watronbully, in the South-East, you will find the name Waniwela on the gate. Lance never spoke of his World War II experiences and few in the close-knit community knew what the name implied.

Lance was already enlisted in the RAAF Reserves when he married Jean Groom, from another Yacka family, in 1941. And by April, 1942 he was trained and assigned to 32 General Reconnaissance Squadron with Flight Officer Lex Halliday, and fellow crew members Alan Gawler and Ron Castle. Lance was the close-up at an aeroplane, bedecked with the bunya grass and showing the swathe they had made on landing. The plane was undamaged, so Halliday called for help and in the meantime asked the villagers to make a runway in the grass. Another Hudson flew in with fuel and both planes took off successfully.

The place was near a mission station, Waniwela, and it was about to take a crucial role in the war against the Japanese in New Guinea. Halliday reported his find to Group Captain "Bull" Garing, the liaison officer between the RAAF and General Douglas MacArthur, who commanded the Pacific theatre of war. Garing inspected the Waniwela field and advised MacArthur it could be used to fly in soldiers to Diggers could be flown in from Milne Bay, followed by a further 3000 US troops flown over the mountains from Port Moresby in the US Army's first ever airlift.

Lance, with Halliday, Gawler and Castle, became the longest-serving crew of 32 Squadron, which was disbanded in 1945. Aside from the name Waniwela on the Watronbully farm gate, the Badman family photograph album has a series of those photos taken after the forced landing. Lance, who was discharged medically unfit in May, 1945, never got back to New Guinea.

He was the youngest of four sons born to the progressive wheat and sheep farmers Albert and Ann at Yacka in the Mid North. Albert wanted a better education for his sons and also had political ambitions, so he moved to Adelaide in the mid-1920s and became a senator and later a federal MHR. After World War II, the 17 soldier settlers of Watronbully had to establish themselves. They built their own community hall and tennis courts, phone lines, formed their own CSS unit, and helped out on each others' farms. ETSA power didn't arrive until the 1970s, so they learned how to be self-sufficient.

Lance was 94 when he decided to stop keeping his garden, and he and Jean moved into aged care in Naracoorte.