



The Life, Valor, and Legacy of Major Edwin Essery Swales, VC, DFC: A Comprehensive Military Biography

The history of the South African Air Force during the Second World War is punctuated by numerous acts of gallantry, yet the narrative of Major Edwin Essery Swales, VC, DFC, stands as a singular testament to the transition from a ground-based non-commissioned officer to one of the most elite aviators in the Allied air forces. As the only member of the South African Air Force to be awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest military decoration for valor in the British and Commonwealth armed forces, Swales occupies a unique position in the pantheon of military heroes.¹ His career, though tragically short, encapsulated the full breadth of the Commonwealth war effort, spanning the rugged ground campaigns of East and North Africa to the technologically sophisticated and high-stakes environment of the Royal Air Force Pathfinder Force over occupied Europe.² This report provides an exhaustive examination of Swales' origins, his rapid ascent through the military hierarchy, the technical demands of his role as a Master Bomber, and the profound legacy he left in his wake, which continues to be a subject of both deep reverence and political discourse in contemporary South Africa.

Ancestry, Early Life, and Formative Influences in Natal

The foundations of Edwin Swales' character were laid in the Inanda district of Natal, South Africa, where he was born on July 3, 1915.³ He was the twin son of Harry Evelyn Swales, a farmer in the Heatonville district at Ntambanana, and Olive Miriam Swales (née Essery).⁴ The family was of British colonial stock, a demographic that played a central role in the agricultural and administrative life of the Natal Province. Swales was one of four children, sharing his childhood with his twin brother John, an older sister named Joan, and a younger brother also named Harry.⁵ The trajectory of the Swales family was irrevocably altered by the global influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, which claimed the life of his father, Harry Swales.⁴ This loss necessitated a radical shift in the family's circumstances; unable to maintain the farm, Olive Swales moved her young children to the Berea district of Durban, a move that would provide Edwin with access to the city's premier educational institutions.²

Education served as the primary vehicle for Swales' early development. He attended Durban Preparatory High School and later Durban High School (DHS), where he was enrolled from January 1930 to December 1934.³ At DHS, Swales was not merely an average student but a standout athlete whose prowess on the rugby field and cricket pitch earned him early recognition.² He represented the DHS 2nd XV in rugby and the 1st XI in cricket, later playing provincial rugby for Natal, a feat that demonstrated his physical durability and competitive spirit.² His early engagement with the 4th Durban Scout Troop further instilled a sense of



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leadership and practical discipline. ¹ Upon matriculating in 1934, Swales entered the professional world as a clerk for Barclays Bank (Dominion, Colonial, and Overseas —DCO) in Durban.² This clerical background provided a sharp contrast to the high -intensity military career that followed, yet the discipline of the banking sector likely contributed to the meticulous attention to detail required in his later role as a Pathfinder navigator and pilot.

Chronology of Early Life and Education	Detail and Significance
July 3, 1915	Born in Inanda, Natal, to Harry and Olive Swales ⁴
1918-1919	Death of Harry Swales in influenza pandemic; family moves to Durban ⁴
1930–1934	Attends Durban High School; excels in rugby and cricket ²
1934	Matriculates from DHS; begins employment at Barclays Bank ²
June 1, 1935	Joins Natal Mounted Rifles as a part -time citizen soldier ²
March 12, 1936	Death of twin brother John in a motorcycle accident ⁵

The duality of Swales' pre - war life—balancing professional responsibilities with provincial sports and part -time military service—forged a resilient personality. On June 1, 1935, he joined the Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR), an Active Citizen Force unit similar to the British Territorial Army. ² By May 1939, he had completed his initial term of service, having risen to the rank of Warrant Officer Class II (Sergeant Major), a remarkable achievement for a part -time soldier in his early twenties. ² This early leadership experience in a mounted infantry unit would serve as the bedrock for his future command of a heavy bomber crew.

Ground Campaigns: The Natal Mounted Rifles in Africa

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 transformed Swales from a part-time soldier and bank clerk into a full-time combatant. He rejoined the NMR on September 4,



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1939, immediately after the declaration of war.¹ His unit, part of the 2nd South African Infantry Brigade, was eventually mobilized for foreign service in June 1940 as part of the South African push to secure the African continent from Axis influence.² The initial phase of his wartime service saw him deployed to Kenya, which was then under direct threat from Italian forces based in Abyssinia.¹

Swales' experience with the NMR in East Africa was characterized by grueling marches and tactical engagements in difficult terrain. The 2nd Brigade moved into southern Abyssinia in February 1941, participating in the retrieval of the region from Italian control.² Throughout this campaign, which included operations in Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, and Eritrea, Swales demonstrated the grit and tactical awareness of a veteran Sergeant Major.³ Following the success of the East African campaign, the NMR was transferred to North Africa to participate in the Western Desert campaign.² Here, Swales saw action in some of the most critical battles of the Eighth Army, including the Crusader offensive, the defensive battles at Gazala, and the strategic retreat to El Alamein.² It was in the North African desert that Swales first became fascinated by the role of aviation in modern warfare, as he observed the growing dominance of the air forces over the ground struggle.²

Despite his success as a ground soldier, Swales sought a more direct and impactful role in the conflict. On January 17, 1942, while in North Africa, he officially volunteered for a transfer to the South African Air Force (SAAF).¹ This decision represented a significant career pivot; he was prepared to relinquish his established rank as a Sergeant Major to start at the bottom of the pilot training pipeline. His application was accepted, and he returned to South Africa to begin the transition from the infantry to the cockpit.

The Airborne Transition: Pilot Training and Secondment

Swales' transition to the air force was methodical and rapid, reflecting the same aptitude he had shown in the NMR. He reported to No. 75 Air School at Lyttleton, near Pretoria, on February 2, 1942, to commence his initial instruction.² This was followed by primary flight training at No. 4 Air School in Benoni, where he made his first solo flight in a de Havilland Tiger Moth on October 29, 1942.² The SAAF training program was rigorous, designed to produce pilots capable of operating in the high-stress environments of the Mediterranean and European theaters.

Advanced training took place at No. 21 Air School in Kimberley, where Swales learned to pilot the Airspeed Oxford, a twin-engine aircraft that introduced him to the complexities of multi-engine flight and instrument navigation.¹ On June 26, 1943, Swales was awarded his pilot's "wings" and commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the SAAF.¹ His progression continued with a secondment to the Royal Air Force on August 22, 1943, a common arrangement that



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allowed the RAF to tap into the high -quality training of Commonwealth pilots while the SAAF maintained its administrative and uniform identity. ¹

SAAF Training and RAF Integration Milestones	School/Unit and Date
Transfer to South African Air Force	January 17, 1942 ¹
Initial Instruction	No. 75 Air School, Lyttleton (Feb 1942) ²
Primary Flight Training	No. 4 Air School, Benoni (Oct 1942) ²
Advanced Flight Training	No. 21 Air School, Kimberley (Feb 1943) ²
Award of Wings & Commission	June 26, 1943 (2nd Lieutenant) ¹
Secondment to Royal Air Force	August 22, 1943 ¹
Heavy Bomber Conversion	RAF Little Rissington (1944) ¹

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, Swales underwent heavy bomber conversion training. This phase was critical as it involved mastering the Avro Lancaster, a four -engine heavy bomber that required sophisticated coordination between the pilot and a six -man crew. In June 1944, Swales was posted to No. 582 Squadron, a unit within the elite No. 8 Pathfinder Group based at RAF Little Staughton in Huntingdonshire. ² This posting was extraordinary; the Pathfinder Force typically required pilots to have completed at least one full operational tour (30 missions) with a standard bomber squadron before being considered for marking duties. ² Swales, despite having no prior combat experience as a heavy bomber pilot, was admitted directly to the squadron based on his exceptional performance during training and his demonstrated maturity as a leader. ²

Technical Mastery in the Pathfinder Force: 582 Squadron



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No. 582 Squadron was a key component of the RAF's target marking infrastructure. The Pathfinders were responsible for navigating to the target ahead of the main bomber force and dropping target indicators (TIs) —high-intensity flares—to guide the following waves of bombers. This role demanded the highest levels of navigational accuracy and steady nerves, as the Pathfinders were often the first to face the concentrated fury of German anti-aircraft defenses and night fighters.

Swales' entry into the squadron coincided with the deployment of advanced electronic aids such as Oboe, a radar-based blind-bombing system that allowed for pinpoint accuracy regardless of weather or cloud cover. On July 11, 1944, a Lancaster from 582 Squadron became the first heavy bomber to use Oboe equipment to control a raid.⁸ Swales' first operational flight took place on July 12, 1944, marking the beginning of a relentless period of service over occupied Europe.² His reputation grew rapidly; he was noted for his "unshakeable" demeanor and his ability to maintain precise flight parameters under fire. By November 4, 1944, he was promoted to Captain (in the SAAF ranking system), and he had begun to take on the responsibilities of a Master Bomber.¹

The role of the Master Bomber was the most hazardous in Bomber Command. The Master Bomber arrived over the target first, assessed the accuracy of the initial markers, and then circled the target area for the duration of the raid, broadcasting radio instructions to the main force.⁹ This required the pilot to fly a predictable and vulnerable pattern while ignoring the flak and fighters that prioritized the Master Bomber as the most dangerous target in the formation. Swales was mentored in this role by his close friend, Squadron Leader Robert Palmer, DFC, an exceptionally experienced Pathfinder who would also go on to win a posthumous Victoria Cross.²

The Cologne Raid and the Distinguished Flying Cross

Swales' courage was formally recognized following a daring daylight raid on the Gremberg railway yards in Cologne on December 23, 1944.² This operation was small-scale but high-risk, involving only 27 Lancasters and 3 Mosquitos.⁸ Swales flew as the "number two" Pathfinder, leading the main flight and following Squadron Leader Palmer as he marked the target.²

During the approach, the formation encountered intense anti-aircraft fire. Despite the flak, Swales successfully marked the target, but shortly after his bombing run, his Lancaster was intercepted by five German fighters.² The ensuing combat was a masterclass in heavy bomber tactics. Swales maneuvered the large Lancaster with such skill that his gunners were able to bring effective fire to bear on the attackers, believed to have shot down one of the fighters.² His "exceptional coolness and captaincy" during this engagement were cited as the primary reasons for his award of the Distinguished Flying Cross.¹ This mission underscored Swales' ability to protect his crew and aircraft in the face of overwhelming odds, a trait that would define his final action two months later.



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Operation Cologne Statistics (Dec 23, 1944)	Data and Outcomes
Target	Gremberg Railway Yards, Cologne, Germany ²
Swales' Role	Number Two Pathfinder; leading main flight ²
Opposition	Intense flak and 5 enemy fighters ²
Damage/Losses	6 out of 30 aircraft lost; Palmer killed (posthumous VC) ²
Swales' Award	Distinguished Flying Cross (immediate) ³

The Pforzheim Mission: The Anatomy of a Sacrifice

The raid on Pforzheim on the night of February 23, 1945, was designed to be a decisive blow against German infrastructure supporting the defense against the American 7th Army.¹⁰ The force consisted of 367 Lancasters and 13 Mosquitos.¹¹ Swales, now an acting Major, was the Master Bomber for the mission, piloting Lancaster III PB538.⁴ The raid was exceptionally concentrated, with over 1,800 tons of bombs dropped in just 22 minutes, destroying approximately 83% of the built-up area of the town.⁴

Shortly after arriving over the target area to begin his marking instructions, Swales' aircraft was engaged by a German night fighter, identified as a Messerschmitt Bf 110.⁴ The first attack shattered one of the Lancaster's engines and holed the fuel tanks.⁴ A second attack by the same fighter knocked out a second engine and disabled the rear guns, leaving the aircraft almost defenseless.⁹ Despite the severe damage and the clear threat of an imminent crash or another attack, Swales refused to leave his station. He remained over Pforzheim, circling at low altitude, and continued to broadcast precise aiming instructions to the main force until he was satisfied that the attack had achieved its purpose.¹

His determination ensured that the raid was one of the most successful of the war, yet it left him with a crippled aircraft hundreds of miles from safety. With two engines out, failing flight controls, and no blind-flying instruments, Swales set a course for the Allied lines in France.⁹ For over an hour, he struggled to keep the Lancaster airborne as the weather closed in, encountering heavy cloud and turbulent air.⁹ Realizing that the aircraft was losing height and



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could no longer be controlled, Swales ordered his crew to bail out while he exerted all his physical strength to keep the aircraft steady for their exit. ⁹

All seven members of his crew successfully parachuted to safety.¹ Hardly had the last man cleared the aircraft when the Lancaster plunged to the earth near Valenciennes, France.¹ Swales was found dead at the controls.¹ His body was initially buried at a U.S. military cemetery in Fosses, Belgium, but was later reinterred at the Leopoldsbury War Cemetery in November 1946.¹

The Crew of Lancaster PB538 'M - Mother'	Role and Service	Post - Mission Status
Capt. Edwin Swales	Pilot / Master Bomber (SAAF)	Killed in Action (VC) ¹²
Sqn Ldr. D.P.D. Archer	Navigator I (RAF)	Survived (DSO, DFC) ¹²
Plt Off. R.A. Wheaton	Navigator II (RAAF)	Survived (DFC) ¹²
Flt Lt. Clive Dodson	Bomb Aimer (RAF)	Survived (DSO, DFC) ¹²
Plt Off. A.V. Goodacre	WOp/Air Gnr (RAAF)	Survived (DFC) ¹²
Flt Sgt. Bryn Leach	Air Gnr (Mid-Upper) (RAF)	Survived (DFM) ¹²
Plt Off. A.A.W. Bourne	Air Gnr (Rear) (RCAF)	Survived (DFC) ¹²
Flt Sgt. G.W. Bennington	Flight Engineer (RAF)	Survived (DFM) ¹²

Honours, Decorations, and Military Recognition

The posthumous award of the Victoria Cross was gazetted on April 20, 1945.¹ The citation highlighted his "most conspicuous bravery" and noted that he was "intrepid in the attack,



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courageous in the face of danger".¹ Swales was the last member of Bomber Command to receive the Victoria Cross during the war, and he remains the only SAAF pilot to be so honored.⁴ The recognition of his heroism came not only from the official citations but also from the highest echelons of command. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris wrote a personal letter to Swales' mother, Olive Swales, describing Edwin as "a fighter and a resolute captain of his crew" and "one of the very few who could be described as a born leader".⁷

Swales' full array of medals represents a comprehensive record of service across multiple theaters of war. These artifacts, which include the Victoria Cross, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and various theater stars, are now preserved at the South African National Museum of Military History in Saxonwold, Johannesburg.¹¹ Additionally, in 2013, he was posthumously awarded the "Bomber Command" clasp for his 1939-1945 Star, a long-overdue recognition of the specific risks faced by the aircrews who served over Europe.⁷

Honours and Decorations of Major Edwin Swales	Significance and Date
Victoria Cross (VC)	Posthumous; Gazetted April 20, 1945 ¹
Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)	Action Dec 23, 1944; Gazetted Feb 23, 1945 ³
1939-1945 Star (with Bomber Command Clasp)	General service and specialized air operations ⁴
Africa Star	Service in Kenya, Abyssinia, and North Africa ⁴
France and Germany Star	Operational service over Western Europe ⁴
Defence Medal 1939-1945	Service in the UK and overseas territories ⁴
War Medal 1939-1945	General WWII service ⁴
Africa Service Medal	Specific South African military service ⁴



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Legacy and Commemoration: The Politics of Memory

The legacy of Edwin Swales in South Africa is one of profound significance but also of modern contention. For decades after the war, he was celebrated as one of Durban's "greatest sons".¹⁶ A major arterial road in Durban was named "Edwin Swales VC Drive" in his honor, and his old school, Durban High School, established several permanent memorials.¹⁷ These include Swales House, a school residential or competitive house, and an annual scholarship that bears his name.¹¹ In 2004, a set of his miniature medals and a silver model Lancaster Bomber were returned to the school after being purchased at an auction in London.¹¹

However, the political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa led to a controversial decision by the eThekweni Municipality in 2007. As part of a broader renaming project to honor figures from the anti-apartheid struggle, Edwin Swales VC Drive was renamed Solomon Mahlangu Drive.⁴ This decision was criticized by military historians and veterans' organizations, who argued that Swales' contribution to the global fight against fascism should not be eclipsed by local political shifts.⁴ In response, the South African Military History Society and other groups redoubled their efforts to ensure Swales' name was not forgotten, leading to the unveiling of new granite memorials at DHS and the Natal Mounted Rifles headquarters in 2009.¹⁷

The enduring nature of Swales' story is not merely found in the medals and monuments, but in the narrative of a man who transitioned seamlessly from the heat of the African desert to the cold technicality of high-altitude bombing, always maintaining the "smile at his crew" that inspired them to follow him to the very end.⁷ His story remains a central pillar of South African military history, representing the ultimate expression of the "Springbok" spirit on the world stage.

Professional Analysis of the Master Bomber Strategy

The efficacy of the Pforzheim raid, which Swales directed, serves as a prime example of the evolution of the Master Bomber doctrine during the final year of the war. Prior to the establishment of the Pathfinder Force and the introduction of Master Bombers, night bombing was notoriously inaccurate, with many aircraft dropping their payloads miles from the intended targets. The Master Bomber role introduced a layer of real-time human command over the target, allowing for the correction of drift and the identification of "creep-back"—a phenomenon where bombers drop their loads earlier and earlier as the raid progresses, often due to a psychological desire to clear the target area quickly.

Swales' performance at Pforzheim demonstrated a high level of technical proficiency in managing the "Oboe" markings and communicating them effectively to a force of hundreds. His decision to remain over the target while his aircraft was on fire and losing power was not



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an act of blind heroism but a calculated tactical choice. He understood that the removal of the Master Bomber at the height of the raid could lead to the fragmentation of the bomber stream and a loss of concentration, potentially rendering the entire mission a failure. By maintaining his position, he ensured that the 1,825 tons of bombs fell with devastating precision.

The survival of Swales' crew also provides insight into his abilities as an aircraft captain. Managing a four-engine bomber with two engines out and failing flight controls requires significant physical strength and a deep understanding of aerodynamics. The fact that he was able to maintain a stable platform for seven different individuals to move to the escape hatch and parachute into turbulent air is a testament to his skill. His final moments at the controls suggest he prioritized the safety of his men over his own survival, a characteristic often found in the highest-performing military leaders of the era.

Post-War Context and the Retrieval of History

The recovery of Swales' history in recent years has been bolstered by the discovery of primary source materials, such as his original flying logbook and his personal files from Barclays Bank.¹⁷ These documents provide a minute-by-minute account of his operational career and a glimpse into the civilian life that was interrupted by the war. The efforts of the South African National Museum of Military History to preserve his full set of medals, including the Victoria Cross, have ensured that the physical symbols of his valor remain accessible to the public.¹⁸

Furthermore, the continuing interest from his alma mater, Durban High School, has turned the story of Edwin Swales into an educational tool. The school's "War Cry" and its focus on its "Old Boys" who served in the world wars have kept the narrative alive for new generations of South Africans. While the renaming of streets remains a point of political tension, the existence of dedicated memorials at the school and the NMR headquarters provides a permanent physical presence for Swales in the city he called home. The story of Edwin Swales thus remains a living part of the cultural and military fabric of South Africa, illustrating the profound impact of a single individual's commitment to duty.

Conclusion: The Ultimate Legacy of Major Edwin Swales

In retrospect, the life of Edwin Essery Swales was a bridge between different worlds: between the agrarian life of colonial Natal and the industrial warfare of the 1940s; between the ground-level struggle of the infantry and the high-altitude technicality of the Pathfinders; and between the British Empire and the emerging national identity of South Africa. His award of the Victoria Cross was a recognition not just of a single night of bravery, but of a career



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defined by rapid adaptation, technical excellence, and an unwavering commitment to the men under his command.

The sacrifice he made over Pforzheim—staying at the controls of a failing aircraft to save his crew—remains one of the most poignant examples of self-sacrifice in the history of aerial warfare. As the only member of the South African Air Force to receive the Victoria Cross, he represents the pinnacle of that service's contribution to the Allied victory. Despite the shifting sands of political memory in contemporary South Africa, the professional and personal qualities he exhibited—coolness under fire, meticulous preparation, and selfless leadership—remain universal ideals for military professionals worldwide. Major Edwin Swales, VC, DFC, remains, in every sense, a "true South African hero," whose legacy is etched into the very history of the skies he so valiantly defended.

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