

Roland – RAF Bomber Pilot

No. 75 (NZ) Squadron, 3 Group, Royal Air Force

England and Europe

World War 2

Killed in Action



Avro Lancaster

BETLEY, Roland Desmond Ernest

421495 Flight Sergeant (Pilot) R.D.E. BETLEY, Royal New Zealand Air Force, was killed on air operations over France in 1944 aged 22 years.



Roland Desmond Ernest BETLEY was born at Whangamomona, Taranaki, on 2 August 1921 and is the son of John Ernest and Amy Violet BETLEY. Roland's wife was Barbara Isabella May MASTERS¹, the granddaughter of Edmund Richard MORGAN (brother of my great-grandmother Charlotte Mary (Lotte) MORGAN).

Roland is the husband of Barbara Isabella May MASTERS, my second cousin (1x removed).

A keen sportsman, Roland played football and cricket and had interests in shooting and swimming. He was educated at Palmerston North Technical School², becoming an apprentice electrical engineer at Fielding Freezing Works. Roland spent 10 months with the Territorials before enlisting with the RNZAF on 2 March 1942. About this time Roland married Barbara, and they resided at 6 Wellesley Steet, Fielding³.

Enlistment

Roland received his flying wings after completing his advanced flying training in Alberta, Canada, under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Roland initially enlisted as an Aircraft Hand GD (General duties)⁴, though he changed his mind and decided upon becoming a Pilot instead. Recruits for aircrew were posted on enlistment to the Ground [Initial] Training School at Rongotai.⁵ It was here that Roland would have been formally attested, kitted out, and given a four week course of basic service training and drill.

After completing his basic service training, Roland was posted to the No.2 Elementary Flying Training School (No.2 EFTS) at Ashburton. It was here that he survived a mid-air collision during his training. He graduated from the elementary flying school in early 1943 and commenced his advanced training at No.10 Service Flying Training School at Dauphin, in Alberta, Canada⁶. Roland qualified, was awarded his flying badge, and promoted to Sergeant on 7 July 1943. He was immediately deployed for the United Kingdom.

On arrival in England [around August 1943], Roland was to spend almost 12 months training before he would become 'operational'. He was posted to an Advanced Flying Unit, then 11 Operational Training Unit (OTU) to gain experience on Wellingtons located at RAF Westcott in Berkshire. He was subsequently promoted to Flight Sergeant on 9 January 1944.

At the end of May 1944, Roland spent a short spell at No. 31 Base, RAF Sub-station Wrattling Common, Unit 1651 – Heavy Conversion Unit, for training on Stirlings and Lancasters, located in Cambridgeshire. This training on 'heavies' was preparatory to his posting to No 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, No 3 Group Bomber Command, stationed at Mepal, Cambridgeshire at the beginning of June 1944.

¹ Barbara's mother was Rosalie May MORGAN (1889-1969). Her uncles, Inky and Syd MORGAN, fought at Gallipoli during WW1.

² The Technical School main building on Duke Street (now Princess Street) was built in 1909. The Palmerston North Technical School occupied the building until 1956. It is now used by the Universal College of Learning (UCOL).

³ Barbara remained at 6 Wellesley Street for the duration of the war, around 1946 she moved to Glasgow Street, Wanganui.

⁴ Aircraft Hand (General Duties) were personnel trained in any specific trade group like a Fitter, Rigger, Armourer, Electrician, Instrument Repairer, etc. They were more like auxiliary workers who could float between different jobs.

⁵ Rongotai is a suburb of Wellington, located southeast of the city centre. It is known mostly for being the location of the Wellington International Airport.

⁶ The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) was a large-scale multinational military aircrew training program conducted in Canada. BCATP remains one of the single largest aviation training programs in history and was responsible for training nearly half the pilots, navigators, bomb aimers, air gunners, wireless operators and flight engineers who served with the Royal Air Force (RAF).

No. 75 (NZ) Squadron

75 (New Zealand) Squadron was a key component of No. 3 Group, Bomber Command, seeing action over France, Norway, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, and Germany.



In August 1939, with war seeming increasingly likely, the New Zealand government offered to place both men and machines at the disposal of Britain. They were allocated the "75" squadron number and officially became No. 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, RAF on 4 April 1940. Former aircrew included Pilot Officer James Allen WARD VC⁷, and Flying Officer Walter Willoughby MORGAN⁸ (421083) who flew Stirling Mk.III's during his stint here in September 1943.

The Squadron was initially based at RAF Feltwell, then RAF Mildenhall, RAF Newmarket, but during Roland's time it was based at RAF Mepal. Equipped with Wellingtons, progressively these were replaced by Short Stirlings, Avro Lancasters, and finally Avro Lincolns. In March 1944, No. 75 (NZ) Squadron began to exchange its

Stirlings for Lancaster and was ready in time to participate in preparation and support of the Allied invasion.

The Avro Lancaster, commonly known as the Lancaster Bomber, first saw service with RAF Bomber Command in 1942 and as the strategic bombing offensive over Europe gathered momentum, was the main aircraft for the night-time bombing campaigns that followed. As increasing numbers of the type were produced, it became the principal 'heavy' bomber used by the RAF, and squadrons from other Commonwealth and European countries serving within the RAF.

Killed on Operations

On the night of 15-16 June 1944, on his second operation as pilot, Roland's Lancaster was shot down and crashed. There were no survivors from the seven crew on board.

On 3 June 1944 Roland arrived at RAF Mepal, on posting from No. 31 Base (RAF Sub-station Wratting Common). RAF Mepal was the home base of No. 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, located south of the village of Mepal, Cambridgeshire. This was the first 'operational' posting for Roland and where the war got very real for him.

Over the next few days Roland would have gone through a period of familiarisation and non-operational air tests – where cross country flights and formation flying were carried out. These occurred on days the Squadron was not on operations. Roland would have most likely gone on an operation at some stage as 2nd pilot to gain experience and feel of 'active service'.

On the night of 14 June 1944, Roland carried out his first operation as pilot of a Lancaster Bomber. He was engaged in operations over Le Havre, France. The weather was fair with occasional showers. Twenty five aircraft conducted a very concentrated and accurate raid. One aircraft returned early owing to engine trouble and opposition was slight.

The next night (15-16 June 1944) the weather was cloudy with occasional showers. Roland carried out his second operation as part of a 224 aircraft bomber force to attack railway installations at Lens and Valenciennes, over France. Twenty four aircraft of 75 (NZ) Squadron took off as detailed and tasked to attack the Marshalling Yards at Valenciennes. Anti-aircraft fire was very slight, but enemy fighters were active, with two of the Lancasters having contacts with the enemy aircraft.

⁷ Born in Wanganui, James Allen Ward was a teacher when the Second World War began. He was posted to No. 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, which at that time operated Vickers Wellington bombers. He was awarded the VC on 7 July 1941 (for his feat in climbing out onto the wing of his damaged Wellington bomber to extinguish an engine fire). 'Jimmy' Ward was killed on air operations two months later.

⁸ Walter is the son of Walter Robert MORGAN (parents John MORGAN and Mary Elvins FAULL), my first cousin 2x removed.

The aircraft captained by Roland was one of the two planes that had contacts. His plane, an Avro Lancaster I, Serial No. LL888 with markings AA-X, failed to return to base, and all seven crew were classified as missing. Later information received confirmed that LL888 had crashed at Rieux-en-Cambrais, killing all on board.

LL888 was brought down by a night-fighter⁹ south-west of the target. Six of the seven crew members were located in or near the wreckage and later buried at Rieux. The body of the seventh crew member was found some distance away indicating he probably had attempted to bail out, without success.

Roland died on 16 June 1944 aged 22 years. He is buried at Rieux Communal Cemetery, Coll. grave 8-10, with



his crew: Flight Sergeant P J COOK – rear gunner (NZ); Sergeant E G GILLIATT - navigator (UK); Sergeant B GRIFFITHS – flight engineer (UK); Flight Sergeant L E HALE – air bomber (NZ); Sergeant R HOWE – mid upper gunner (UK); and Flight Sergeant E W TOOHEY – wireless operator (NZ).

Photo: Rieux Communal Cemetery where Roland and his crew are buried. This communal grave also contains some of the crew from 514 Squadron who were also shot down the same night as LL888.

Roland's wife, Barbara Isabella May MASTERS, married Maurice Amil ANNABEL after the war in 1947. They had one daughter. Barbara died on 24 June 2007 and is buried at Aramoho Cemetery, Wanganui.

References

Auckland War Memorial Museum – Online Cenotaph

<https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C20793?srt=relevance&n=421495&from=%2Fwar-memorial%2Fon>

International Bomber Command Centre – Losses Database

<https://losses.internationalbcc.co.uk/loss/202103/>

Aircrew Remembered

<https://aircrewremembered.com/betley-roland.html>

75 (New Zealand) Squadron

<https://75nzsquadron.wordpress.com/75nz-raf/>

RAF Bomber Command Bases – World War 2

<https://www.rafweb.org/Organsation/Bases.htm>

Ancestry.com

<https://www.ancestry.com.au/family-tree/person/tree/178090473/person/132516373572/facts>

⁹ LL888 is reported to have been shot down as a 'probable' by Hauptman Josef KRAHFORST at 00.51 hours. KRAHFORST claimed a total of 11 'kills' before he was shot down by a Mosquito on 27-28 September 1944 over Hessen, Germany.