



My father, Sgt Brian Welch, was a member of the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF), sent to England to fly as a tail gunner, in Stirling and Lancaster bombers, over Germany and Europe, writes retired Brigadier Dr Anthony Welch. After training in Canada, he arrived in England and spent time familiarising himself with the bombers he would fly in on operations before joining an operational squadron in Suffolk.

On leave in London he met my mother, who was an English girl of twenty-one, born in Godalming. He was just two years older than his stunningly beautiful bride. My mother been engaged to marry an American flyer called Bob Ryerson, a winner of the Silver Star, who was to die on operations over Europe. My father had been engaged to a girl in New Zealand before the war but he broke it off when he met my mother, such was her charm. This was, of course, wartime and lives were short. Fun and romance had to be taken as and when it presented itself.

My parents did just that and it was, perhaps, a miracle that my father survived the war. Bomber Command aircrews suffered high casualties. Of a total of 125,000 aircrew, 57,205 were killed, a staggering 46% death rate. Tail gunners were particularly vulnerable. In all, 1,850 New Zealand airmen died in bombers flying from British bases during the war.

A stark reminder of this was found among my father's papers when he died in January 1989. It was a letter on headed notepaper from the Sergeants' Mess, RAF Feltwell in Norfolk. The letter starts, 'Gone I'm afraid' and was a 'Last Letter', written by aircrew to be posted should they be killed in action. My father wrote on the envelope, 'Des, missing in action 5/5/43.' Des Goodfellow, 23 years old, was an air gunner from Auckland, New Zealand and he died on 3rd

May 1943 during a disastrous raid on a power station near Amsterdam. Twelve Ventura light bombers from 487 Squadron RNZAF took off from RAF Feltwell, but only one aircraft returned to the base. Twenty-eight airmen were lost, including seven New Zealanders. Six Kiwis were among the 12 airmen who survived and were taken prisoner by the Germans.

My father seldom talked about his war experiences with 75 (New Zealand) Squadron RAF but his logbook contains remarks about other crew members being wounded or killed. He did relate to me that a cannon shell from a German fighter passed through his turret's Perspex dome, missing his head by inches. His pilot, Douglas Charles Lowe (later Air Chief Marshal Sir, GCB, DFC, AFC) kept a record of their operational flights, which laid out in stark detail the dangers of their missions. My mother told me that Douglas Lowe always wanted my father as his rear gunner as he was "lucky", a virtue highly prized by bomber crews. A typical combat report reads:

08/03/1943 " Stirling Mk. I BK646 AA-N: Attack Against Targets at Nuremburg: Nine aircraft were detailed to carry out the above attack with bombs of 2,000lb 1,000lb, 500lb and incendiaries of 30lb and 4lb. One aircraft returned early owing to engine trouble and another failed to return. The remaining seven aircraft successfully dropped their bombs in the target area, large fires being seen, one large explosion from the centre of target, was seen 100 miles away as the aircraft were returning. Both light and heavy AA [anti-aircraft] fire was encountered co-operating with searchlights, they however, proved to be ineffective. Stirling 1 BK646 captained by P/O Lowe, was attacked by an enemy aircraft near Saarbrucken on the return journey. The enemy aircraft opened fire with cannon and a stream of tracer came into the cockpit, one exploding near the second pilot's leg. Corkscrew tactics were adopted, but after seven minutes, the enemy aircraft was lost. The only casualties were the second pilot, who was wounded in the leg and the captain, who had slight face cuts. The aircraft successfully returned to base ... The missing aircraft was Stirling 1 BF437, captained by Sergeant CR Davey.

The crew of Stirling Mk. I BK646 AA-N were: Pilot; P/O Douglas Charles Lowe, RAFVR 1312163/ 138661 "2nd Pilot; F/O Charles Eddy, RNZAF NZ39003 " Navigator; Sgt Francis Campbell Carswell, RNZAF NZ404457 - Air Bomber; F/S S. Ellis, RAFVR 1012770 " Wireless Operator; Sgt Arthur John William Bodley, RNZAF NZ414538 " Flight Engineer; Sgt A.G. Warr, RAFVR 1274410 " Mid Upper Gunner; Sgt K.W. Wilmer, RAFVR 923838 " Rear Gunner; Sgt Brian Desmond Joseph Welch, RNZAF NZ41719. My father and mother remained friends with 'Cam' Carswell and 'Bill' Bodley all their lives.

75 (NZ) Squadron had been formed at RAF Newmarket in November 1942 and stayed there until 1944. It was here that my father earned a mention in dispatches after his aircraft crashed on the night of 16/17th April 1943. They were returning from Manheim/ Ludwigshafen, where the aircraft was repeatedly racked by heavy AA fire. Douglas Lowe found that his throttle controls were jammed and, although he managed to land at their home airfield, they hit a

half-built hangar and the plane was completely wrecked. Amazingly, none of the crew was killed, although Cam Carswell, the navigator, was badly injured and my father hurt. He did, however, manage to damage a Junkers JU 88 twin-engine bomber/night fighter during the raid.

After flying 194 hours on operations over Europe, including raids on Berlin, Essen, Nuremburg, Cologne, Hannover, Wilhelmshaven, Manheim, Wuppertal, Stuttgart, Lorient and St Nazaire, my father was transferred back to New Zealand as a gunnery instructor and then to Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, to fly against the Japanese. He attacked Japanese supply dumps and gun positions on New Ireland, Emirau and Panapai. He also carried out anti-submarine patrols.

Whilst operating from the Solomon Islands on the 30th June 1945, he discovered a Japanese camp and machine gunned two Japanese soldiers, killing them both. The following day, his aircraft crashed on take-off. My father was the only survivor. On the 14th July 1945, he returned to New Zealand and, for him, after 43 missions, the war was over.

POSTSCRIPT

Brian (known as Bru) was commissioned (the picture shows him as a Flight Lieutenant) towards the end of the war, and continued to serve with the RAF, later becoming Senior Staff Welfare Officer with the Royal Hong Kong Police. He finally returned to New Zealand and had a number of very successful race horses in both Hong Kong and New Zealand.