

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour v 1.1



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4 Document Control

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5 References

Term	Meaning
[1]	National Archive 1071742
[2]	National Archives 74311796
[3]	Melvin Chambers: Remembering Dambuster Les Knight
[4]	Air Marshal "Micky" Martin
[5]	Middleton VC Citation
[6]	Gazette VC Regulations
[7]	Edward Sheean at the AWM
[8]	JB144 Crash Site
[9]	Tom Starcevich Monument Beaufort
[10]	Tom Starcevich Memorial
[11]	Xilisoft
[12]	Transcscribio
[13]	Turboscribe
[14]	ChatGPT
[15]	Operation Garlic Action Report
[16]	Nation Archives 5250758
[17]	Knight MiD Card
[18]	Knight DSO Card
[19]	Sheehand Mid Card
[20]	Bazalgette Action
[21]	Bazalgette at the CWHM
[22]	Liberation of Beauvais
[23]	Middleton on the AWM
[24]	Middleton on the Anzac Portal
[25]	Edward Sheehan AWM
[26]	Andrew Willkie Speech
[27]	Brickhill, Paul (1951). <i>The Dam Busters</i> , London: Evans Brothers Ltd.

6 Glossary

Term	Meaning
MiD	Mentioned in Dispatches
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
F/Lt	Flight Lieutenant
F/O	Flying Officer
VC	Victoria Cross

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Submission to the Defence Honours and Awards Review Board

**Request for Reconsideration of Award for Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight, DSO,
RAAF (401449)**

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Overview

7 Purpose

The purpose of this document is to present a case for the award of a Victoria Cross to Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight, who died in service on the night of 15th/16th of September 1943 in the occupied country of the Netherlands.

8 Document Structure

The document is divided into two main parts:

- Part 1 is a summary of the submission
- Part 2 contains the material that supports the submission

8.1 Reference Links

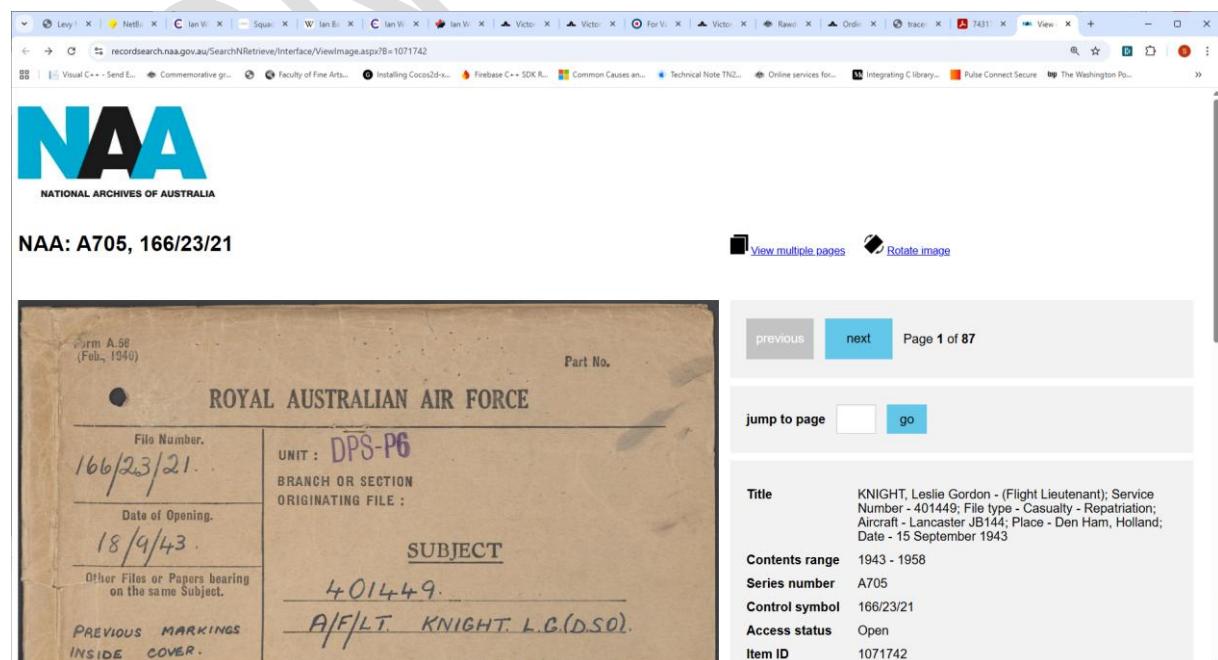
There are three types of reference links. Here are a couple of examples:

- Section 12.1 – a reference internal to the document
- [1] a hook into the central tabulation of references
- Direct links to websites

In the first two cases, if you press Click on the numbers (or Ctrl-click if this is a Word document), you should jump to the referenced section. If you jump to the main reference table, the intention is to take you to an external website. For example:

[1] [National Archive 1071742](#)

Click(or Ctrl-click) on the 'National Archive 1071742', and you will see something like:



Part No.

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

UNIT : DPS-P6

BRANCH OR SECTION
ORIGINATING FILE :

SUBJECT

401449

A/F/LT. KNIGHT. L.G.(D.S.O.)

previous next Page 1 of 87

jump to page go

Title KNIGHT, Leslie Gordon - (Flight Lieutenant); Service Number - 401449; File type - Casualty - Repatriation; Aircraft - Lancaster JB144; Place - Den Ham, Holland; Date - 15 September 1943

Contents range 1943 - 1958

Series number A705

Control symbol 166/23/21

Access status Open

Item ID 1071742

Note that in this archive, multiple pages are referenced. You will need to enter the specific page number to jump to that information.

8.2 Included Documents

When feasible and relevant, images from archives are embedded in the document.

8.3 The use of Artificial Intelligence

Several artificial intelligence tools were used to:

- Convert image text to document text.
- Convert handwritten letters to document text.
- Seed the research by providing initial leads.
- Convert video to audio.
- Convert audio to document text.
- Translate document text.

8.4 Spelling, Grammar and Formatting

Where there are quotations from books and articles, the spelling and grammar are preserved. When there is text that is converted via OCR, any misinterpretations are left 'as-is', and the original is provided for comparison.

9 The Yellow Boxes

Text that is present in bold in a framed box and highlighted in yellow:

This is important! READ THESE FIRST!!!

A summary of the document can be discovered by reading just these.

Part One Summary

10 Introduction

Leslie Gordon Knight was born in Camberwell, Melbourne, on 7 March 1921. He enlisted in the RAAF on 3rd February, 1941. He trained in Australia and was sent to Europe to serve with RAF Bomber Command. He joined 50 Squadron flying Avro Lancaster bombers and conducted 25 successful missions. It was with the 617 Squadron that he earned his fame and met his fate.

- Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight, DSO, served with No. 617 Squadron RAF during the Second World War in 1943.
- He was awarded the **Distinguished Service Order** for his role in breaching the Eder Dam during **Operation Chastise (May 1943)**.
- He died on **16 September 1943** during **Operation Garlic [15]** (the Dortmund–Ems Canal raid), when a collision mortally damaged his Lancaster (ED952 “N for Nan”).
- In recognition of his distinguished service, he was posthumously awarded a **Mention in Despatches (Gazetted January 1 1945)**.

This submission requests reconsideration of his actions in the light of new evidence, with a view to awarding Leslie Gordon Knight the Victoria Cross.

11 Hypothetical Citation

Here is a description of the action for which we are submitting this request.

**Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight, D.S.O. (Aus.), Royal Australian Air Force (401449),
No. 617 Squadron, Royal Air Force**

On the night of **15/16 September 1943**, Flight Lieutenant Knight piloted an Avro Lancaster bomber in a daring low-level attack on the Dortmund–Ems Canal in Germany. The operation demanded exceptional skill and courage, involving navigation at treetop height through intense flak and searchlights.

During the approach to the target, his aircraft sustained severe damage from a tree strike in low visibility, rendering it impossible to complete the bombing run. Displaying sound judgment and composure under extreme pressure, Flight Lieutenant Knight recognised that the damage was beyond repair. Nevertheless, demonstrating the highest level of calmness and professionalism, he formally requested and obtained permission from the mission commander to withdraw and attempt to return to base. With the 12000lb bomb burdening the crippled aircraft, all lives were in peril, and his quick thinking demonstrated excellent command and control in a dire situation.

Despite the aircraft’s crippled condition and failing power, he nursed it westward across occupied territory. When it became evident that the Lancaster could no longer remain aloft, he instructed his crew to prepare to abandon the bomber. The Lancaster had travelled some 91km from the Dortmund-Ems canal and was over the Dutch town of Den Ham. Rather than

attempt to fly the additional 50km to the Zuiderzee, where a water landing might have been possible, Flight Lieutenant Knight prioritised the lives of his crew. With remarkable steadiness and composure, **he held the damaged aircraft level so that every member of his crew could escape safely.**

As he did so, Flight Lieutenant Knight became aware that the stricken aircraft was heading directly toward the Dutch village of **Den Ham**. Even with a parachute strapped to his back, he did not risk the disabled bomber crashing into the township. In his final moments, **he stayed at the controls and deliberately manoeuvred the aircraft away from the houses and population below**, ensuring that it would transit over open fields. Seconds later, the Lancaster struck the ground and exploded, killing its pilot instantly.

By his supreme gallantry, devotion to duty, and self-sacrifice, Flight Lieutenant Knight not only saved the lives of his crew but also spared a civilian community from destruction. His conduct was in the highest traditions of the Royal Australian Air Force and reflects the utmost valour that any member of the Allied Air Forces could display.

12 Awards Granted to Flight Lieutenant Knight

Flight Lieutenant Knight had been awarded the DSO for the Dambuster raid in 1943. On 1 January 1945, he was granted a 'Mentioned in Dispatches' award. There are no details of the reason for this award apart from 'Distinguished Service'. The award may be related to his final action, and it has always been assumed to be so. However, the UK Air Ministry had minimal details and could not have made an informed recommendation or award. This proposition is key to the submission. The details for this are in Section 32.

13 Evidence Considered at the Time

The information available at the time was limited as the crew took some months to return to England. Two were captured and imprisoned until 1945. The crew that did return did not return to service in Europe to avoid the risk of capture and exposure of rescue networks.

- Surviving crew members testified that Knight kept the damaged aircraft steady long enough for them to bail out.
- This act was noted in his crew's testimonies, but not in subsequent RAAF and RAF correspondence. There is no available evidence that this was used as a basis for his MiD.
- At the time, the Air Ministry did not have access to any independent testimony of Knight's actions during the final moments of the crash (i.e., the diversion from the township). Den Ham was not liberated until April 1945, some months after the issue of the MiD.

14 New Evidence from Eyewitnesses

- **Eyewitness Testimony from Den Ham, Netherlands:** Post-war Dutch civilian accounts confirm that Knight deliberately steered his stricken Lancaster away from the centre of the village of Den Ham, thus preventing mass civilian casualties. An eyewitness account was recorded in 2018 with Mrs Bakker, who witnessed the event as a thirteen-year-old.
- **Crewmembers:** Several crew members made more detailed descriptions of the action after the war.

15 Community Support

There are two monuments to individual Australian service members, established by foreign citizens specifically to recognise individual acts of service carried out on their land.

- **Private Leslie "Tom" Starcevich VC – Beaufort, Sabah (Malaysia)**
A memorial to Starcevich stands in Beaufort. It was **erected by the Government of the Colony of North Borneo**—i.e., by foreign nationals—not by Australia. The site is officially listed by Australia's Department of Veterans' Affairs as the **Tom Starcevich Memorial**. [\[9\]](#),[\[10\]](#)
- **Flight Lieutenant Leslie "Les" Knight DSO – Den Ham, Netherlands**
At the crash site near Den Ham, a memorial stone is dedicated to Les Knight. The monument is located in the Netherlands and is maintained/commemorated by the local Dutch community, with regular ceremonies held on key anniversaries (e.g., the 75th anniversary in 2018 and the 80th anniversary in 2023).[\[8\]](#)

The memorial to Les Knight is singularly unique in that it is the only one for which foreign nationals continue to hold regular services of remembrance. Remembrance events recalling the life of Les Knight take place as many as five times a year.

The support for Les Knight is enduring and moving. An example of a service in his honour is described in Section 30.

16 Comparison with Precedent (Middleton VC, Bazalgette VC)

Two awards were made to Commonwealth flyers under similar circumstances.

- **Flight Lieutenant Bill Middleton, VC (1942):** Like Knight, he remained at the controls of a doomed aircraft to save his crew, then diverted to avoid civilian casualties. (Section 22.1)
- **Squadron Leader Ian Willoughby Bazalgette, VC (1944):** Like Knight, he remained at the controls of a doomed aircraft to save his crew, then diverted to avoid civilian casualties. (Section 22.2)

16.1 Similarities

- Both awards were made for the self-sacrifice to save as many of the crew as possible,

- Both awards involved diverting the aircraft away from civilian areas after the crew was safe. The diversion is explicitly described in the citation for Bazalgette.

16.2 Differences

- Both Middelton and Bazalgaette were able to complete the offensive component of their respective actions. However, Knight was flying under high-risk circumstances – at tree-top level. When the aircraft was damaged, it was beyond repair. Moreover, Knight requested permission to break formation, which his commander granted promptly.
- Knight saved his entire crew, whereas Middleton and Bazalgette both lost two personnel.
- Both Middleton and Bazalgette had crews who could advocate for their commanders shortly after the event. Knight's crew were delayed by months, then individually dispersed from the European theatre. Two were in captivity and could not testify comprehensively. The final confirmation of the commander's death took many months.
- The diversions of Middelton and Bazalgette from civilian areas were known at the time. Knight's diversion to save Den Ham was not made public until the 1990's.

We contend that F/L Knight carried out an act of valour impressively comparable with at least two others who were both awarded the Victoria Cross.

17 Upgrade from an MiD

- **Ordinary Seaman Edward “Teddy” Sheean, VC (2020):** Originally awarded an MiD, Sheean's recognition was upgraded to a VC after **new evidence** and analysis demonstrated that his sacrifice met the threshold for “most conspicuous gallantry.”

We contend that F/L Knight's MiD was not well informed regarding his last action, and like Edward Sheehan, should be considered in the light of new evidence.

18 Criteria for the Victoria Cross

- The VC is awarded for “**most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice in the presence of the enemy.**”
- Knight's final act of sacrificing his life not only saved his crew but also spared the civilian population of Den Ham.
- Knight's actions meet both the **self-sacrifice** and **presence of the enemy** elements of the VC criteria.

We contend that F/L Knight's actions meet the criteria for the Victoria Cross.

19 Request

In light of the above, I respectfully request that the Honours and Award Review Board:

Consider recommending Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight for an award of the Victoria Cross.

By:

1. Taking into account the precedents of Middleton (1942), Bazalgette(1944) and Sheean (2020) in applying the standard of recognition.
2. Taking into account the new information from eyewitnesses made available after the war.

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20 Acknowledgements and Contact Details

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I (Stan Malachowski) would like to make special mention of the years of careful preservation carried out by **Melvin Chambers**. Had he not been so devoted to the memory of Les Knight, this submission would not have been possible. Melvin was born in London and has resided in Den Ham, the Netherlands, for nearly 50 years, and lives only a few minutes' walk from the cemetery where Les Knight is buried. He co-founded a charity in 2018 to commemorate the life of the heroic young man who saved Den Ham from disaster in 1943. He feels fortunate to be in a position to be a full-time researcher in his retirement.

A link to the charity is here:

<https://www.rememberingdambusterlesknightdso.org/>

Daniel Love is a great-grandson of Harry Humphries (617 squadron adjutant) and a member of the 617 squadron association. He is an amateur researcher of the squadron and has provided invaluable input to our process.

Stuart Ensor has kept Les's memory alive in our local Camberwell community. He is a member of the same church where Les and his parents worshipped. The biography he wrote, included in this document, offers essential insight into Les's character.

The family of Les Knight – **Loretta, Caroline and John** hold the memory of their uncle and cousin close to their hearts. To them and to the beloved parents of Les – Harry and Nellie - I dedicate this effort.

Part Two Supporting Material

21 Background

21.1 The Victoria Cross

The criteria for the Australian-awarded Victoria Cross have not changed from the original wording of the British Imperial definition:

For most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.

From [6], here is the official wording from the *Letters Patent* establishing the **Victoria Cross for Australia**—the legal instrument created on January 15, 1991, formally institutes the award under Australia's own honours system

By the Queen's Command, under the Great Seal of Australia, at St James's:

Know you that it is Our will and pleasure that the Victoria Cross for Australia be the highest decoration for according recognition to persons who, in the presence of the enemy, perform acts of the most conspicuous gallantry, or daring or pre-eminent acts of valour or self-sacrifice or display extreme devotion to duty: and We do ordain that the award of the Victoria Cross shall be governed by the Regulations set out in the Schedule.

21.2 Summary of the Criteria and Legal Provisions

1. **Highest Australian gallantry decoration:** The VC for Australia is the top award for bravery in wartime.
2. **Identical criteria to the Imperial Victoria Cross:** It must be awarded for:
 - most conspicuous gallantry, or
 - a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or
 - display extreme devotion to duty, undertaken **in the presence of the enemy.**
3. **Awarding process:** The VC for Australia is conferred by the Governor-General (with the Sovereign's approval), upon recommendation—outside the regular honours lists—through a formal process involving the Prime Minister and Minister for Defence.
4. **Eligibility:** Open to:
 - Members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and
 - Other persons determined by the Minister for Defence.”
5. **Design and postnominals:** The medal is visually identical to the British VC, retains the postnominal “VC”, and uses bronze bars for additional awards.

It is proposed that Flight Lieutenant Les Knight meets the criteria on his final mission – Operation Garlic.

21.3 Background – the RAAF in Europe

Despite Australia's distance from the European theatre, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) contributed significantly to the Allied air war. The Empire Air Training Scheme trained over 27,000 Australian aircrews and served with the Royal Air Force (RAF) and other Allied forces. Many were integrated into RAF units, while others served in dedicated RAAF squadrons. The cost was enormous: more than 5397 Australian airmen were killed in the air war over Europe. Another 947 were injured. Many have no known grave, and their names are inscribed on memorials such as Runnymede in England. The casualty rate of the RAAF in Europe was 4-5 times that of Australian forces elsewhere in the conflict.

The RAAF's strongest presence was in Bomber Command, notably Nos. 460, 462, 463 and the top secret 617 Squadrons. No. 460 Squadron flew more sorties and dropped more bomb tonnage than any other Bomber Command unit, participating in major raids against German industry, transport, and military targets. These efforts came at a high cost, with heavy bomber crews facing some of the war's most dangerous missions.

Australians also served in Fighter, Coastal, and Transport Commands. Fighter pilots flew in the Battle of Britain, escorted bombers, and attacked targets in occupied Europe. Coastal Command crews hunted U-boats, escorted convoys, and gathered vital reconnaissance information for Britain's survival.

The RAAF's European service strengthened the Allied air offensive, supported naval operations, and contributed directly to victory. Their courage, professionalism, and sacrifice are central to Australia's wartime heritage.

This document describes the final journey of one such RAAF serviceman: Les Knight, whose courage and commitment to the mission, his comrades, and, finally, to people he never knew, stand as a message and lesson for all Australians.

22 Precedent Victoria Cross Awards

22.1 Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume Middleton

A single Victoria Cross was awarded to an RAAF flyer. Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume Middleton for action on 28-29 November 1942.

22.1.1 The mission of 28–29 November 1942 (Turin raid) and the act of heroism [\[23\]](#)

- On the night of **28–29 November 1942**, Middleton captained a Stirling bomber assigned to bomb the Fiat works at Turin, Italy¹.
- The mission involved crossing the Alps — difficult due to altitude, darkness, fuel constraints, and heavy flak.
- Over Turin, the aircraft came under heavy anti-aircraft fire. A shell burst into the cockpit: Middleton was severely wounded — his right eye was destroyed and the bone exposed; he likely suffered other injuries too.
- Despite his grievous wounds, unconsciousness, severe pain and impaired vision, Middleton regained control, completed the bombing run, then decided to fly the damaged bomber back toward Britain to give his crew a chance to survive.

22.1.2 Self-sacrifice and final moments

- Reaching the English coast after more than four hours of excruciating pain, Middleton ordered his crew to bail out so they could survive. Five crew members parachuted to safety.
- With only two crew members remaining on board, Middleton turned the crippled aircraft out toward the sea to avoid crashing into populated areas. [\[24\]](#)
- The bomber plunged into the English Channel in the early hours of **29 November 1942**. Middleton, too weak to escape, died — along with the two crew members who stayed with him.

22.1.3 VC, legacy, and remembrance

- For his “most conspicuous bravery, self-sacrifice, and devotion to duty,” Middleton was **posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross (VC)** — the first awarded to a member of the RAAF during the Second World War.

What follows is the citation from [\[5\]](#)

“By The KING,

The under-mentioned airman is awarded the **Victoria Cross** in recognition of most conspicuous bravery:—

Aus.402745 Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume MIDDLETON, Royal Australian Air Force, attached No. 149 Squadron, in recognition of his conspicuous gallantry over Turin, Italy, on the night of 28–29 November 1942.

Flight Sergeant Middleton was **captain and first pilot** of a Stirling aircraft detailed to

¹ Les Knight also flew this mission

attack the Fiat Works at Turin one night in November 1942. Great difficulty was experienced in climbing to 12,000 feet to cross the Alps, which led to excessive consumption of fuel. So dark was the night that the mountain peaks were almost invisible. During the crossing, Flight Sergeant Middleton had to decide whether to proceed or turn back, there being barely sufficient fuel for the return journey. Flares were sighted ahead and he continued the mission and even dived to 2,000 feet to identify the target, despite the difficulty of regaining height. Three flights were made over Turin at this low altitude before the target was identified.

The aircraft was then subjected to fire from light anti-aircraft guns. A large hole appeared in the port mainplane which made it difficult to maintain lateral control. A shell then burst in the cockpit, shattering the windscreen and wounding both pilots. A splinter tore into Middleton's face, destroying his right eye and exposing the bone over it. He was also wounded in the body and legs. The second pilot received wounds in the head and both legs, and the wireless operator was wounded in the leg.

Flight Sergeant Middleton became unconscious, and the aircraft dived to 800 ft before the second pilot regained control, climbed to 1,500 ft, and released the bombs. Light flak remained intense and hit the aircraft several times. When Middleton recovered consciousness, he ordered the second pilot to receive first aid. Despite his injuries, the second pilot insisted on returning to the cockpit to assist Middleton.

With the aircraft damaged, fuel dangerously low, and over extremely hazardous terrain, including the Alps, Middleton set course for base. When returning over the French coast and later the English Channel, the aircraft sustained further flak damage and ran out of fuel. As soon as escape out over England became possible, he ordered his crew to bail out—five men escaped successfully, two others remained to assist. Middleton stayed at the controls and the aircraft crashed into the sea off Dymchurch, Kent. Middleton was killed.

In the face of overwhelming odds and grievous wounds, Flight Sergeant Middleton displayed exceptional courage, determination, and leadership. **His devotion to duty in the face of overwhelming odds is unsurpassed in the annals of the Royal Air Force.”**

22.1.4 Timeline

The surviving crew landed in England and were able to make statements promptly.

Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume Middleton stayed at the controls to save his crew and then diverted his aircraft to avoid hitting civilian areas. The surviving crew members could immediately advocate for their commander. He was awarded a VC six weeks after the crash.

22.2 Squadron Leader Ian Willoughby Bazalgette

The following material is drawn primarily from [\[20\]](#)

22.2.1 The Final Mission — 4 August 1944

- On 4 August 1944, Bazalgette was the “master bomber” on a daylight raid tasked with marking a target for the main bomber force. The target was a storage site for V-1 flying bombs at Trossy-St-Maximin in France (north of Paris). [\[21\]](#)
- His aircraft was a Lancaster, serial **ND 811**, code-marked “F2-T” for 635 Squadron.

22.2.2 What Happened — Damage, Fire, and Decision to Continue

- As the bomber approached the target, it came under intense anti-aircraft fire. Both starboard engines were knocked out, and a serious fire broke out in the starboard mainplane and fuselage. The rear fuselage was awash with fuel, and the structural damage was severe.
- The bomb aimer was severely wounded during the attack.
- Despite the damage and fire, and the fact that the deputy master bomber had already been shot down on that mission (meaning the success of the raid depended on Bazalgette), he pressed on. He dropped **the target-marking flares and bombs accurately**. This event ensured the main force could conduct effective bombing.

22.2.3 Fate of the Crew — Bail-out & the Final Decision

- After the bombs were released, the aircraft dived nearly out of control. Bazalgette managed to regain some control — but the port-inner engine failed, and the fire spread across the remaining wing.
- He ordered the crew members who could bail out to do so. Four jumped and survived.
- However, two crew members were seriously wounded or incapacitated and **could not** parachute out: the bomb-aimer (wounded) and a mid-upper gunner, who was overcome by fumes.
- Bazalgette — rather than abandon them — resolved to attempt a crash landing of the burning, crippled Lancaster to try to save their lives.

22.2.4 Crash-landing at Senantes — End of Mission and Lives Lost

- Showing remarkable airmanship and bravery, Bazalgette managed to bring the Lancaster down in a field near the small French village of Senantes (in the Oise department, north-west of Beauvais), taking care to avoid crashing into the town itself.
- Sadly, the aircraft exploded immediately after landing. The explosion killed Bazalgette, the wounded bomb-aimer, and the mid-upper gunner.
- The four crew who had bailed out survived—they evaded capture (with help from local resistance) and eventually returned to England.

22.2.5 Aftermath — Victoria Cross & Remembrance

- For his selfless decision to stay with the wounded rather than save himself, and his attempt to land the burning plane to give them a chance — at great personal risk — Bazalgette was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously.

22.2.6 Citation for the Awarding of the Victoria Cross

On 4 August 1944, Squadron Leader Bazalgette was “master bomber” of a Pathfinder squadron detailed to mark an important target at Trossy-St. Maximin for the main bomber force. When nearing the target his Lancaster came under heavy anti-aircraft fire. Both starboard engines were put out of action and serious fires broke out in the fuselage and the starboard main plane.

The bomb-aimer was badly wounded. As the deputy “master bomber” had already been shot down the success of the attack depended on Squadron Leader Bazalgette, and this he knew. Despite the appalling conditions in his burning aircraft he pressed on gallantly to the target, marking and bombing it accurately. That the attack was successful was due to his magnificent effort.

After the bombs had been dropped the Lancaster dived practically out of control. By expert airmanship and great exertion Squadron Leader Bazalgette regained control, but the port inner engine then failed and the whole of the starboard mainplane became a mass of flames. Squadron Leader Bazalgette fought bravely to bring his aircraft and crew to safety. The mid-upper gunner was overcome by fumes. Squadron Leader Bazalgette ordered those of his crew who were able to leave by parachute to do so. He remained at the controls and attempted the almost hopeless task of landing the crippled and blazing aircraft in a last effort to save the wounded bomb-aimer and helpless air-gunner.

With superb skill and taking great care to avoid a small French village nearby, he brought the aircraft down safely. Unfortunately it then exploded and this gallant officer and his two comrades perished. His heroic sacrifice marked the climax of a long career of operations against the enemy. He always chose the more dangerous and exacting roles. His courage and devotion to duty were beyond praise.

22.2.7 Timeline

Senantes was liberated in the last days of August 1944, most likely on 30 or 31 August, during the British XII Corps advance and the local FFI/Resistance uprising. This estimate is based on the list of towns liberated by date in the vicinity of Senantes. One reference for Beauvais is [\[22\]](#).

Nearby Town	Approx. Distance from Senantes	Liberation Date	Notes
Gournay-en-Bray	~8 km W	30-Aug-44	Major junction; firmly documented date
Ferrières-en-Bray	~6 km WSW	~30–31 Aug 1944	Same battle axis as Gournay
Songeons	~14 km N	31-Aug-44	Freed by British XII Corps + FFI
Formerie	~18 km NW	31-Aug-44	Same XII Corps manoeuvre
Grandvilliers	~22 km NW	30-Aug-44	Liberated by British armour
Beauvais	~32 km SE	30-Aug-44	Department capital; strong documentation

Nearby Town	Approx. Distance from Senantes	Liberation Date	Notes
Auneuil	~27 km S	31-Aug-44	Cleared in the same push as Songeons/Formerie
Clermont-en-Oise	~54 km SE	1-Sep-44	Liberated the day after Beauvais
Neufchâtel-en-Bray	~20 km WNW	31-Aug-44	Canadian advance past the Seine
Rouen	~56 km WSW	30-Aug-44	Large city; contextual anchor date

Table 1 : Liberation Dates Near Senantes

22.2.8 What this means for Senantes

Senantes itself was almost certainly liberated between 30 and 31 August 1944.

The axis of liberation swept:

- **30 Aug:** from Rouen toward Beauvais + Gournay
- **31 Aug:** mopped up villages and small communes around Bray and northern Oise

Given that:

- Gournay (8 km) was liberated on **30 Aug**
- Songeons and Formerie (14–18 km) were liberated on **31 Aug**
- Beauvais (32 km) was freed on **30 Aug**

22.2.9 Summary timeline crash → liberation

- **4 August 1944**
 - Sqn Ldr Ian Bazalgette crashes Lancaster ND811 near Senantes after attempting to save wounded aircrew.
- **Early–mid August 1944**
 - Allied front breaks eastwards after Falaise; German retreat begins.
- **25–29 August 1944**
 - Allied forces cross the Seine; XII Corps advances toward the Bray region.
- **30 August 1944**
 - Beauvais was liberated; Gournay-en-Bray (8 km from Senantes) was also liberated.
- **31 August 1944**
 - Songeons and Formerie taken; remaining German outposts in Oise collapse.
- **1 September 1944**
 - Clermont liberated; area generally secure.

Conclusion: The area around Senantes was freed about **26–27 days after Bazalgette's crash.**

Squadron Leader Ian Willoughby Bazalgette stayed at the controls to save his crew and then diverted his aircraft to avoid hitting civilian areas. The four surviving crew members were hidden by the resistance for about 25 days. They were then able to return home and advocate for their commander, who was awarded the VC six to seven weeks later.

23 Les Knight The Man

The section includes perspectives on Les Knight as a young man growing up in Melbourne, Australia, and also as a leader of an international team of personnel from the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

23.1 Les Knight's Biography

The following biography is provided by Stuart Ensor, local historian in the Boroondara area in Melbourne. He wrote this in 2019.

Flight Lieutenant Leslie Knight, DSO

On Sunday morning, September 14 1952, at Camberwell Methodist Church, a most impressive service was held in which a beautiful marble memorial plaque was unveiled to the memory of Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight, D.S.O., and mentioned in Dispatches posthumously (Knight and Plaque pictured below).

The plaque is on the right-hand side as you enter the church, just above the recording desk.



Les Knight was one of four young men from the Camberwell Church who made the supreme sacrifice in World War II, all of whom came from highly esteemed families of the church.

According to *The (Methodist) Spectator* at the time of the unveiling, "Les Knight was a former choir member and teacher in the Camberwell Sunday School. He was also a Rechabite, and the plaque was donated by a fellow Rechabite who admired his well-known stand against alcoholic liquor. The Rechabites were in attendance in full regalia, and the District Superintendent unveiled the plaque.

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

This gallant young airman, 22 years of age, was decorated with the DSO for bursting the Eder Dam in the Ruhr, one of the three great dams on which depended Germany's monumental munition works in the gigantic Ruhr arsenal. Knight's crew attacked, hit and breached the Eder Dam, the second dam to be attacked, after his comrades had previously scored one hit and one miss."

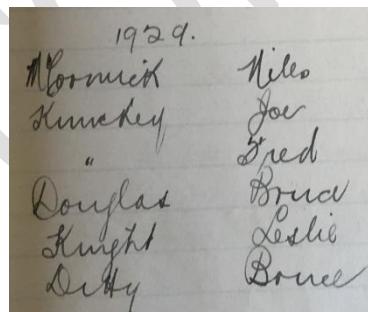
Describing this remarkable feat, Paul Brickhill, in his book "The Dam Busters", writes: "*Knight was then ordered in to bomb (after repeated attempts by other planes, some of them being shot down). He was a young Australian who did not drink, his idea of a riotous evening being to write letters home and go to the pictures.*" Repeatedly, in the various books and articles in which he is mentioned, reference is made to his steadfast loyalty to his Rechabite principles and his personal integrity.

A special Order of Service, a four-page folder, prepared by the minister of the church, the Rev. Harold Chambers, was used. This document had a photo of the plaque on the front page and on the inner pages, as well as the service and several appropriate quotations from the available records of this gallant young airman's character and heroic exploits.

He lost his life in an operation to destroy Hitler's sinister secret weapon base, where the gigantic V3 rocket-guns were being assembled to bombard London. For this, he was mentioned in despatches posthumously. More will be said of his exploits later.

23.2 Early Life

Les Knight was born on March 7 1921, and lived at 51 Bowen Street, Camberwell.



Above is his name on the Sunday School Member Roll for 1929, when he was 8 years old.



Les was 7 years old

After completing school, Les took up a clerical accounting job for a World War 1 veteran, Len Carter, who became a close friend.

Knight applied to join the RAAF in 1941. His parents were sceptical. His father thought that his son, who stayed at home most nights to study, would never make a pilot – he said Les had no aptitude for tools or mechanical skill.

After training as a pilot, he was soon sent to embattled England. There, he formed a crew that flew with him throughout the rest of his operational life. The crew was posted to 50 Squadron in September 1942. Knight had flown on some 26 operations by March 1943 when the crew were offered the chance to transfer into a new squadron being formed at nearby Scampton for a secret mission. They made a joint decision to transfer.

The crew's faith was probably because they had together recognised that Knight was an exceptional pilot, even though he couldn't ride a bicycle or drive a car.

Les Knight was a retiring type. He rarely appeared in photographs and didn't participate in celebrations when medals were handed out.

23.2.1 RAF 617 Squadron

“Number 617 Squadron is a Royal Air Force aircraft squadron, based at RAF Marham in Norfolk, England. It is commonly known as the Dambusters for its actions during Operation Chastise, the attack on German dams during the Second World War.

The squadron was formed under great secrecy on March 21 1943. It included Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force and Royal New Zealand Air Force personnel. It was formed to attack three major dams that contributed water and power to the Ruhr industrial region in Germany: the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe.

The plan was given the codename *Operation Chastise*. The squadron had to develop the tactics to deploy Barnes Wallis's “*Bouncing bomb*”, and undertook some of its training over the dams of the Upper Derwent Valley in Derbyshire, as the towers on the dam walls were similar to those to be found on some of the target dams in Germany.

The squadron's badge, approved by King George V1, depicts a dam bursting in commemoration of *Chastise*.” (Wikipedia).

23.2.2 The Dam Busters Raid

Knight won international fame for his role in the Dam Busters raid.

He was flying the last aircraft in the attack. The Möhne Dam had been breached, but the Eder Dam stood firm. Those ahead of him failed to crack the concrete of the dam wall.

Tail-gunner Harry O'Brien said later that he '*never thought they would get over the mountain*' on the other side, the Lancaster was so heavily laden with the ungainly bouncing bomb.

But, under full emergency power, Knight did. And he soon nosed the aircraft back into position for a second, more dangerous run, carrying the last bouncing bomb. It was the last chance of making the costly mission a success.

What Knight had learned from his failed first approach allowed him to place the radical weapon he had carried precisely on target.



The flight engineer (Sgt Ray Grayston) later reported: "There was only five to seven seconds to get level then release - as luck would have it, we flattened her out, got the speed right, all the rest of the crew doing their jobs right, calling speed, height, and we were spot on, releasing the bomb, and we blew the bottom out of the Eder Dam."

Les Knight was awarded the Distinguished Service Order medal for his role. His navigator and bomb aimer were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses.

At left is Les in conversation with King George VI after the raid.

23.2.3 Film

In 1955, the British made a film called "***The Dam Busters***", starring Michael Redgrave and Richard Todd. The film re-creates the true story of *Operation Chastise*, when the RAF's 617 Squadron attacked the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams in Nazi Germany in 1943 with Barnes Wallis's '*bouncing bombs*'.

The film was based on the books '*The Dam Busters*' (1951) by Paul Brickhill and '*Enemy Coast Ahead*' (1946) by Wing Commander Guy Gibson. The film's reflective last minutes convey the poignant mix of emotions felt by the characters – triumph over striking a successful blow against the enemy's industrial base, tempered by the sobering knowledge that many died while delivering it.

The film was widely admired and became the British cinemas' most popular motion picture in 1955. In 1999, the British Film Institute voted the Dam Busters the 68th Greatest British Film of the 20th century. In the film, Knight was played by Welsh actor Denys Graham.



Thanks to one of Charles Foster's* contributors (Alex Bateman), we have, at left, a photo of Mrs Nellie Knight, mother of Les Knight, who attended the Premiere of The Dam Busters and was presented to Princess Margaret.

23.2.4 Operation Garlic

Whilst the Dam Busters raid was successful, there was still a lot of war left to fight.

Four months later, the elite 617 Squadron was given another difficult task. Codenamed "Garlic", they aimed to bomb the Dortmund-Ems canal in Ladbergen, Germany. It was a vital supply route and, as such, was heavily defended.

Just getting there was almost impossible. The big Lancaster bombers had to fly at, and sometimes below, treetop height, at night, to avoid being seen by radar and lookouts.

The pilots of 617 Squadron had been trained for such a job. But the odds were stacked against them. Knight was flying with the same crew he had carried against the Eder Dam. An extra gunner was added to the crew, mid-upper gunner Sgt Les Woppard, as the RAF deemed this mission worthy of extra aircraft defences.

It had already been a long, eventful flight over darkened, occupied Europe. And when they arrived at the canal, they found it covered in thick fog.

Knight was lining up for a bombing run at the unbelievable height of just 30 metres when a tall clump of trees appeared out of the murk. He couldn't pull the aircraft up fast enough. It ploughed through the treetops, shredding the branches with the propeller blades of its two port engines and the edge of its wing.

Knight quickly realised he could not finish his attack and struggled to keep his plane stable and on course. Despite the pressure, Knight radioed his flight commander for permission to jettison his bomb, knowing it was the only thing to get him home. His commander said, "For God's sake, Les, yes", and it was gone.

Relieved of the weight, they began to climb. But not quite enough. Knight's radio operator, Kellow, recalled the struggle to keep the Lancaster in the air. *"We had crossed the Dutch/German border and were about halfway to the Dutch coast. We knew that at this height and with only one motor working properly, our chances of getting back to England were slim."*

The crew fought to manage the steering, but the engines were overheating and would soon lose power. Knight finally realised he could not stop the plane from veering to port or fly her home. To get so far had been a superhuman effort.

23.2.5 Last Roll of the Dice

1.

Journalist Jamie Seidel, who wrote an article on the last flight in the Herald-Sun on 15th September 2018, imagined the last moments: "The bomber shuddered. Tortured metal screamed. Failing engines whined. The pilot braced his feet against the console as he heaved back on the control stick, struggling to keep his Lancaster in the air. "Bail out now!" he bellowed.

The last sighting of pilot officer Les Knight, flying a badly damaged four-engine Lancaster, was by his crew, who saw him firmly holding the wheel, keeping the aircraft on a steady course and making it easier for each man to jump out. *"Like a sea captain, he wanted to be sure everyone was safely off before he abandoned ship."* Knight could not follow them.

He knew the instant he released his grip on the controls, the bomber would plummet to the ground. But he was prepared to sacrifice his life to save his seven-man crew – and the people in the unsuspecting village below.

Knight had seen the village of Den Ham ahead. He wrestled with his dying aircraft, steering it away from the rural cluster of houses, and trying to land in a field. Eyewitnesses said they saw him change course to avoid landing in a built-up area.

Unfortunately, he hit a hidden ditch, and the plane exploded on impact. Les Knight was killed instantly. The grateful villagers buried him in the local Den Ham General Cemetery in the Netherlands. Because he managed to avoid the built-up area of Den Ham, Knight is still regarded as a hero in the village.

23.2.6 The Aftermath:

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

Les Knight's body was retrieved the next morning. He was buried in the village's old graveyard. A Commonwealth Graves Commission headstone now stands in place of the simple timber cross initially marking his plot.



A German-made wooden cross initially marked Les Knight's wartime grave. The Germans gave Les Knight a funeral with full military honours, saying they did not see him as an enemy but calling him "a brother in arms."



Les Knight with DSO ribbon



Knight's current
Official headstone

Les' crew survived. German Forces quickly took two prisoners. Villagers found the remaining five. At significant risk (they knew they and their families would be shot if caught), the townspeople hid them. Resistance forces were contacted. Underground networks were activated, and all five safely returned to England. Their gratitude knew no bounds.



A memorial stone stands where Les Knight's plane crashed on the outskirts of the village.

The village of Den Ham also never forgot the courage of Knight's final act, as you will read below..

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

The *Methodist Spectator* wrote, at the unveiling of the memorial plaque, that “Les Knight lost his life in an operation to destroy Hitler’s sinister secret weapon base where the gigantic V3 rocket-guns were being assembled to bombard London. For this, he was mentioned in despatches posthumously. Camberwell Church is proud of these gallant young men and of the long list of servicemen and women who served in both wars.”

The raid came at a terrible cost. In all, 133 aircrew were involved – 53 of the crews died. On the ground, about 1,300 were killed by the bombs and floods.



Mrs Nellie Knight (second left) had the opportunity to visit her son's grave.

23.2.7 September 2018

“Local people in Den Ham organised a weekend commemoration of Les Knight over the weekend of Friday 14-16 September 2018, bringing together members of his family, the families of his crew and local people. Also present are family members of the local underground resistance movement, which helped several crew evade capture and return to England.

And so, with each day, week, month, year passing since that fateful night in September '43, Les Knight lies in rest in the old general graveyard in Den Ham. His grave is often visited, flowers laid, his headstone cleaned, respects and thanks paid. Den Ham has never forgotten Les Knight.”

(Thanks to local resident, Joe Vella, AHSA, Aviation Historical Society, who suggested this article on Les for the ‘Burwood Bulletin’ in September 2018).

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour



Three such banners were placed at each major road entry point to Den Ham.

Middle picture: A full page Thank You Poster published in the local weekly newspaper distributed to 22000 homes, businesses, etc., asking inhabitants to display the page in their windows as a thank you to Les and support to the international crew and family members from Australia, Canada, England and Belgium... it was an atypical request, but hundreds of villagers responded.

Picture on the right: a better quality of the huge welcome banner for international visitors



This queue of Dutch citizens of Den Ham wanting to pay their own respects to Les Knight by laying a rose at his memorial took more than 15 minutes for them all to do so. (Pic: Wim Govaerts)



Matthew Neuhaus, the Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands, laid a wreath at the memorial marking the spot where Knight's Lancaster crashed. (Pic: Wim Govaerts)

Lest we forget.

23.2.8 Order of Service for the Unveiling of a Memorial Plaque to Flight-Lieutenant Leslie Knight

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

As mentioned earlier, a special Order of Service was prepared for the unveiling of the plaque. Sadly, my copy does not reproduce well, so I have not included the Service details in this article.

However, there were two other components to the Order of Service which are worthy of special mention:

A COMRADE'S TRIBUTE

"Les' name will be remembered, not only as a brilliant pilot, but also a man who gave his all, thinking of his friends before himself."

---O---

He was distinguished also in his unswerving loyalty to the principles on which his life was founded. He was a Rechabite and, in the face of temptations which must have been particularly difficult to resist, he remained steadfast and true to his convictions and principles, winning the deep respect of his comrades.

---O---

Also included in the Order of Service was a brief biography of Les Knight's life, most of which you have already read. It concluded with the paragraph:

On the lawn behind the home of his mother and her other son, Jack (who served his country in the Navy and was, for several years, treasurer of this Sunday School), is a neatly-trimmed Yew Tree, planted there by Les Knight's superior in the firm in which he was employed. On the tree is attached a tablet bearing this inscription:-

"DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

FLT.-LT. LESLIE GORDON KNIGHT, DSO, RAAF.

Killed in Action, September 16, 1943.

LET US BE WORTHY."

23.2.9 Acknowledgments

* For much information, I am indebted to Charles Foster, a nephew of another Dambuster pilot, David Maltby. Charles is a writer, editor and designer and lives in Dublin, Ireland.

On 7 May 2018, he set up a blog to serve anyone wanting to learn more or share material about the RAF's 617 Squadron.

The reason for his interest was personal: his late mother was Jean Foster, née Maltby, and was the younger sister of Dams Raid pilot Sqn Ldr David Maltby. David and his whole crew were killed returning from an aborted operation in September 1943.

This led him to write a book about David Maltby and his crew, which was published in 2008. He has now written a new book, 'The Complete Dambusters', published in May 2018, which contains a biography and a photograph of all 133 men who flew on the Dams Raid.

I wrote to Charles, requesting permission to quote from his blog and his books, and to reproduce some of his photographs. He replied and kindly gave me the permission I sought, providing I acknowledged the source. This I have gladly done. He has done much to preserve the memory of the heroism of the members of 617 Squadron.

** Journalist Jamie Seidel wrote an article in the *Herald Sun* newspaper in September 2018 under the heading "*The War Hero Australia Forgot*". I quoted and summarised some relevant parts of his article in the work above, and acknowledged their source.

As part of his research, Seidel spoke to the Toorak RSL president, who was concerned that whilst "*Knight's courage and critical role is still remembered by the (local) Bomber Command, he was worried that others will forget.*"

I know that the people of Camberwell Uniting Church, along with the people of the Dutch village of Den Ham, will never forget.

*** I am grateful to the many people in our congregation who, over time, gave me various articles on Les Knight's bravery and ultimate sacrifice, as we acknowledged the contributions of former members of our congregation to creating a better life for us all.

*

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*

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour



The Distinguished Service Order is a military decoration of the United Kingdom, and formerly of other parts of the Commonwealth, awarded for "meritorious or distinguished service by officers of the armed forces during active operations against the enemy."

Below are some other pictures from the 75th anniversary in 2018 of the raid in which Les Knight lost his life.



A wreath from "the Government and People of Australia"



A wreath from the British Embassy "to those who gave everything for our futures"



A note attached to a wreath from a crew member's (Hobday) family, which reads, in part, "It hurts so badly when I think of what you have done. I want to leave you behind but I can't..."



Village children pay their respects by reading poems of thanks they have written themselves.



Wreath laying by the village's leaders, the village Mayor on the right, Mrs Annelies van der Kolk



Honouring Les'sacrifice. The portrait on display was sent to local resistance man Dr Kohly, who signed Les' death certificate. The portrait was signed on the back with thanks from Les' mother. The portrait was placed on Kohly's desk at his surgery for 50 years, for everyone to see.

23.3 Les Knight by John Dean

John Dean is Les Knight's cousin

A TRIBUTE TO Flight Lt. LESLIE GORDON KNIGHT D.S.O.

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

“AUSTRALIA’S DAM BUSTER”

7 March 1921 – 16 September 1943

Commemorative Service at Bowen Gardens, 95 Bowen Street, Camberwell
at 2 p.m. on Saturday, 1 October 2022

On behalf of Les' many relatives and friends, I wish to thank two men in particular who have spent countless hours, much effort and not a little heartache to bring this Commemorative Service to fruition.

Mr Paul Dipnall, *Executive Chairman of the Bomber Command Commemorative Association of Victoria* and Mr Mike Fogarty, *Past President of the Toorak R.S.L.* and member of the same Association. They were ably assisted by other members of the *Victorian Association*, of course, but we especially thank you, Paul and Mike -- your tireless and dedicated work is very much appreciated.

Good afternoon, my name is John Dean, and Les Knight's mother's maiden name was Nellie Dean. She was my father's third-oldest sister, and Les was the elder of her two sons. Therefore, Les was my father's nephew and my first cousin. I didn't know my cousin, as I was only 6 when he enlisted in 1941, but his heroic story, which we are all aware of, makes me extremely proud to be related to him.

And now, a very special moment in our commemoration of Les; I invite his niece, Caroline Knight, to display for us all, the very D.S.O. (Distinguished Service Order) medal which was presented to him in 1943 by our late Queen's father, King George VI. Thank you, Caroline. By the way, you may have noticed another young RAAF Cadet in our midst. He is my grandson, Cadet Corporal Oliver Dean. Oliver is, and has been for a long time, an ardent fan of Les Knight and is very happy to be part of this commemoration today.

As we gather here today in remembrance of Les, we pay tribute to a very special person in each of our lives. In so doing, we are all aware of the extreme debt we owe to our late family member, relative, and friend, as we recognise his contribution to mankind as a whole.

As we have just been reminded, Les was the successful Dam Buster who piloted the plane that dropped the bomb that burst the Eder Dam in Germany on 16 May 1943, thus inflicting a heavy blow on the Nazi war effort by flooding the ammunition factories below. He returned safely from that mission, but four months later to the day, on 16 September 1943, over Den Ham in Holland, Les made the supreme sacrifice.

I believe that reflecting on our past and our history brings a sense of identity and psychological balance in our lives. So, on this significant occasion, we can feel a sense of gratitude to have had some association – close or otherwise – with such a hero as Leslie Gordon Knight.

Group Captain Cheshire, V.C, D.S.O., D.F.C. wrote, and I quote:

“Les Knight piloted one of nine Lancaster Bombers that set out in September 1943 to deliver a low-level 12,000-pound bomb attack against the Dortmund-Ems Canal.

In the face of the formidable Ruhr defences and the extreme difficulty of map-reading in fog from tree-top level, there was little chance of completing the attack. After persevering for 40 minutes, Les' plane was hit by gunfire. His two starboard (right) engines were put out of action, his tailplane was severely damaged, and his aircraft became virtually unmanageable. Given permission, he jettisoned his remaining bombs. Les never survived to tell his story, and of the nine aircraft, only three returned to base". *Unquote*.

Les managed to keep the plane airborne against immeasurable odds so that his crewmates might get safely away, and then, when his turn came, it was too late. He was just twenty-two years old. A letter received from Flight Lieutenant Bob Kellow stated:

"I lived, worked and flew in training and on operations, and spent leisure hours with Les for almost 18 months during our Air Force lives, and I want to say that a truer and more sincere friend I have yet to meet. Les was one of the most popular and respected pilots on 617 Squadron. Our commanding officer displayed the utmost confidence in him. Our crew, to a man, vouched 'they would fly anywhere with Les'."

To this day, many residents of Den Ham, led by Melvin Chambers, gratefully remember his sacrifice in that Les was able to steer the huge Lancaster bomber away from the township, thus saving many Dutch civilian lives. Melvin's group have constantly and faithfully maintained his grave throughout every year since then to honour his successful avoidance of disaster for the Den Ham civilians who lived nearby. Incidentally, another niece of Les's is Loretta Knight, Caroline's sister. She is in constant touch with Melvin Chambers and so keeps up to date with his remembrance of Les' sacrifice.

His selfless legacy has contributed much to our continuing freedom and ongoing peace, made possible by his supreme sacrifice. To quote the prophet Kahlil Gibran, "*It is when you give of yourself that you truly give*".

So, to honour Leslie Gordon Knight, we dedicate this plaque to a great yet humble young man whose memory we hold in our hearts with pride, satisfaction and gratitude.

John Dean

23.4 Les Knight, Described by Harold Hobday

Piet Meijer was an architect living in Den Haag who maintained regular communication with the crew. In a one-on-one communication, he posed several questions to HS Hobday. The written version and AI-converted text are listed in the following table.

Original	AI-processed
Original Questions and Answers	Interpreted Questions and Answers

Table 2 : Hobday Questions and Answers

Some of the relevant questions and answers are extracted here:

23.4.1 Questions

- Was Les Knight indeed a modest man?

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

- Can you give a quality of character and events you remember about him?
- In the books I read he had special qualities as a pilot?

23.4.2 Answers

- Les Knight was a dedicated pilot, very keen to perfect his flying. I did not know much about him socially, but I had the greatest respect for him. He was about ten years younger than I was.
- He was a sound pilot, took no foolish risks, and was thoroughly reliable. Not a daredevil. Our aircraft on both the Dam raid and the Dortmund–Ems canal raid was “N for Nuts.”²
- He was probably classified as a Sergeant initially, but had his own room as an officer.
- He had the highest respect of the crew.
- Regarding Les’s character — a completely dedicated flyer, keen and thorough, not a drinker, fairly quiet, much younger than I was.

Harold Hobday also wrote an extended description of his story. This material was obtained from the Amsterdam Archive by Melvin Chambers. The story was written in 1946 and is held in the Dutch War Archive.

Original	AI-processed
Hobday Story Original	Interpreted Hobday Story

Table 3 : Hobday Story

One paragraph is relevant to this submission.

“We all got out in good order except poor old Les, the pilot, who manfully stuck to the controls until we had jumped. I imagine that when he let go of the stick, the plane dived straight to the deck. I shall never forget how he wished me the best of luck before I left him. He certainly showed great courage, and had we realised that he would not be able to make it, we should have stayed in the machine and force-landed. He was a good lad and deserved a posthumous award for his bravery.”

Les Knight was a young man of sincere character. Sober in all respects and a calm, engaging commander. He was nominated as one of the best Lancaster pilots in Bomber Command. He was beloved and respected by his crew and all who knew him.

² Elsewhere (in many places), the designation is “N” for “Nan”

24 Les Knight in the News

The following appeared after the Dambuster raid.

Evening Advocate (Innisfail, Qld. : 1941 - 1954), Thursday 10 June 1943, page 4

DAM-BUSTER WAS SHY LAD

MELBOURNE.—A quiet, shy, studious lad who never shone at sport and was an accountant in Melbourne when he was 20, is the Lancaster pilot, Flying-Officer L. G. Knight, who was awarded the DSO for his part in the raids on the German dams.

His parents were inclined to scepticism when he announced his intention in February, 1940, of becoming an RAAF pilot.

His father, Mr. Harry Knight, of Camberwell, said he thought the boy who was at home on most nights studying could never make a pilot.

He had no aptitude for tools his father says. He has no mechanical skill, but he brought home a crippled Manchester bomber, with only one engine, after one of his earlier flights over Germany.

National Library of Australia

Figure 1: Les Knight in the news

25 Flight Lieutenant Knight's Service Record

The service records for Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight can be found in [\[1\]](#), page 9.

The text was extracted using ChatGPT[\[14\]](#). The original is included for completeness.

Ref. No.	MK18335
Rank	Flt. Lt.
Name	Leslie Gordon Knight, D.S.O.
Number	401449
Date of Birth	7th March, 1921
Date of Enlistment as Airman	3rd February, 1941
Date of Discharge as Airman	7th December, 1942
Date of Appointment to Pilot Officer	8th December, 1942
Nature of Service	General Duties Branch Citizen Air Force called up for the duration of the war and a period of twelve (12) months thereafter.
Promotions	Flying Officer – 8.6.43 Acting Flight Lieutenant – 1.8.43
Postings & Movements	1 I.T.S., Somers – 3.2.41 7 E.F.T.S., Western Junction – 20.4.41 1 S.F.T.S., Point Cook – 5.7.41 1 Personnel Depot, Melbourne – 17.10.41 Embarked Sydney – 5.11.41 Disembarked U.K. – 17.1.42 3 P.R.C., Bournemouth – 21.1.42 R.A.F. Station, Kirmington – 5.5.42 14 O.T.U. – 5.5.42 1654 Conversion Unit – 14.9.42 50 Squadron – 18.9.42 617 Squadron – 25.3.43
Attachments	Royal Air Force – 17.11.41 to 16.9.43
Honours & Awards	Distinguished Service Order Mentioned in Despatches
Entries on Conduct Sheet	Nil
Casualty	Previously reported missing air operations, now presumed dead by the Air Ministry w.e.f. 16th September, 1943

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

Place of Casualty

Holland

Certified

That the above is a true and correct statement of the service of the abovenamed deceased officer who served outside Australia during the Second World War, 1939-45.

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE
RECORD OF SERVICE - OFFICER
EXTRACT FROM FORMS P/P.24 & P/P.25

REF. NO:	MX18235			
RANK:	FLT. LT.	NAME:	Leslie Gordon KNIGHT, D.S.O. NUMBER:	401449
DATE OF BIRTH:	7th March, 1921.			
DATE OF BALKIMENT AS AIRMAN:	3rd February, 1941.			
DATE OF DISCHARGE AS AIRMAN:	7th December, 1942.			
DATE OF APPOINTMENT TO PILOT OFFICER:	8th December, 1942.			
NATURE OF SERVICE:	General Duties Branch Citizen Air Force called up for the duration of the war and a period of twelve (12) months thereafter.			
PROMOTIONS:	Flying Officer 8. 6.43. Acting Flight Lieutenant 1. 8.43.			
POSTINGS & MOVEMENTS:	1 I.T.S. Somers 3. 2.41. 7 E.F.T.S. Western Junction 1. 5.41. 1 S.F.T.S. Point Cook 30. 6.41. 1 Personnel Depot, Melbourne 17.10.41. Embarked Sydney 17.11.41. Disembarked U.K. 5. 2.42. 3 P.R.C. Bournemouth 5. 2.42. 15 A.F.U. 2. 5.42. R.A.F. Station, Kimington 14. 4.42. 14 O.T.U. 5. 5.42. 1654 Conversion Unit 14. 8.42. 50 Squadron 18. 9.42. 617 Squadron 25. 3.43.			
ATTACHMENTS:	Royal Air Force 17.11.41 - 16. 9.43.			
HONOURS & AWARDS:	Distinguished Service Order. Mentioned-in-Despatches.			
ENTRIES ON CONDUCT SHEET:	Nil.			
CASUALTY:	Previously reported missing air operations, now presumed dead by Air Ministry wef 16th September, 1943.			
PLACE OF CASUALTY:	Holland.			
CERTIFIED:	That the above is a true and correct statement of the service of the abovenamed deceased officer who served outside Australia during the Second World War 1939-45.			

This member is a deserter against the Imperial Government if, and only if, his disability is found to have arisen from an overzealous happening between 17/11/41 and 17/9/45 whilst he was attached to the R.A.F.

National Archives of Australia NAA: A705, 166/23/21

Figure 2: Service Record Page 9

Here is a page from Les Knight's logbook where the 50 Squadron commander makes an entry:

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

"One of the Squadron's best Operational Pilots. Efficient on the ground and in the air.
[Peter Branch?] S/L for w/e.
OC 50 Sqn."

Type	No.	1st Pilot	or Passenger	(Including Results and Remarks)
—	—	—	—	— Totals Brought Forward
		One of the Squadron's best Operational Pilots. Efficient on the ground and in the air.		Some Experience. Peter C. Branch S/L for w/e. OC 50 Sqn.

Figure 3: Excerpt from Les Knight's Log Book

The progression of rank for Les Knight, while not entirely atypical, was indicative of someone with considerable flying skill. This perception was repeatedly confirmed by his crew and others in his squadron.

26 Action Report From Operation Garlic

This section transcribes the action report from [2] for Operation Garlic—snapshots from the original document. Formatting is only used for clarity. Grammar and spelling are left as in the original. The text was extracted using ChatGPT [14].

SECRET

ATTACK ON THE DORTHUND-EMS CANAL, SEPT. 15/16, 1943.

(Full story of raid -- see story done by Mrs Walker for A.O.C's book, and extracts therefrom in personal folders of Martin, Shannon and Spafford).

Captains in the two Lancaster formations in the attack on the Dortmund Ems Canal on the night of September 15/16, 1943, were:-

No. 1 Formation

No. 1 : Squadron Leader George HOLDEN R.A.F. (his crew included Flying Officer Spafford, R.A.A.F. - (Leader of formation) later D.F.C, D.F.M. -- missing, believed killed)

No. 2: Flight Lieutenant (now Squadron Leader) H.B. ("Mick") MARTIN, R.A.F. now D.S.O. and D.F.C, Australian member of RAF. His crew included the following RAAF men --- Hay, Foxlee, Simpson (q.v) and Flying Officer Ken Stott, navigator. The flight engineer and wireless operator were RAF men - Flying Officer Ivan Whittaker, later D.F.C. and Bar; and Flying Officer Larry Curtis later D.F.C. and Bar.

No. 3: Flight Lieutenant Les KNIGHT, R.A.E.F. (won DSO. for Dam raid) now listed as killed, result of this raid. His crew included Pilot Officer R.G. Kellow RAAF (won D.F.C. for Dam raid).

No. 4: - I WILSON, RAF (killed). No Australians in crew.

No. 2 Formation

No. 1 : Flight Lieutenant Ralph ALLSEBROOK, RAF. (Leader of formation)

No. 2 : Flying Officer D.J. SHANNON (won DSO for Dam raid in May and later Bar to D.F.C. for this raid).

No. 3 / No 4. Unrecorded, but either No. 3 or No. 4 piloted by Flying Officer G. RICE, RAF (later won D.F.C. for this operation).

Each aircraft carried a 12,000 lb. bomb.

The following account is given by Squadron Leader Martin (captain of No. 2 a/c in No. 1 formation).

Took off about midnight and were over target about 2 a.m.

Heavy fog was encountered from the frontier of Germany and Belgium to the target. "It came down like a wall," says Martin.

The aircraft flew at "rooftop height".

Approaching the target, Holden's starboard inner petrol tank was hit by flak and caught on fire. Flames streamed back in a long line of fire until the tank blew up. Holden's Lancaster half turned, dived and rolled straight down. Martin saw it explode on the ground in successive bursts as the oil, then the bombs, blew up.

Martin took charge. Knight (No. 3) formed on him to starboard and Wilson on the port side.

Martin's formation turned early to avoid flying over an airfield, the flare-path of which was visible. (Visibility then was about 500 yds).

That turn brought the formation north of the track, and it ran into the defences of what Martin thinks was Rheims. Martin tried twice to get through, but each time had to orbit and break out. Then he swung the formation away to go round north of the town.

Martin believes that Knight's aircraft was hit at this stage, because he found himself then with only one accompanying Lancaster.

The weather was deteriorating, and Martin believes they must have crossed their "pin-points." Five to 10 minutes after the two Lancasters had got clear of the town, Knight's voice came through on the R/T.

"I have lost two engines. May I have permission to jettison, sir?" he said.

At this time Knight must have been only about 50 ft. above ground.

Martin is impressed with the iron discipline of a man who, with only two engines functioning in an aircraft laden with a 12,000 lb. bomb, could pause to ask permission to drop it.

Martin replied: "O.K. Jettison. Good luck!" and he heard Allsebrook, leading the other formation (at that stage in the target area) echo his "Good luck!"

Three or four minutes later Knight's voice was heard again.

"I have successfully jettisoned and am endeavouring to return

to base."

Martin heard the other pilots come in on the R/T with calls of "Good luck!" "Best of luck!"

From high above, from one of the two escorting formation of Mosquitoes, came, too, the good wishes of one Australian, Flight Lieutenant Charlie Scherf (later awarded the D.F.C. for 121/2 kills between January 27 and April 5, 1944, while serving with a R.C.A.P. Intruder squadron based in Britain).

That, Martin says, was the last they heard of Knight.

Martin began looking for the target. He was then eight to 10 miles north of it. Shannon (No. 2 to Allsebrook) was at that stage three or four miles from it, also looking for it.

As stated in the citations to the awards they received afterwards, Martin spent 84 minutes and Shannon 45 minutes in their search for the target. Both bombed after careful identification.

Only survivors at this stage, a subsequent analysis shows, were Martin, Shannon and Rice, who eventually returned to base. Martin ordered Rice home after Shannan Lic had screened. boushed & humself continued the search for the target alone.

after bombing

On the way back/Martin found the weather equally bad, until visibility cleared greatly over the Zuyder Zee.

Of Knight, Martin says he was quiet, a non-drinker and non-smoker who had had a very successful tour. He was one of the outstanding pilots of the famous No. 50 Squadron, RAF ("Ye Olde Dingo Flyte" g.v.)

S.T. WRIGHT F/Lt.

P.R.2. 20/4/44.

26.1 The Bomb Release

There have been several versions of the conversation between Squadron Leader Martin and Knight when the request came to release the bob and break formation.

The one in the action report is:

Knight: "I have lost two engines. May I have permission to jettison, sir?"

Martin : "O.K. Jettison. Good luck!"

In Section 29.1, Bob Kellow does not quote the request, but the response was:

Martin: "Go ahead and jettison and the best of luck to you."

In Paul Brickhill's book *Dambusters* [27], on page 121, he describes a subsequent conversation with Martin:

With the two starboard engines roaring at full power, the Lancaster, with the bomb still aboard, was just able to hold her height. No chance of bombing in that condition, and Knight called up Martin: "Two port engines gone. May I have permission to jettison bomb, sir?" It was the "sir" that got Martin. Quiet little Knight was following the copybook procedure, asking respectful permission to do the only thing that might get him home.

Martin said, "For God's sake, Les, yes," and as the bomb was not fused, Knight told Johnson to let it go. Relieved of the weight, they started to climb very slowly.

Martin's exact response may not have been as in the action reports as it might have been considered profane³, and similarly, Kellow may have softened the words. Regardless, it is the calm usage of the word "sir" that is telling.

Les Knight performed with the utmost professionalism during the offensive phase of Operation Garlic. He left formation only when it became impossible to continue, and the mission commander permitted it.⁴

³ He was Australian, after all.

⁴ His commander at that point was "Micky" Martin – another Australian of great repute. After the war, he stayed on in England, joining the RAF and rising to the rank of Air Marshal [4]

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

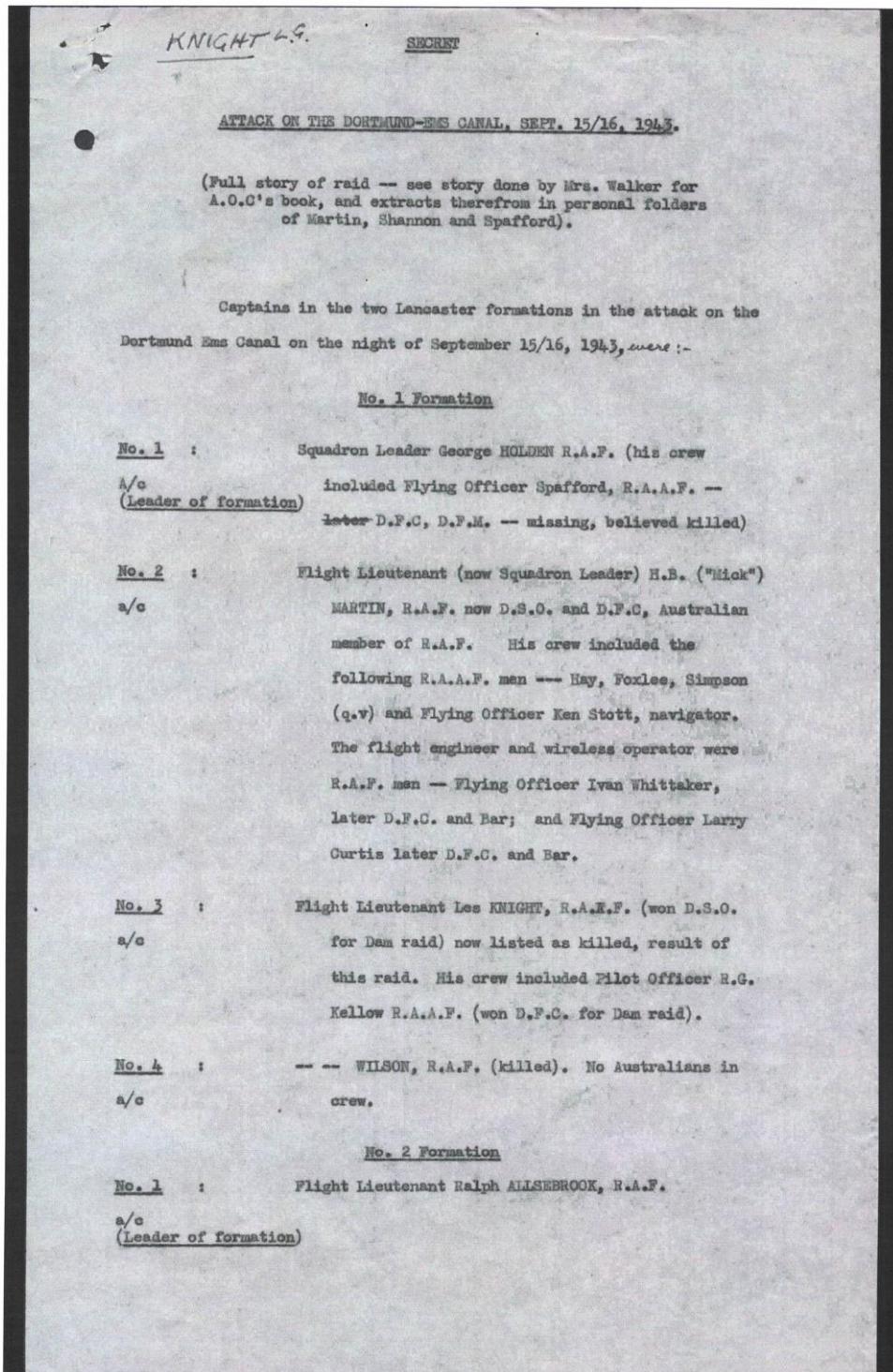


Figure 4: Action Report page 8 from [2]

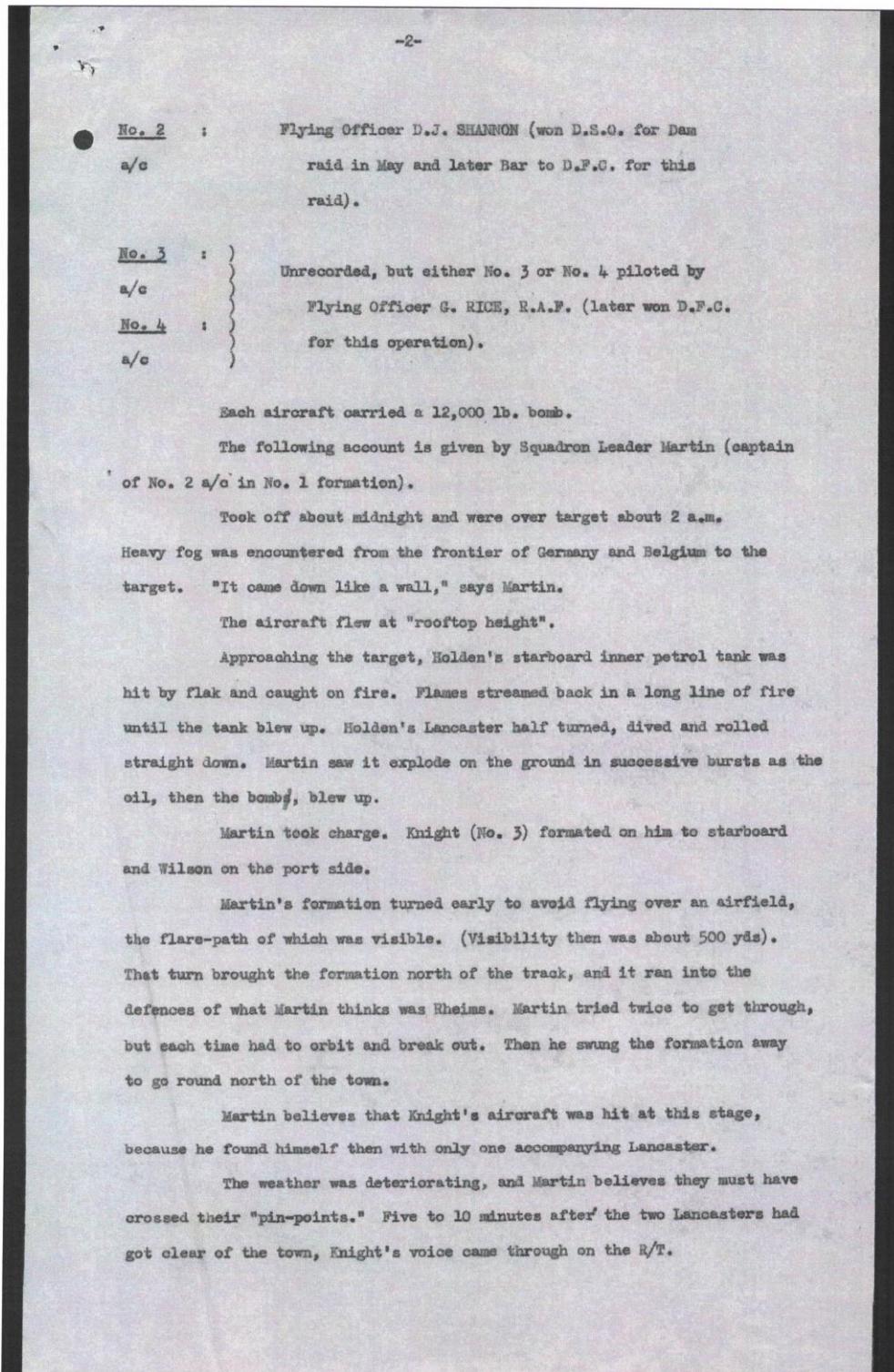


Figure 5: Action Report page 9 from [2]

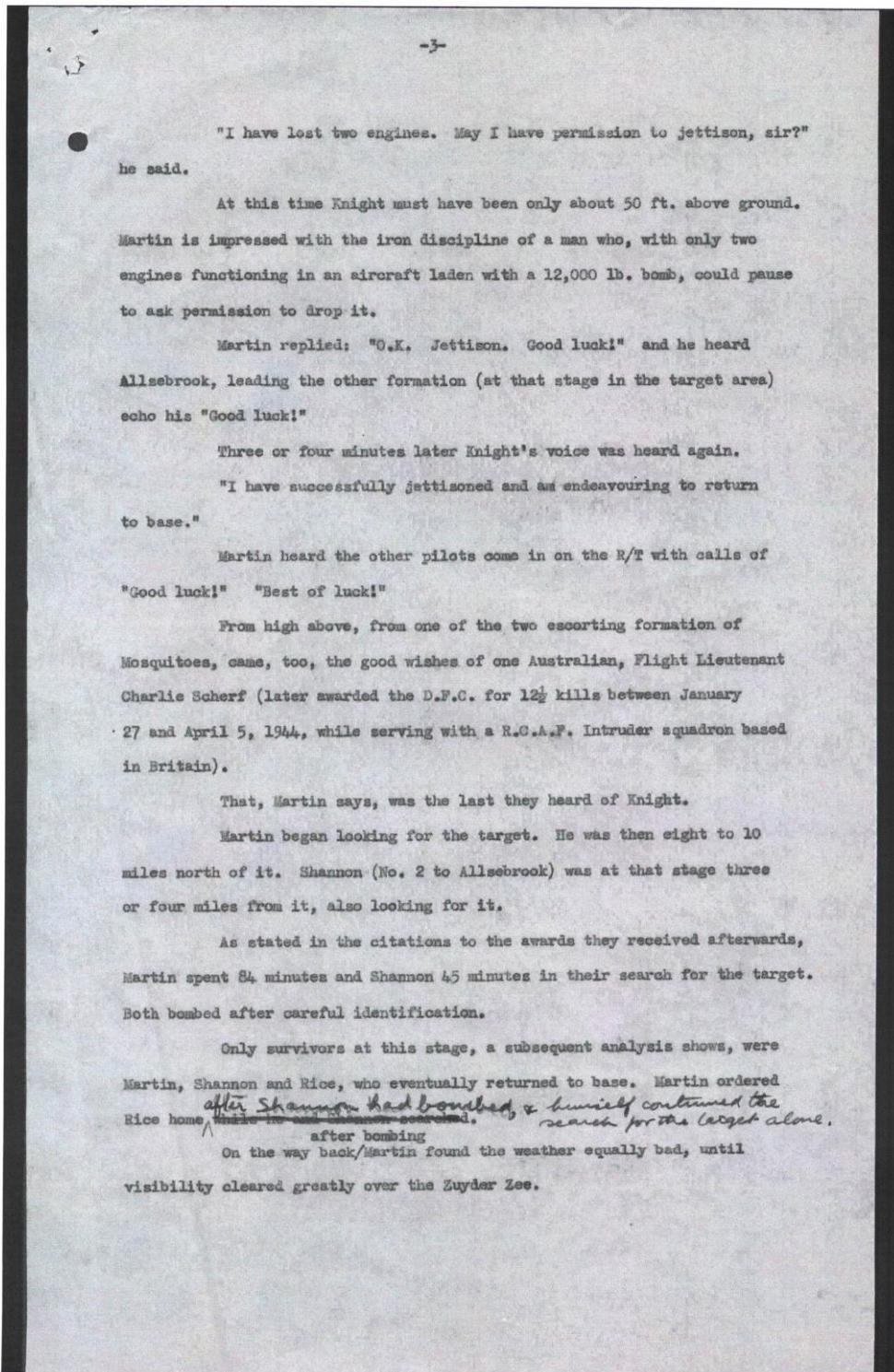


Figure 6: Action Report page 10 from [2]

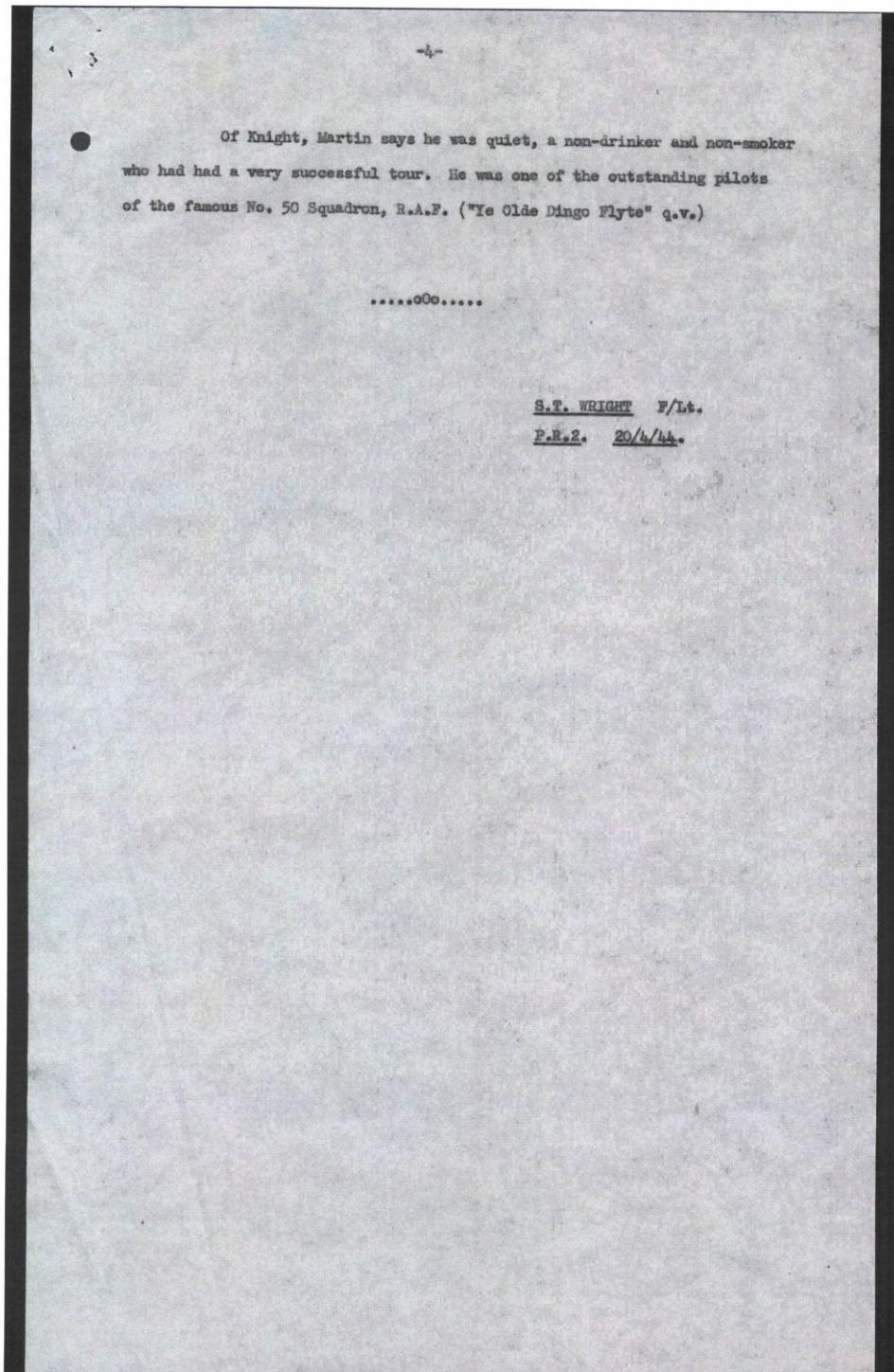


Figure 7: Action Report page 11 from [2]

27 Death Notification

The notices of Les Knight's death came only after some months had passed. There had been preliminary signals sent to his parents expressing hope. However, the final transmission went to the RAAF sometime in early January.

27.1 Notice from the Department of Air - Australia

This document is the definitive statement of the loss of Les Knight to his parents.

Commonwealth of Australia – Department of Air

Casualty Section

Merton Hall,
Anderson Street,
South Yarra, S.E.1.

7 January 1944

Ref: R.A.A.F. 166/23/21(26A)

Our Ref: L.A. 5271

To:

Mr W. L. Knight
Camberwell, Vic.

Dear Sir,

I refer to previous communications from this Department concerning your son, Acting Flight Lieutenant **Leslie Gordon Knight, D.S.O.**, who is missing but believed to have lost his life as a result of air operations.

I regret to inform you that a statement made by the second pilot of your son's aircraft supports the information obtained through the International Red Cross Committee from German sources, that he lost his life when his machine crashed in enemy territory.

An extract of this report has been received by cablegram and contains the following information. Flight Sergeant **Kellow**, who makes the statement, was the second pilot and advises that the aircraft took off from base on **15 September 1943** to attack a secret target in Germany. When over the target, the accompanying aircraft was struck by flak and was seen to crash after being attacked.

They had made a second run over the same direction on the target when the aircraft was seen to be hit and continued on their way to the target area. Your son's aircraft was not seen again. However, six or seven aircraft were later seen to crash, one of which was on fire and at an altitude of 50 to 100 feet.

Pathfinder's flares caused some difficulty in locating the target owing to very poor visibility. Your son, who was the pilot, steadied the aircraft after it struck a tree and re-ascended height, ordering his crew to leave the aircraft. Two members—the flight engineer and the

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

navigator—were seen by Flying Officer Kellow to escape the aircraft. Your son's aircraft was then observed by the front gunner to strike the ground and catch fire.

Flight Sergeant Kellow left the aircraft at about 1,000 feet. It was then flying level on an even keel, but swerving to starboard and still losing height. The front gunner states that the aircraft turned sharply to starboard after he left, and dived into the ground.

Although this information tends to confirm the information obtained through the International Red Cross Committee and other sources, it is the custom of this Department to await definite confirmation before an airman is officially classified as "killed." In the meantime, he is listed as **missing, believed killed**.

As you will see, your son's name has been referred to in connection with orders promulgating his appointment as a **Flight Commander**, and his appointment to the acting rank of **Flight Lieutenant** has been approved by His Majesty the King. When it is gazetted in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, you will be notified officially.

May I again assure you of the constant sympathy of this Department in your great anxiety.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed)

M C. Langslow

for Secretary, Department of Air

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

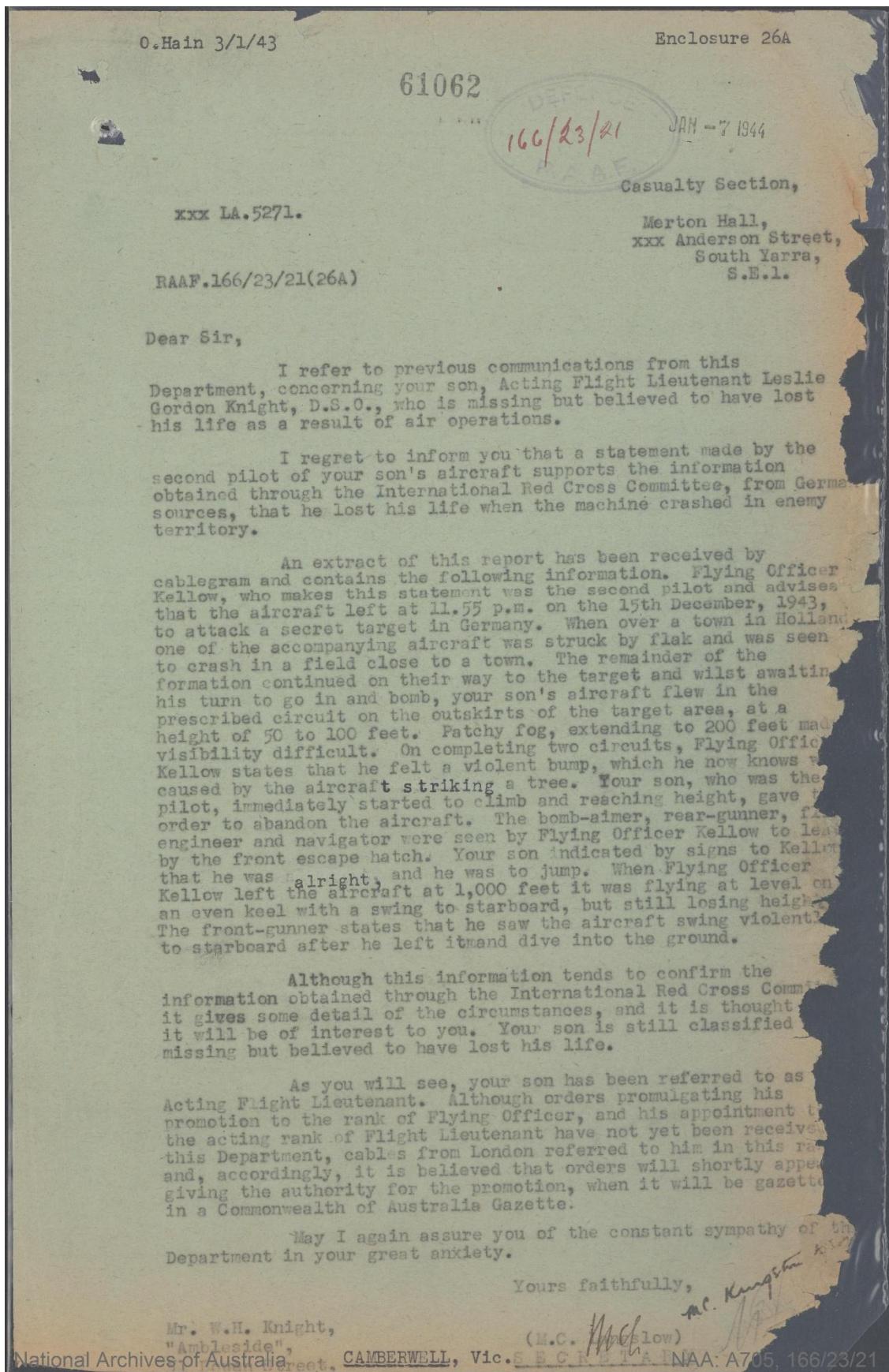


Figure 8: Les Knight's death notification to family, Page 60 from [1]

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

The German command provided notice⁵ that he died on September 16 1943. The original can be found in [\[1\]](#).

AIR MINISTRY
(Casualty Branch)
73–77, OXFORD STREET, W.1.

1 FEB 1944

Telephone: Gerrard 9234 Extn.

Any communications on the subject of this letter should be addressed to: **THE SECRETARY** and the following number quoted: **P.408748/43/D.8.**

Your Ref: —

Sir,

**AUS/401449 Flying Officer L.G. Knight D.S.O.
Reported missing on 15th September, 1943.**

In confirmation of the cable of even date, I am directed to inform you that the German Totenliste No. 179 confirms that the above-named officer was killed on the 16th September, 1943, and states that he was buried in the Municipal Cemetery, Den-Ham (11 miles N.W. Almelo) Holland, Grave No. 1, Row 23, on 16th September, 1943.

Action has accordingly been taken to presume, for official purposes, that he lost his life on the 16th September, 1943.

The next of kin has not been informed by this Department. Mrs. Newton has been informed by this Department.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,
D. Bent
for Director of Personal Services.

The Secretary,
Department of Air,
Victoria Barracks,
Melbourne,
Australia.

⁵ I was never aware that the opposing side communicated this during the conflict

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

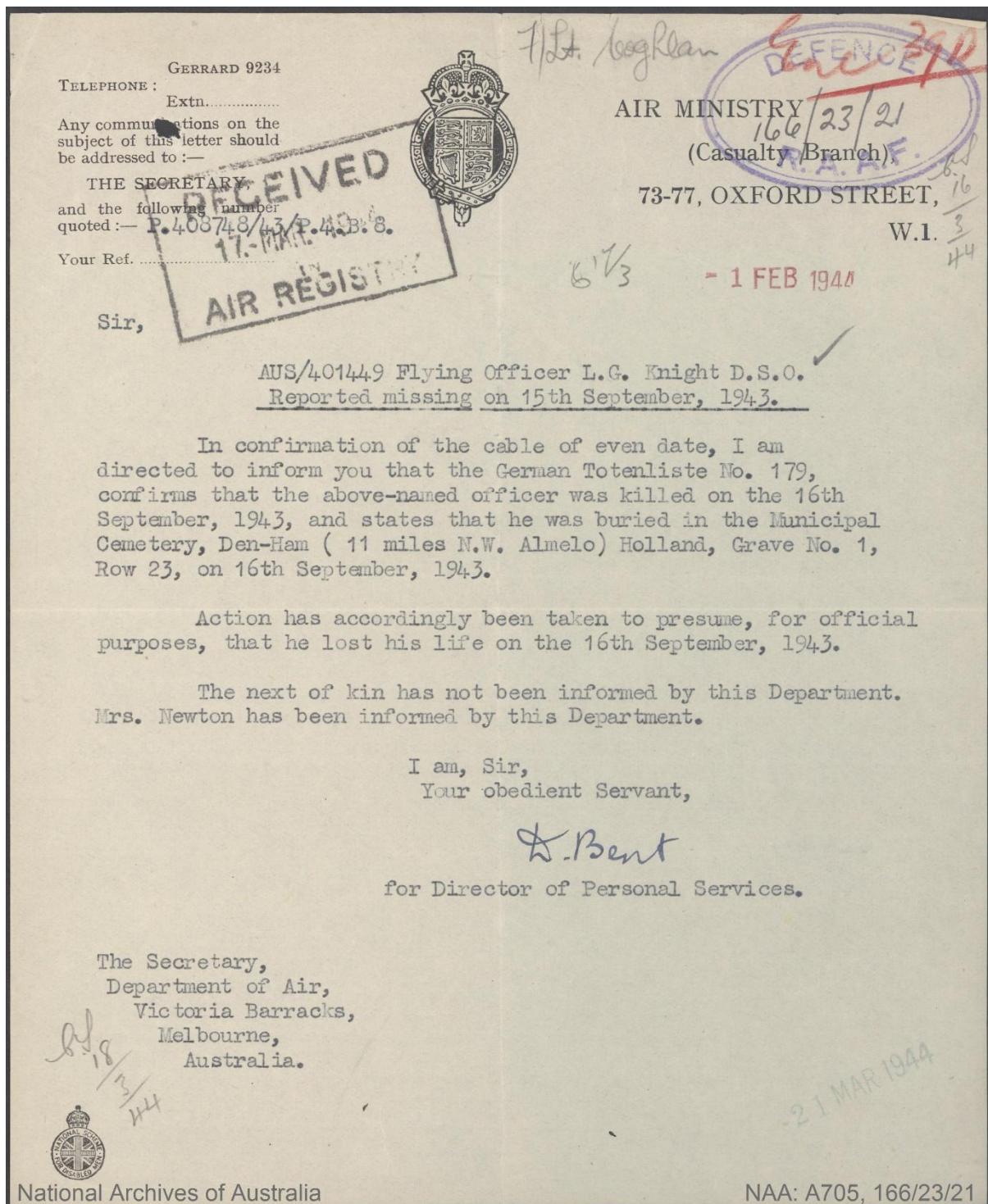


Figure 9: Les Knight's death notification, Page 40 from [1]

The dates on notifications do not align. In the 'definitive' letter to the parent, the date is just a stamp that may indicate the date of reception. The second statement, dated 1 February, would have to be the final statement.

The communication of Les Knight's death was somewhat confusing, as you might expect with the war raging and the Allies preparing for D-Day.

28 Eyewitness Accounts from 1943

There are eyewitness accounts during World War 2. These are statements by:

Pilot Officer Grayston

The following eyewitness accounts from Les Knight's bomber crew members are transcribed from [1].

28.1 Statement by P/O R.E.Grayston, 155194

Further to this Headquarters signal AL.883 Cas 927 of the December 27, 1943, the following statement has now been received from P/O R.E.Grayston, 155194, a prisoner of war at Camp Stalag Luft III, and who was a member of the same crew as Flight Lieutenant Knight:-

In the early hours of the September 16, 1943, owing to various circumstances, my aircraft was flying low and flew through the top of some trees which resulted in damage to the engines and to the aircraft itself. The Captain F/Lt.L.Knight, however, managed to climb up to about 1,200 feet and made for base.

The aircraft flew thus for some time but eventually owing to the condition of the remaining engines becoming worse. F/Lt. Knight decided to abandon the aircraft which was still flying at a very low altitude. F/Lt.Knight although he was still having difficulty in holding the aircraft in the air, gave orders to bale out to each of his crew individually. I was the fourth to leave.

F/Lt.Knight had told me over the intercom that our altitude was only 800 feet and to get out as quickly as possible as we were losing height. After I left I saw the aircraft doing a left hand turn which I presumed was the result of the Rear Gunner baling out, as when the aircraft was hit and his turret unserviceable, the Rear Gunner had come forward to assist the Captain and had helped him by bearing on the rudder controls, thus keeping the aircraft on a straight course, the Captain finding it impossible to do this by himself owing to the damaged state of the aircraft.

I was only in the air a very short time and after I had collected myself from my parachute landing, I saw a column of smoke and flames rising over the trees about five miles away which must have been my aircraft hitting the ground.

Later I was informed that the Captain had endeavoured to crash land the aircraft but it hit a hill and burst into flames. His body was found later in his seat at his controls. I have seen the Rear Gunner, F/Sgt. H.E.O'Brien but I do not know the fate of the remainder of the crew.

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

I would be grateful if you could bring to the notice of my Squadron Commander the gallantry of F/Lt. Knight because he knew, when giving us the order to abandon the aircraft, he would not be able to take his parachute as the aircraft would have gone out of control immediately. He therefore remained at the controls to allow us all to escape although he must have known he had very little chance of pulling off a successful crash landing.

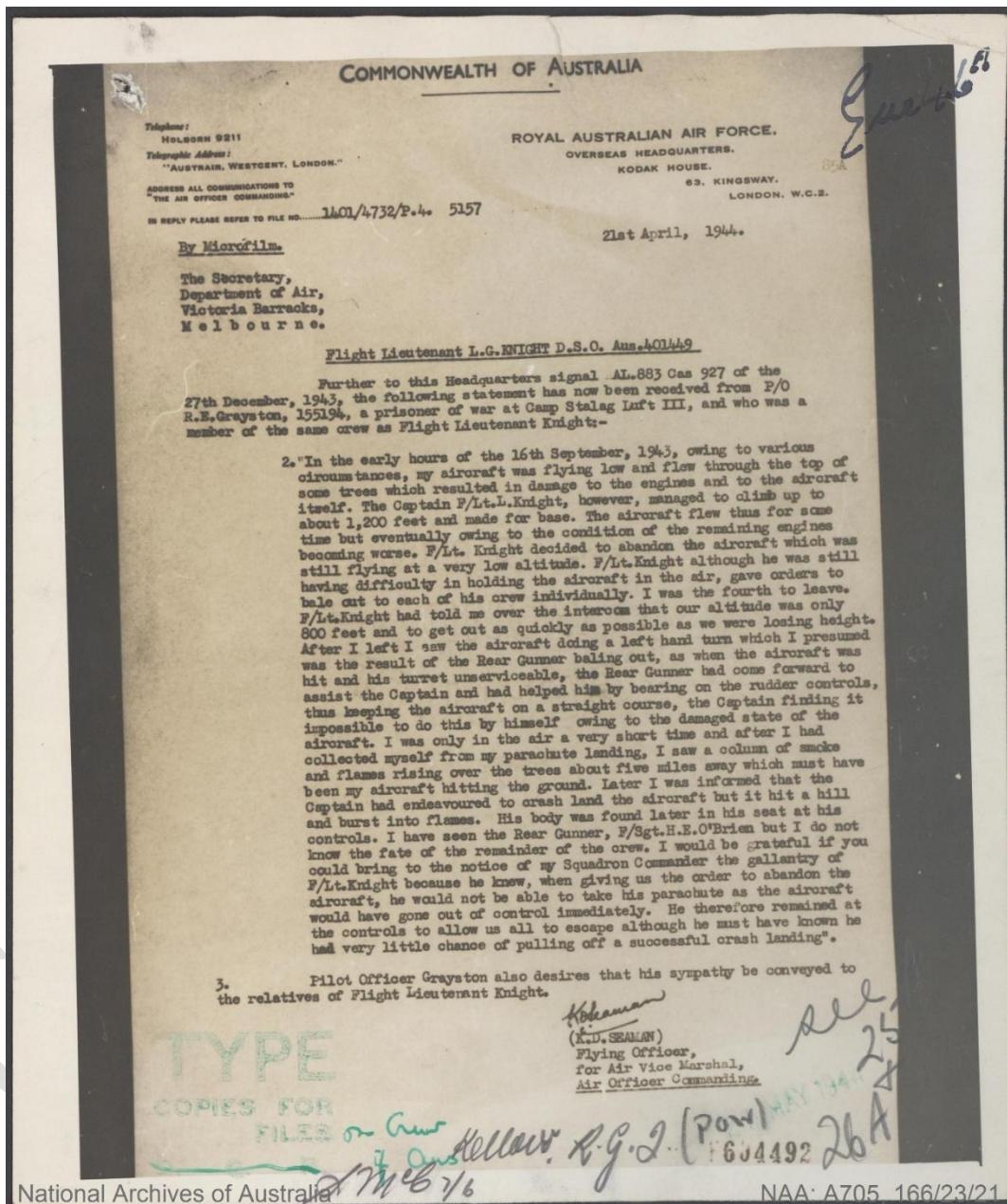


Figure 10: Grayson Statement Page 33 from [1]

Grayston's statement was made while a POW. He had, however, met O'Brien, and the latter may have informed him as to the finer details of Knight's final minutes, as O'Brien was with him trying to control the aircraft.

28.2 Statement by Flying Officer R.G.T. KELLOW 411453

A covering statement precedes the statement by Flying Officer Kellow. The date on the cover is January 7 1944. It's unclear when the original statement was made, but it may have been December 1943. In later remarks, Kellow indicated he did not find out Knight's fate until well after the events, as he noted in his book (Section 29.1)

28.2.1 Covering Page

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE
OVERSEAS HEADQUARTERS,
KODAK HOUSE,
63, KINGSWAY,
LONDON, W.C.2.**

Telephone: Holborn 9211

Telegraphic Address: "AUSARTAIR, WESTCENT, LONDON."

Address all communications to "THE AIR OFFICER COMMANDING."

In reply please refer to file No. **77/01/4732/p.4.(56A) 158**

7th January, 1944.

IMMEDIATE

The Secretary,
Department of Air,
Victoria Barracks,
MELBOURNE

**Acting Flight Lieutenant L.G. KNIGHT, D.S.O. Aus/401449 Missing, Believed Killed
Flying Officer P.M. SPAFFORD, D.F.M. Aus/407380 Missing**

1. With reference to this Headquarters' signal AL.883 Cas. 927 of the 27th December, 1943, forwarded herewith is copy of a statement taken from Flying Officer R.G.C. KELLOW, D.F.M. Aus/411153.
2. A copy of this statement has been submitted to Air Ministry in regard to the possible reclassification of Flying Officer SPAFFORD from "Missing" to "Missing, Believed Killed".

(Signed)

**W. M. MELVILLE,
Squadron Leader,
for Air Vice Marshal,
Air Officer Commanding**

28.2.2 Kellow Statement (December 1943?)

The following is a statement by Flying Officer R.G.T. KELLOW, D.F.M., Aus/411453 of 617 SQUADRON.

I was the Wireless Operator Air Gunner of a crew of a Lancaster JB. 144 detailed to attack a secret target on September 15, 1943. We took off at approximately 23.55 hours on September 15, and when we went over Holland Lancaster EE.144 piloted by Squadron Leader HOLDEN with Flying Officer F.M. SPAFFORD Aus/407380 as Bomb Aimer, was struck by flak. Squadron Leader HOLDEN's aircraft was, at the time, the leading aircraft in the formation and was flying at approximately 200 feet.

At the time when his aircraft was hit we were flying over a town of which I am unable to recall the name. At that time, the visibility was clear.

I personally saw Squadron Leader HOIDEN's aircraft on fire after it was hit, the aircraft swerving violently to port and then coming down in a 35° angle to crash, apparently in a field close to the town. The aircraft was clearly to be seen burning on the ground and lit up the houses of the town. I did not see any parachutes open from the 'plane and SO far as I am aware no other member of my crew saw any parachutes open.

Another aircraft then took the lead and we proceeded on for a further half hour before reaching our target. We were number six in the order to bomb the target and whilst waiting our turn were flying on the outskirts of the target at a height of 50 to 100 feet. We had completed two circuits when I felt a violent bump, which appeared to me to come from almost underneath the aircraft. The Pilot started at once to climb and when he reached a height of about 500 feet he sought permission from the leader of the formation to jettison his bombs.

Our aircraft for this operation was fitted with R/T for inter communication purposes. The leader of the formation gave permission to Flight Lieutenant KNIGHT to jettison, which he did immediately. Flight Lieutenant KNIGHT then stated over the R/T that he had jettisoned his bombs and would endeavour to make Base. The Pilot continued to climb, but as the two port engines showed signs of catching fire they were feathered.

After reaching a height of approximately 1,500 feet the starboard inner engine showed signs of catching fire and was also feathered. The starboard rudder also appeared to be damaged. The aircraft then started to lose height gradually and at about 1,200 feet the captain gave the order to "abandon aircraft."

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

Before I left the aircraft the Bomb Aimer and Rear Gunner left by the front escape hatch and were followed by the Flight Engineer and the Navigator. I signalled to the Pilot to ask him if he was alright and he gave me a sign indicating that he was alright. At the time when I left the aircraft, although it was losing height it was flying level, but with a swing to starboard, the height was then about 1,000 feet.

When I reached the ground I could see wreckage of an aircraft burning about six miles away. I have later been informed by Sergeant Sutherland F.E., the Front Gunner, that he was the aircraft after he had left it swing violently to starboard and dive into the ground.

Before leaving the aircraft I did hear messages received from two of the aircraft on the R/T wishing us good luck, that was immediately after Flight Lieutenant KNIGHT stated he was going to endeavour to return to Base. For the purpose of the operation R/T was used by the leader of the formation to call in the aircraft in their order to bomb.

Whilst we were waiting for our turn to bomb the target we were flying through patchy fog. The weather up to within twenty minutes flying from the target was clear with bright moonlight, but ground fog developed within the vicinity of the target. The fog did not appear to extend to above 200 feet.

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28.2.3 Covering Page

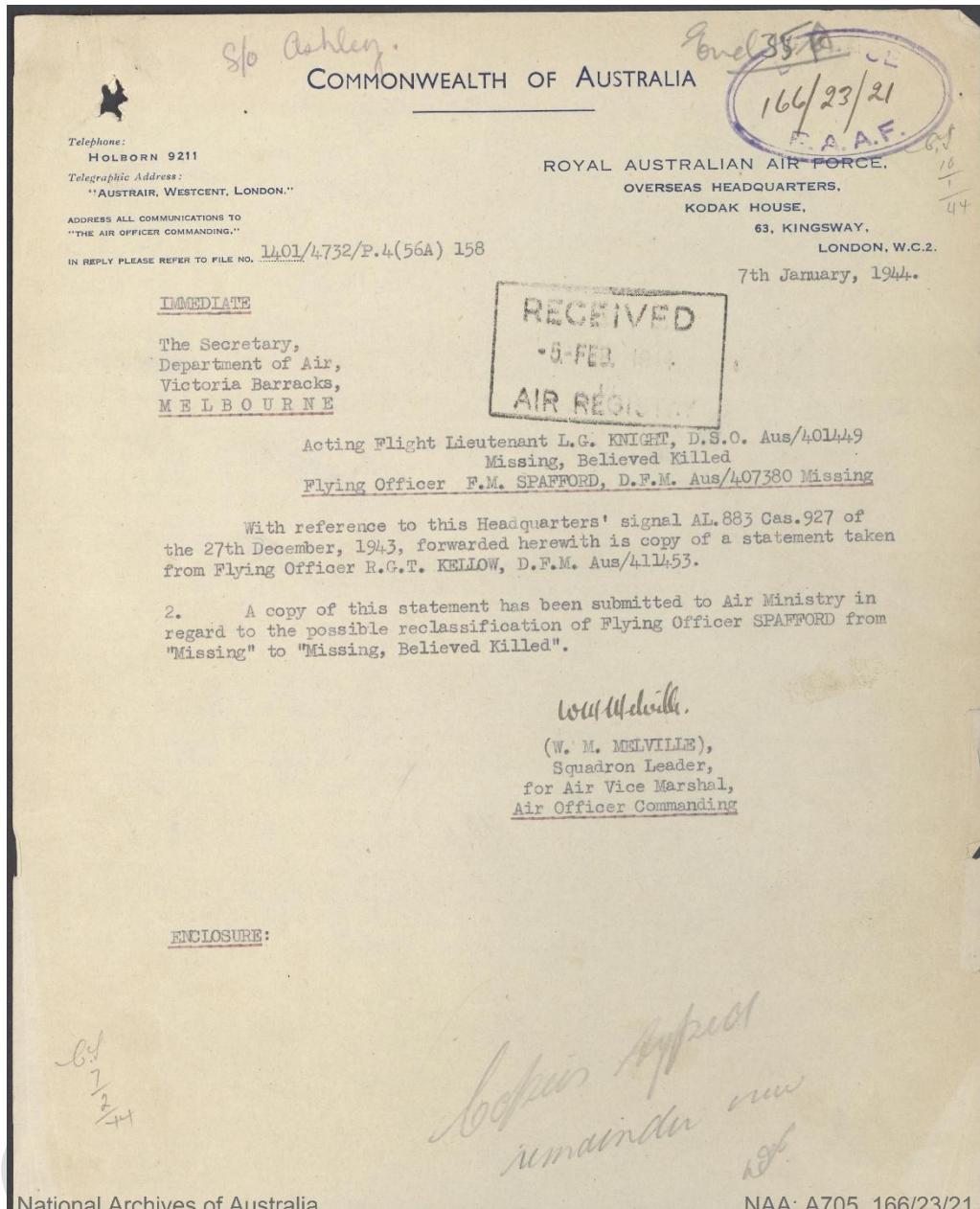


Figure 11: Kellow Cover Statement Page 47 from [1]

28.2.4 Kellow's Statement from 1943

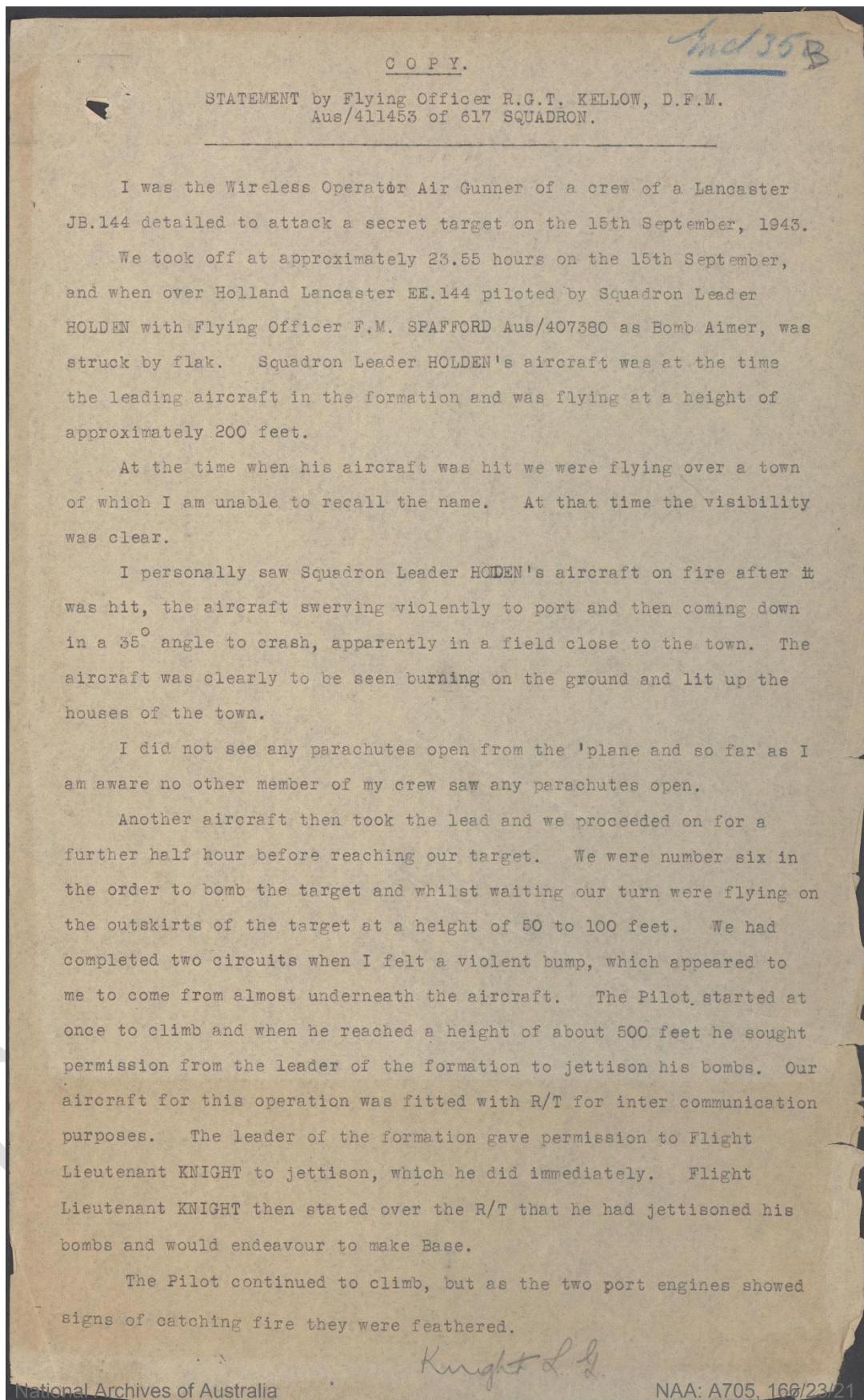


Figure 12: Kellow Statement Page 48 from [1]

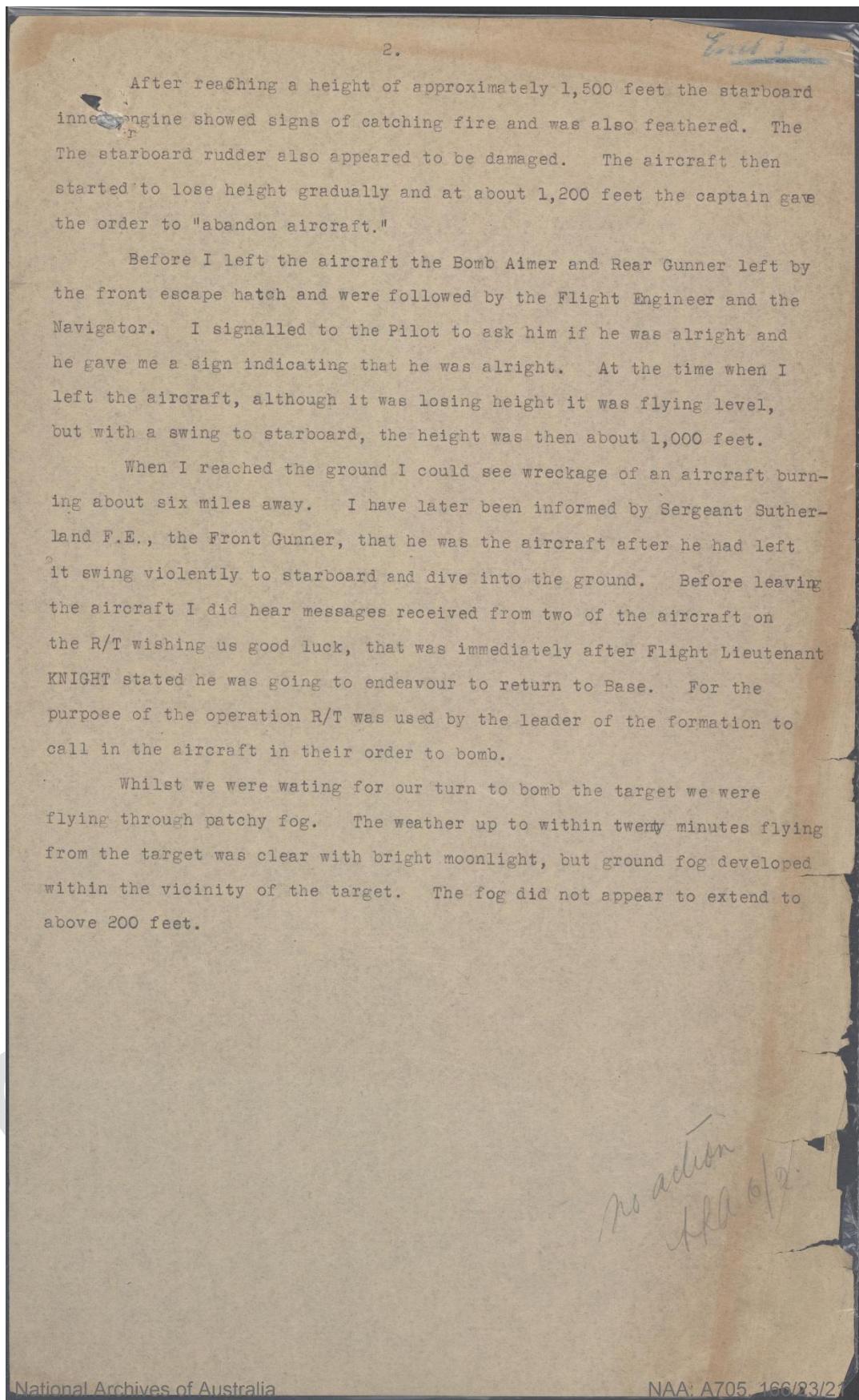


Figure 13 : Kellow Statement Page 49 from [1]

29 Post-War Testimonies

29.1 Extract from Bob Kellow's Book pp 21-23 (1970's-80's?)

Les Knight, our pilot, was calm as a cucumber.

"We've hit something. Anyone see it?" he asked.

"Yes, I think we hit some trees, skipper." answered 'Doc' Sutherland, our mid-upper gunner. Sutherland's turret, protruding above the rest of the plane, had an uninterrupted view in all directions and he had seen the dark mass of trees through the swirling fog, but when he'd tried to warn the pilot his intercom plug had become disconnected.

"Everything OK with the motors?" our pilot queried.

"No, skipper. Oil temperatures are going up on the two port engines," flight engineer Ray Grayson shot back.

"OK, keep an eye on them. Is everyone else alright?" We all told Les we were fine, but a moment later came more trouble.

"There's smoke coming from both port engines, skipper," said I. After a quick check Les ordered both port engines stopped. He also ordered our bomb aimer to prepare to drop the 12,000 pounder. He was still calm, still flying on as well as he could. When the bomb was ready, Les radioed plane number two, requesting permission to drop the bomb. He had assumed number two was now the leader, but in fact this role had switched to the pilot of plane three, Squadron Leader Martin, because plane two had already crashed.

"Go ahead and jettison and the best of luck to you," came back the voice of Squadron Leader Martin, another Australian.

"Bomb ready, skipper," said Johnnie Johnson.

"Hold it a bit longer Johnnie while I try to gain a bit more height," replied Les. He pushed the throttles on the two starboard motors a little further forward. The noisy vibrations increased and 'Nan' began to climb slowly.

"We're at 1,200 feet now Johnnie, so you can let her go and we'll hope she doesn't go off right away," said Les. We all waited.

"OK. She's going going gone," said Johnnie. 'Nan' lifted noticeably as the plane lightened and our bomb sped down. We all hoped the delayed action fuse would work because we'd be blown to bits if the bomb went off before we'd had time to escape.

"We're reasonably safe now, skipper," said Johnnie. "It's definitely hit the ground."

"The starboard inner engine's temperature is rising, skipper," said flight engineer Grayson. "It's getting pretty high." Our pilot said nothing. He adjusted the trim and gently pulled back on the steering column.

"OK, throw out all your ammunition and any other excess weight, gunners," he said finally. "Keep an eye on those engine temperatures, Ray." By now we had crossed the Dutch/German border and were about halfway to the Dutch coast. We all knew that at this height and with only one motor working properly, our chances of getting back to England were slim. Les had asked our rear gunner, 'Obie' O'Brien, to go to the front gun turret, and he threw me a questioning glance as he passed me. 'Obie' was well built and reminded me of a huge, lumbering bear, dressed as he was in his bulky flying suit and huge boots - both needed to fight the cold in that lonely gun turret.

"OK I'm in the turret, Les. What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Good, now reach along below my feet 'Obie' and see if you can find a loose, broken cable," said Les. "It belongs to the starboard rudder. When you find it, pull on it for all you're worth." In a few moments 'Obie' announced he'd found the cable and was pulling it. The plane began to slowly swing to the right. It was only then that I realized we'd been steadily swinging to the left for the past few minutes. With two engines on the left side of the plane out of use and the two on the right straining above their normal operating limits, they and the useless starboard rudder had been constantly pushing the plane to the left.

"I'll have to stop the starboard inner, Les," said Ray, our flight engineer.

"Try to hold it a bit longer, Ray," Les replied. 'Obie', meanwhile, warned that his arm was breaking from pulling on the cable and he'd need a break.

"OK 'Obie', but pull on it again as soon as you can," said Les. It was clear Les was putting out a superhuman effort to keep our crippled plane on some sort of course, but I knew we couldn't go on much longer. The plane was now down to 1,000 feet, and the glide angle was steadily increasing.

"Send out that we're bailing out, Bob," Les said to me. I unhooked my Morse key and began tapping out the message.

"The escape hatch is open, Les," shouted Johnnie.

"Good, then let's get going and good luck to you all," said Les.

I had a lump in my throat, realising this would probably be the last trip we would do together as a crew. We had fun when we were flying, and we had lots of fun when we were on the ground, but when would we all be together again? One of us hooked Les' parachute onto him as he flew on.

"Bomb aimer going - cheers, Les," said Johnnie.

"Cheers and good luck Johnnie," he said calmly.

"Rear gunner going now. Goodbye Les," said 'Obie'. In a moment he too was gone.

"Mid-upper gunner going out the back door, Les," said 'Doc' Sutherland.

"OK 'Doc'. Goodbye and good luck," said our pilot in his unflappable way. Front gunner Woppard was the next to bail out. There was no rush and no panic. It seemed to me as if each man was about to go on leave, and Les would calmly take the aircraft home when they'd gone, but of course, there was no way that plane would ever get home. As each man took his farewell, the navigator and I collected our escape aids - maps, money and survival kits - and destroyed anything we didn't want to fall into enemy hands. Hobby Hobday, our navigator, was now in the nose of the plane, ready to go through the escape hatch. I had disconnected my intercom plug and couldn't hear his farewell to Les. I moved towards Les and stood by him as he firmly held the wheel and tried to keep 'Nan' on a steady course, making it easier for each man to jump out. Like a sea captain, he wanted to be sure everyone was safely off before he abandoned ship. His parachute was clipped onto his harness, and he looked searchingly at me, probably wondering why I hadn't jumped already. Using signs, I asked if he was OK. He nodded his answer, and a wry smile puckered his mouth. With a last smile, I gave him the thumbs-up sign, checked my parachute and took my position at the edge of the escape hatch. Then I bent forward with my head down and tumbled out into the dark Dutch night. As I plummeted to earth I could just hear the mournful hum of 'Nan's' one

good engine as she disappeared into the distance. It was the last time I ever saw Les Knight alive.

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I learned much later that Les had stayed with the plane till the end and had even tried to land her, but had hit a hard bank of earth by a big ditch. At least he hadn't suffered. His neck was broken, and he likely died instantly. He was only 22 and had been so dedicated and full of love and concern for others. We all owed our lives to his courage. Now, at last on the ground in Holland, I had to think fast and move quickly to avoid detection.

29.2 Extract from Bob Kellow's Book p 180

Why had our crew been one of the ninety-four selected for the daylight low-level raid on Le Creusot? Why was it that when a new type of bombing technique was to be tried, we were always included? And why was it that when crews were selected to join the by now famous "dam busters' squadron" we were picked? There was only one answer: Les Knight was our pilot. I knew now that I wanted to return to Australia. No other pilot could ever take the place of Les.

Thinking back sadly, I remembered the vow Les and I had made when we started our first operational trip together. We had promised each other that if anything happened to either of us, the other would go and see his parents. I never at that time thought I'd have to fulfill my promise. I had hoped we'd go home together. We were so alike in many ways, and I'd pictured us doing things in the future once the war was over.

As the days passed, I learned that Hobby and 'Doc' arrived back two days after me and that Johnnie Johnston returned a week later. Woollie, the extra member of our crew that fateful night, got back to England a month later. We had all travelled different and interesting paths and we all had fascinating stories to tell. We were also all very indebted to so many brave people in those occupied countries. Many had risked their lives to help us on our way back to freedom. My adventure is long since over, but it remains a very vivid memory. After the war I managed to visit some of those who'd helped me, but others I couldn't locate. I thank them anyway. On Monday February 21, 1944 I boarded the Queen Mary and sailed from England, heading back to Australia by way of the United States and Canada. I was to start the second phase of my airforce life in Transport Command in Australia. I was a free man and had found my own path to freedom.

An important point to note is that Kellow did not know of Knight's death until well after he made the statement in 1943. In that testimony, he did not refer to an act of self-sacrifice, as he may have thought Les Knight was still alive.

29.3 Extract from O'Brien's letter from 1978

The original of this letter is held by the O'Brien family. This extract appears in Melvin Chambers' private publication [3].

Our run into the target was over this light and on a certain heading. The squadron aircraft were to attack one by one. My recollection of the events that followed are these: We were flying low in ground fog but with some visibility. I spotted the flashing ground light from my rear turret at seven or eight o'clock ground and advised Les. Within seconds of this information to Les, there was a shattering, breaking sound throughout the aircraft, but the aircraft flew on and up.

Johnson then advised, or perhaps it was Les, that we had flown through the top of a collection of trees. Les pulled up to 1,000 feet and told us that the aircraft was in bad shape power-wise. Les then radioed our leader Martin, who had taken over from Holden, advising him very briefly of our problem, and then asked for permission to drop our bomb immediately in an unfused condition. Martin gave this permission and wished us "good luck". We headed for home.

It was now obvious to those up front that the cowlings under the engine air-scoops were bent upwards, cutting down the air flow into the engines. A little later, it was easily seen that the propeller ends were bent backwards. I presume this accounted for our loss of power. Shortly after heading for home, we were down to 800 feet, and at about the same time Les asked Ray Grayston to feather the port outer as this engine temperature had climbed well into the danger area. A while later, the port inner engine's temperature was well into the danger area also – Grayston feathered this one.

With both port engines gone, out went our hydraulic systems. Shortly after losing both port engines, Les asked me to leave my rear turret, as it was now unserviceable, and help him with the holding of the rudder pedals. Les informed me that the great pressure required on the rudder pedals to hold the aircraft on the desired heading, because of all the power being on the starboard side coupled with the control damage, was too much for his leg on a continuous basis.

I made my way from the rear turret to Les' side, picking up my parachute from its receptacle, and plugged into the intercom system. Les went over the problem again and then asked me to try and hold the rudder pedals in the position they were now in. I noticed Les' right foot on the right pedal was extended as far as he could reach. Les was short in stature, consequently short in the leg. If I could accomplish this in some way, Les could rest his leg from time to time.

I went into the bomb aimer's compartment and stood facing the rudder pedals. I gripped the right rudder pedal by Les' foot and exerted all my strength. Les gradually released his foot pressure on the pedal. It was realized immediately that I could not hold the pedal in the forward position for any length of time using only the strength in my arms. It was also apparent that the pedal must be braced in a fixed position with a metal bar or some other object if Les was to get the leg rest he desperately needed.

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There was no such object available, and even if there was, how to fix it into the correct position? The adrenaline was, by this time, working overtime; perhaps this helped in determining the final solution. I used my forearm as the fixed rod we were looking for, and it worked perfectly. I positioned my right forearm behind the arm of the right rudder pedal and positioned my right wrist against and in front of the vertical airframe spar which was beside the rudder pedals. Fortunately, the desired position of the rudder pedals and the position of the spar were just about in line.

By using my forearm in this manner, I was able to hold the rudder pedals and Les was able to release his foot from the pedal and rest his leg. When Les had rested his leg for a few minutes he would take over on the pedal and I would release my arm. We alternated this routine until Les told us to abandon the aircraft.

During my ordeal with the rudder pedals, other deteriorating things were taking place. We were gradually losing height and the starboard engines were heating up. I do not recall whether or not we were experiencing ground fire, and frankly I wasn't interested at the time.

A few miles east of the Zuider Zee and water (it was only later that I learned of this exact position, but I did know we were over Holland) the starboard inner engine temperature had reached well into the danger area. Les told us to bail out before he feathered the starboard inner. We were now down to about 600 feet.

I put on my parachute, sat on the opened bomb aimer's escape hatch and rolled out headfirst. I do not recall who of the crew went ahead of me. Immediately on leaving the aircraft I pulled my ripcord, and at the same time a mistaken thought entered my head — that the parachute would catch on the aircraft as it billowed. With this thought, I clamped my hand over the small pilot chute before it had time to escape its packing. I only guessed at the seconds of delay and then released my hand from the pilot chute.

The pilot chute rapidly pulled from its casing; the main chute came out and billowed fully just before I hit a ploughed, furrowed field of soft soil. I hit the ground with considerable force. I picked myself up, not conscious of any injury, and looked around. The first thing on my mind was our aircraft and Les.

I saw our aircraft banking slowly to the left and low to the ground. I followed it with my eyes. In my mind the aircraft turned 180 degrees before crashing and exploding. I can still see the fiery explosion; it was some distance away. I do not know if we could have made it to the Zuider Zee and water, effecting a crash landing on water, thus the possibility of saving Les's life. I do know that Les had no intention of gambling with even one of our lives to save his own.

After watching the glow from our crashed aircraft for some minutes, I made my way to a group of bushes and buried my parachute in a depression next to these bushes.

O'Brien worked the closest with Knight, trying to control the aircraft. More likely than not, they were discussing the possibilities. He had a unique insight into the pilot's thinking.

29.4 Eyewitness Account from Mrs Bertha Bakker 2018

Mrs Bertha Bakker was thirteen at the time of the incident. She witnessed it with her father. This interview was conducted by Melvin Chambers in 2018 when Mrs Bakker was in her 80s. The interview is in Dutch and was translated and transcribed using artificial intelligence tools. Mr Chambers then carried out a proofread and adjusted some of the interpretations.

Video	Transcript
Mrs Bakker Interview	Mrs Bakker Transcript

- This additional act of conscious self-sacrifice was **not available to the authorities in 1943–44**, and therefore could not have been taken into account in the MiD recommendation.
- These testimonies, supported by Dutch memorials and local commemorations, constitute new, credible evidence of conspicuous gallantry.

29.4.1 Summary of Mrs Bakker's Interview

The Night of the Crash

Berta recalls that in the middle of the night, her mother woke her father, who immediately took the family—Berta, her two sisters, baby brother, grandmother, and mother—outside their home at Ommerweg 69. They saw a plane flying very low, its engines making a strange, struggling noise. At first, it wasn't on fire. Her father remarked that "the village was spared" as it passed overhead and flew away toward Den Ham. Moments later, the aircraft returned, this time with smoke and flames trailing from the tail. The pilot turned the plane to the left—apparently to avoid the village or possibly Den Ham—and crashed moments later, within what she described as "a count of twenty."

What the Family Saw

They watched from the front of their house; the plane flew extremely low, almost level with the treetops. After the impact, her father ran toward the crash site while Berta and her sister followed until he sent them back home for safety. Her father reached the burning wreckage, one of the first locals on the scene, along with neighbours Rosman (known later as "Grandpa Rosman") and Wetering. The heat was intense, and flames engulfed the area. Her father later told her that he had seen the pilot's body still in the cockpit, leaning forward, apparently having tried to release his seatbelt ("as if he had scissors in his right hand"). The sight deeply moved him and spoke of it only rarely, but with emotion whenever he did.

Her Father's View of Les Knight

Berta's father believed the pilot had deliberately turned the aircraft away from the village to prevent further casualties or damage. He often said, "He saved us. He saved everything." The family and residents regarded the event as an act of bravery and sacrifice.

The residents of Den Ham, both in 1943 and today, believe that Les Knight saved them from destruction.

30 Community Remembrance

There are multiple occasions when the people of Den Ham remember Les Knight. For example, a service was recorded on **16 September 2018 with 600 in attendance**. Speeches and an act of commemoration are linked in the Table below. There are three principal speakers:

- Marcel van Dijk Master of Ceremonies
- Mrs Annelies van der Kolk, Mayor of the municipality of Twenterand
- Mr Andries Heidema, the Dutch King's Persona, representative for the province of Overijssel

The text was extracted from the videos using Xilisoft [\[11\]](#), then automatically transcribed by TranscribIO [\[12\]](#), and finally proofread and corrected by **Melvin Chambers**. Much of the material has been translated from the original Dutch.

Video	Transcript
Marcel van Dijk Speech	Marcel van Dijk Transcript
Annelies van der Kolk Speech	Annelies van der Kolk Transcript
Memorial Service at Den Ham	No transcript

Table 4 : Den Ham Commemoration

30.1 Support in Australia

Andrew Wilkie, the member for Clark, delivered a speech describing Les Knight's heroism on 29/05/2018 [\[26\]](#). A relevant paragraph is recorded here:

“Since Les's story was brought to my attention, it has been remarkable to see the impression he has left behind both in Australia and in the Netherlands. Why, just this month, there was a ceremony in Den Ham to raise the new flag, and I'm told that six members of the Knight family attended, as well as three children of Sergeant Les Woppard, one of Les's crew. Moreover, three generations of the Knight family will visit the Netherlands in September for a three-day event. The Australian flag flies at the monument to Les, which was erected in 2002, and it is well looked after by 85-year-old Lucas Kamphuis. Lucas heard Les's plane fly overhead in 1943 when he was just a boy and saw the wreckage of Les's plane on that fateful day. Lucas still walks to the monument every day to make sure it's in good condition.”

The people of Den Ham have celebrated the life of Les Knight for 80 years. They remember his birthday, the day of the action over Den Ham, AZNAC day and other important dates. He is the only Australian veteran commemorated for an individual act of courage in a foreign land by the people of that land.

31 When Did the Diversion over Den Ham Become Public Knowledge?

In 2012, the brother of Les Knight made an application to the Minister for Defence for consideration of an award. This effort was based on information he had received from the Netherlands. In communication (email) with his daughter Loretta (dated 04/12/2025), we can see that the general knowledge of what happened above Den Ham was not made public for decades:

“ Thanks, Stan.

“ In truth, it was not until Piet Meijer contacted my father in the 1990s that we were even aware of Les’s actions to spare the village, nor of the honour the villagers paid him.

It was on that information that my father applied.

“ Loretta”

We contend that if the family of Les Knight did not know about the aircraft's diversion over Den Ham until the 1990's, the Air Ministry could not possibly have been aware of it in 1944.

32 The Award of the MiD

Flight Lieutenant Knight was awarded a Mentioned in Dispatches award on 01/01/1945. A search of the archives in Kew, London, found no other material related to this, and any available documentation indicates that there is no detailed citation. On 01/01/1945, his name was included among thousands of others, with no associated description.

There are three possibilities.

- Knight was awarded the MiD for the action over Den Ham.
- Knight was awarded the MiD for his services in 50 Squadron – before joining the ‘Dam Busters.’
- Or both

There are two documents related to his MiD. The card at the Australian War Memorial [17] and a statement found in the archives [16], Page 12.

NAME	KNIGHT, Leslie Gordon											
Award	M.I.D.	Reg. No.	401449	Rank	F/LT.	Service						
Recommended by Governor-General on				O-R								
Promulgated in <i>London Gazette</i> on				1/1/45.		G. H. File R.A.A.F. 8.						
Promulgated in <i>Commonwealth of Australia Gazette</i> on				4/1/45.								
Citation (G. H. File	RAAF 15 D)			NCA								
Insignia received from London					G. H. File							
Insignia presented by												
At			On		G. H. File							
Address of recipient on presentation date												
Remarks	See <u>D.S.O.</u> , card.											
Other Awards												
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL												
2276. RCDIG1068960												

Figure 14: MiD card [17]

We can compare this with his DSO card [18]. The purpose of the award is clear. This award was for the Dambuster Raid.

A single page in archives ([16]), shown below in [Figure 16](#), specifies that the MiD is for ‘distinguished service.’ This recognition would be consistent with his service in 50 Squadron, possibly combined with the recommendation of Grayston (Section 28.1)

Leslie Gordon Knight - For Valour

NAME	KNIGHT, Leslie Gordon						
Award	D. S. O.	Reg. No.	401449	Rank	P/O.	Service	R. A. A. F.
Recommended by Governor-General on						0 - R	G. H. File R. A. A. F. 1A.
Promulgated in <i>London Gazette</i> on	28/5/43.						
Promulgated in <i>Commonwealth of Australia Gazette</i> on	3/6/43.						
Citation (G. H. File RAAF 137 A) Bombing attacks on MOEHNE, EDER & SORPE dams GERMANY							
Insignia received from London	N/A	PN LONDON.	N/A	G. H. File	-		
Insignia presented by	His Majesty, The King,						
At	BUCKINGHAM Palace, London, On			22/6/43.	G. H. File	ENGLAND/31.	
Address of recipient on presentation date	A/N/A						

Remarks

Other Awards **M. I. D.**

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

2876.

RCDIG1068960

Figure 15: DSO Card [18]

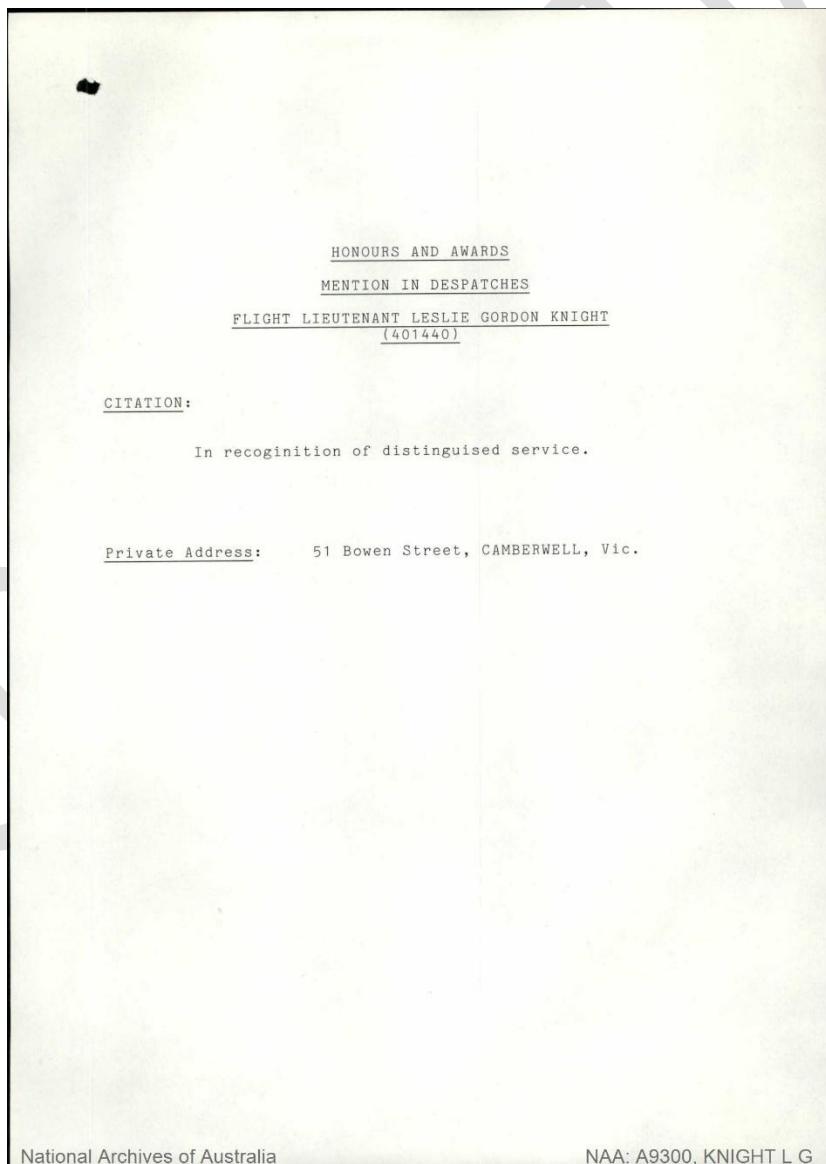


Figure 16: MiD 'Citation' Page 12 in [16]

It is the contention here that the MiD was granted for general excellence, possibly including the action over Den Ham, but not for any specific act of valour.

1. The action over Den Ham was one of high gallantry. Not mentioning this in a formal statement would be an oversight⁶. The Air Ministry did not have the entire story at the time the MiD was issued; it had only a single line of recommendation for Grayston, his crewman.
2. With regards to 50 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Knight demonstrated best-in-class flying skills. Knight and his crew were selected from 50 Squadron and posted to 617 Squadron in March 1943 as part of 5 Group's call for hand-picked crews. With most of the same crew on the Dambuster raid, he had flown 25 successful missions in 50 Squadron. A typical tour with Bomber Command during this period consisted of 30 missions, with a survival rate of 15-20%. The fact that he brought so many attacks successfully is a testament to his skill. It would seem unusual that this collective service at such a high level would have gone unacknowledged.

The claim cannot be proven one way or the other. Here is the basis of the conjecture.

The timeline leading to the death of Les Knight and the subsequent reporting is as follows:

Date	Activity
18/09/1942	Joined 50 Squadron. 25 successful missions
25/03/1943	Joined 617 Squadron
16/05/1943	Dam Buster Raid (Operation Chastise)
28/05/1943	Awarded DSO
15/09/1943	Operation Garlic and final mission
16/09/1943	Fatal crash near Den Ham, Holland
23/11/1943	Bob Kellow arrives in Grbralter and makes a verbal statement(?)
25/11/1943	First communication to Les Knight's parents
15/12/1943	Bob Kellow (radio op) returns to England and makes a written statement (approx)
07/01/1944	Letter to parents stating the loss of Knight.
21/4/1944	Statement from Grayston as a POW in Germany attesting to the gallantry of Les Knight.
01/01/1945	Award of Mention in Dispatches with thousands of others.

Table 5 : Les Knight Timeline

Bob Kellow's statement did not mention the sacrifice by Knight. He may not have been aware of the full details at the time, or, more likely, he was unaware of Knight's death.

The only input the Air Ministry would have had in the lead-up to the MiD was Grayston's statement. :

"I would be grateful if you could bring to the notice of my Squadron Commander the gallantry of F/Lt.Knight, because he knew, when giving us the order to abandon the aircraft, he would not be able to take his parachute, as the aircraft would have gone out of control immediately. He therefore remained at the controls to allow us all to escape, although he must have known he had very little chance of pulling off a successful crash landing"

It would not have been possible to review this with Grayston, as he remained in captivity until 1945. If this is the entire input to the decision-making process, it is easy to see how any award may have been overlooked. In the case of Middleton (Section 16), five of his crew members were present after the event and would have strongly advocated for recognition. There were five who could speak out. Les Knight never had such a chorus to speak on his behalf, at least not in 1944.

So, why was Kellow less specific than Grayston? In Grayston's statement, he indicated that he had met O'Brien during his imprisonment. O'Brien was the crew member who was with Knight, attempting to assist with steering the aircraft. He was asked to help because he was physically powerful, and Knight needed strong muscles to push the pedals below the console. He was closest to understanding the nature of Les Knight's final action and may have been conversing about their prospects and alternatives.

We have no contemporaneous statement from O'Brien, as he was in captivity until 1945. Unlike Grayston, he may not have been permitted to make a report, even if the Air Ministry had made the request. Perhaps the commandant at his camp was not so sympathetic to the request. We do not know. Whatever the case, his later statement, in the form of a letter to the Dambusters Association, is unambiguous. (Section 29.3). We do not know the exact sequence of events, but it would be reasonable to assume that O'Brien discussed this with Kellow at some point after the war, leading to Kellow's assertions in his book (Section 29.1). In Grayston's 1944 statement from captivity, he indicated that he had met O'Brien, and perhaps they compared notes.

32.1 Edward "Teddy" Sheehan MiD

It was common for MiD awards to have limited information. However, this was not always the case, as in the award to Edward Sheehan [\[7\]](#). This MiD is quite explicit and mentions his action on the Armidale. The MiD was eventually upgraded to a Victoria Cross. The relevant card can be found at [\[19\]](#), and is reproduced here:

NAME	SHEEAN, Edward		
Award M. I. D. (P)	Reg. No.	Rank	ORDINARY SEAMAN
		Service	
		R. A. N. R. (S).	
Recommended by Governor-General on			
Promulgated in <i>London Gazette</i> on			
Promulgated in <i>Commonwealth of Australia Gazette</i> on			
Citation (G. H. File RAN N/101) Bravery & devotion when HMAS "ARMDALE" was lost. RAN N/53.			
Insignia received from London			
Insignia presented by			
At	On	G. H. File	
Address of recipient on presentation date			
Remarks			
Other Awards			
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL			2976, RCDIG1068967

Figure 17: Teddy Sheehan MiD [19]

32.2 Archive Search

In October 2025, Daniel Love searched the Air Ministry archive held at Kew, London. The following archives were examined.

- AIR 2/9015 – Non-immediate awards: Bomber Command, recommendations (1944)
- AIR 2/9024 – Non-immediate awards: Bomber Command, recommendations (1944–45)
- AIR 2/9038 – Non-immediate awards: Bomber Command, recommendations (1945)

There was no finding of additional material related to Les Knight.

We contend that the MiD award was either not fully informed about the final action or was purely based on Flight Lieutenant Knight's overall performance.

33 Action Flight Path

33.1 Summary

This section clarifies the evacuation sequence of the crew of Lancaster JB144. It presents a technically and aerodynamically coherent interpretation of the aircraft's flight path during the final minutes of the mission of 15/16 September 1943, consistent with witness accounts, known aircraft damage, and performance characteristics of the Avro Lancaster. The estimated flight path and bailout sequence are depicted in [Figure 18](#).



Figure 18: Estimated Flight Path

33.2 The Crew from Operation Garlic

The Table below lists the crew on this flight and their estimated bailout order, based on a combination of Kellow's statements from 1943 (Section 28.2) and in his book (Section 29.1). There is a slight inconsistency in the position of Grayston.

KIA	Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight (RAAF) – pilot — KIA at the crash site outside Den Ham.
5	Sgt Raymond Ernest Grayston – flight engineer — captured (POW) ; later at Stalag Luft III.
6	F/O Harold Sydney ("Sydney") Hobday – navigator — evaded via Dutch resistance.
1	F/O Edward Cuthbert ("Johnnie") Johnson DFC – bomb aimer — evaded (returned to UK Nov 1943).
7	F/Sgt Robert George Thomas ("Bob") Kellow DFM – wireless op — evaded .
3	Sgt Frederick E. ("Fred") Sutherland (RCAF) – upper gunner — evaded (linked up with Hobday).
2	Sgt Harry E. O'Brien (RCAF) – rear gunner — captured (POW, Stalag 357) .
4	Sgt Les Woolland – added as extra (front) gunner specifically for this mission — evaded .

Table 6 : Operation Garlic Crew

33.3 What we know for sure about the damage and natural tendency

The best summary from contemporary research says that after hitting the trees:

- **Both port engines and the tail were damaged.**
- The aircraft could only reach about 1,400 ft.
- Because of the damage, it “continued to turn to port” (i.e. natural left-turning tendency).

So, if Les did nothing with the controls, JB144 would want to:

- yaw and roll **left** (towards the dead/damaged engines),
- and possibly start into a gentle left spiral.

To keep it more or less straight, he'd have to hold **significant right rudder and some right bank**.

That's the fundamental physics backdrop.

33.4 Positions of Crew Bail-Outs and Their Interpretation

The approximate landing sites of the seven surviving crew, as mapped through post-war interviews, local investigations, and Dutch resistance records, show that:

- All crew exited the aircraft **during a sustained right-hand turn away from Den Ham**, not during any leftward segment.
- The sequence of departures, from earliest to latest, is:
Woollard → Sutherland → Johnson → O'Brien → Grayston → Hobday → Kellow
- Notably, both **Hobday and Kellow** exited near the apex — the top of the right-hand arc — indicating:
 - The aircraft was still being deliberately banked to the right,
 - The pilot was still maintaining active control,
 - and the plane was held clear of Den Ham for the crew's evacuation.

33.5 Aircraft Damage and Control Principles

Post-damage behavioural expectations:

- The Lancaster had suffered damage to the **port (left-side) engines** and to the **tail assembly** during the initial tree strike.
- This damage produces a **natural aerodynamic tendency to yaw and roll left**, particularly at low airspeeds.

Therefore:

- Any right-turning behaviour of the aircraft was the result of **active pilot correction**, not passive physics.

Thus, the long rightward arc was **intentional**, commanded by Flt Lt Les Knight.

33.6 Phasing of the Final Flight Path (Authoritative Sequence)

33.6.1 Phase 1 — Approach from the East (pre-bail-out)

- Aircraft damaged but stable; heading westward.
- Pilot counters left-pull with right rudder to keep the aircraft tracking straight.

33.6.2 Phase 2 — Initiation of the right-hand turn (first three crew exit)

- Knight banks the aircraft to the right to move it over open farmland.
- The first three: Woppard, Sutherland, and Johnson exit during this phase.

33.6.3 Phase 3 — Main rightward arc (remaining crew exit, including Kellow)

- The aircraft performs a $\sim 180^\circ$ right turn.
- O'Brien, Grayston, and Hobday depart during this arc.
- **Kellow exits near the apex of the curve**, not later during a leftward track.
- After Kellow's exit, Knight is alone, still in a right-bank attitude.

33.6.4 Phase 4 — Transition to leftward drift (Knight alone)

- Only after Kellow has left does the aircraft's natural **left-yaw tendency** begin to dominate.
- Airspeed and control authority decrease.
- The aircraft swings left back toward Den Ham.

33.6.5 Phase 5 — Final rightward control input immediately before impact

- A short rightward correction appears in the ground track seconds before impact.
- This path is most consistent with:
 - a final deliberate attempt by Knight to avoid houses and civilian casualties, and
 - potentially the very last moment of control authority.

33.7 Conclusions Supported by the Data

- **All bail-outs occurred during a deliberate right-hand turn**, commanded by Knight.
- **Kellow was not last during a leftward track back toward the town**, but exited during the culmination of the rightward manoeuvre.
- The subsequent leftward motion occurred **only after Knight was alone**.
- The final rightward control deflection immediately before ground impact reflects a **last conscious act of piloting** to divert the aircraft away from Den Ham.

33.8 Implications for Knight's Conduct

This reconstructed flight path demonstrates:

- Prolonged control of a damaged bomber,
- Maintenance of a deliberate evasion path to allow every crew member to escape,
- Sacrificial action consistent with honourable conduct and gallantry,
- Final intentional manoeuvring to protect civilians on the ground.

Knight did not merely “fail to escape”; he continued piloting alone for the safety of both:

- his crew, and
- the population of Den Ham.

34 Could Flt Lt L.G. Knight Have Escaped via Cockpit Hatch?

34.1 Relevant Aircraft Architecture: Crew Escape Routes

For clarity of reference, the Avro Lancaster possessed several fundamentally different escape routes:

34.2 A. Forward Nose Floor Hatch

This exit is the standard bailout route for crew members



Figure 19: Forward Parachute Escape

This hatch was expressly designated in manuals and training as the **primary parachute exit** for crew members. This hatch was below the pilot.

There was another hatch behind and above the pilot, but, as shown in the following diagram.

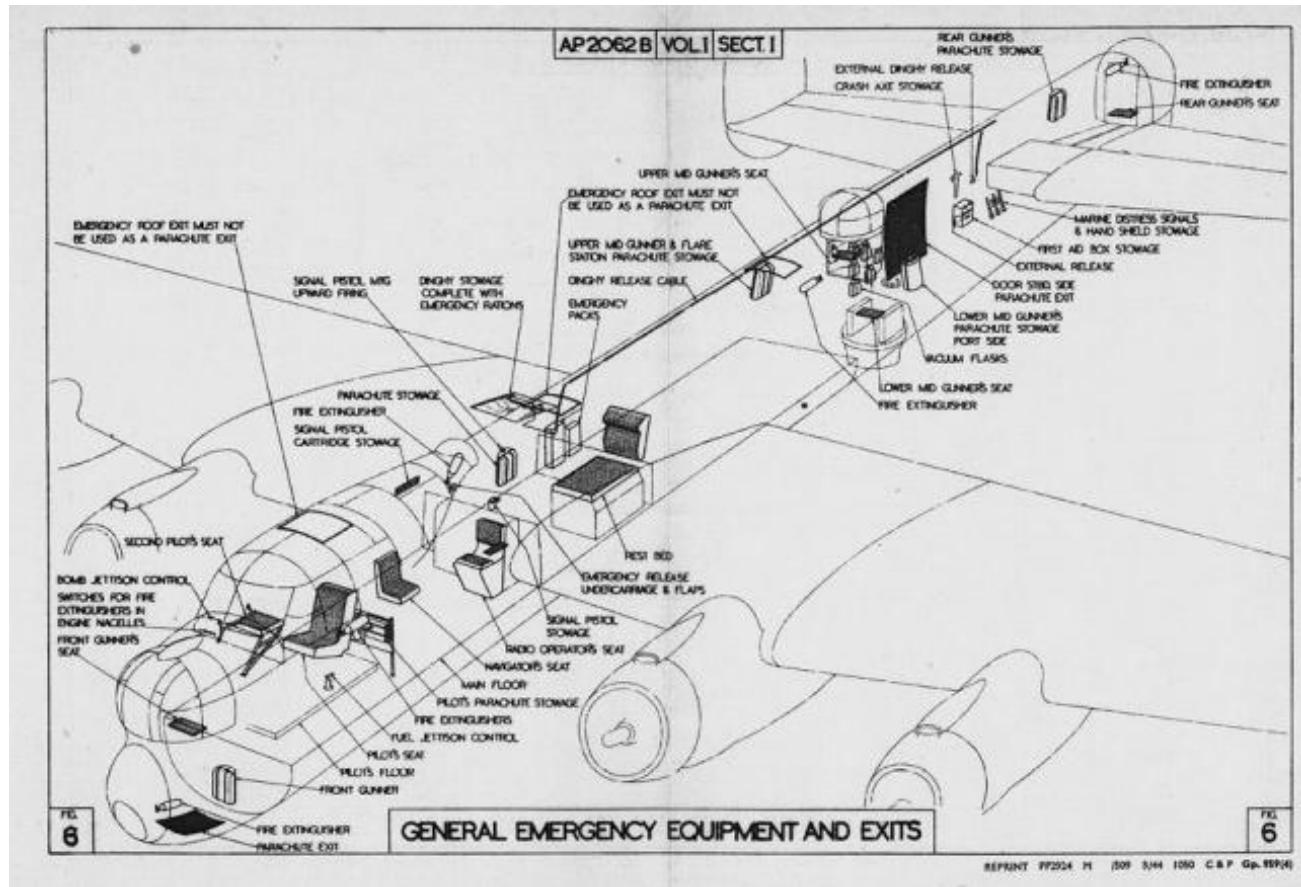


Figure 20: Avro Lancaster Overall Configuration

This hatch was **not** a parachute exit. It was doctrinally restricted to use **after landing**, when the floor exit was blocked — a proper *crash egress*, not a bail-out route.

34.3 Physical Capacity of Flt Lt Knight to Use Roof Hatch

The cockpit hatch measured approximately:

- 66 cm x 51–55 cm

Flt Lt Knight's physique:

- 170 cm tall
- 66 kg
- narrow-framed

Thus, **Knight was physically capable of fitting through the hatch with parachute gear attached.**

However:

- physical capability ≠ operational feasibility
- physical capability ≠ doctrinal permission

34.4 Flight Path and Evacuation Sequence Analysis

Based on landing-site maps and survivor accounts, the crew bailed out during a deliberate right-hand turn away from Den Ham.

The bail-out order was:

Woppard → Sutherland → Johnson → O'Brien → Grayston → Hobday → Kellow

Critically:

- **Kellow departed near the apex of the right-hand turn**, not during any leftward drift.
- After Kellow's exit, Knight was alone at the controls.
- The aircraft continued its right-turning arc briefly (consistent with ongoing corrective inputs),
- Only **then** did it begin to yaw left due to loss of counter-rudder authority.

Finally, immediately before impact, the flight track shows a sharp rightward corrective turn, consistent with a last attempt to avoid buildings.

This analysis demonstrates that Knight retained aircraft control **until the last seconds**.

34.5 Operational Constraints Preventing Knight's Escape

Once the final crew member had departed, the following conditions applied:

34.5.1 1. Aircraft stability:

- Asymmetric thrust from damaged port engines
- Compromised tailplane
- Loss of rudder effectiveness

34.5.2 2. Altitude:

- Descent below minimum safe parachute deployment height (~600–800 ft recommended; ~500 ft minimum)

34.5.3 3. Control necessity:

- If Knight removed his hands/feet from controls to reach the hatch, the aircraft would have immediately lost directional integrity
- Resulting in an uncontrolled descent onto civilian areas

Therefore, **escape was no longer viable** by the time he could attempt it.

34.6 Doctrinal Constraints: “NOT FOR PARACHUTE EXIT”

The hatch directly above Knight bore an explicit instruction marking, to the effect of:

“NOT FOR PARACHUTE EXIT.”

This notice was not a casual note but a safety regulation.

Flt Lt Knight, as a professional RAAF captain, would have:

- adhered to written procedural prohibitions
- recognised the hatch as a non-option
- rejected any attempt to use it under combat conditions

Thus, his decision was not merely physical or situational — it was **doctrinal and moral**.

34.7 Intent, Duty, and Sacrifice

It is clear that Knight’s priority was:

1. to maintain stable flight while each crew member exited,
2. to keep the aircraft clear of Den Ham’s residential core,
3. to provide every possible chance of survival to others,
4. to minimise the risk to civilians on the ground.

He did not remain because:

- He was trapped
- He was incapable
- He attempted and failed

Knight did not attempt escape because:

- He refused to abandon command
- He declined to release the controls
- He voluntarily continued flying a dying aircraft to protect others

The evidence supports the conclusion that his death was the result of:

Conscious, deliberate, self-sacrificial endurance of command responsibility.

35 Last Entry

This is the last page of Les Knight's logbook, signed off by Squadron Leader Martin.

YEAR 1943	AIRCRAFT		Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	DUTY (Including Results and Remarks)										
	Month	Date	Type	No.											
SEPT.	15/6	LANCASTER	J8 H+4	SELF	Totals Brought Forward										
					P/O GRAYSTON F/E F/O HODDIE NAV P/O KELLOW W/H F/Sgt O'BRIEN R/T Sgt. WOOLLARD M/H F/O JOHNSON P/B Sgt SUTHERLAND P/G OPERATIONS, ; RECALLED.										
	16/11	---	B.144 X	---	OPERATIONS DORTMUND E.M.S (ANAL) REPORTED MISSING										
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Summary</td> <td>SEPT. 43</td> </tr> <tr> <td>UNIT</td> <td>617 SQUADRON</td> </tr> <tr> <td>DATE</td> <td>20 SEPT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SIGNATURE</td> <td>—</td> </tr> </table>		Summary	SEPT. 43	UNIT	617 SQUADRON	DATE	20 SEPT	SIGNATURE	—	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>1. LANCASTER</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4.</td> </tr> </table>	1. LANCASTER	2.	3.	4.	
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UNIT	617 SQUADRON														
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1. LANCASTER															
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4.															
<p><i>JL Murray</i></p> <p><i>OC Bkt</i></p> <p><i>3/2 Martin</i></p> <p><i>Spdr. OC 617 Sqn</i></p>															
<p>GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (10)]</p>															
<p>D 2200/7.37.—C.4947.</p>															

Figure 21: Last Log Entry

36 In Summary

Flight Lieutenant Leslie Gordon Knight was a humble and intelligent man, devoted to his comrades. In a final selfless act, he ensured they would be safe, and that people on the ground – whom he did not know and would never know - would be safe. His action conforms to the criteria of the Victoria Cross. Reiterating those criteria, the Cross is awarded for:

- a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or
- display extreme devotion to duty, undertaken **in the presence of the enemy.**

The flight was over enemy-occupied land, and some of his crew were taken captive, but others made it out with the help of the underground. They all made it home – all but Les Knight.

It is vital for this young man's courage to be acknowledged, for Australia, for the community, for his family, for Les Knight, for Valour.