

Flight Lieutenant Leslie Knight, DSO

On Sunday morning 14 September 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, 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 present at the service in full regalia and the District Superintendent unveiled the plaque.

This gallant young airman, of 22 years of age, was decorated with the D.S.O. for bursting the Eder Dam in the Ruhr, one of the three great dams on which depended Germany's huge 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 great 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 to his personal integrity.

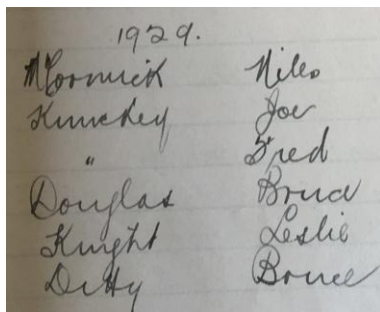
A special Order of Service, a four page folder, prepared by the minister of the church, the Rev. Harold Chambers, was used. This had a photo of the plaque on the front page and on the inner pages, the service and a number of appropriate quotations from the available records of this gallant young airman's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

I have a copy of the Order of Service should anyone wish to read it.

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.

Early Life:

Les Knight was born on 7 March 1921 and lived in Bowen Street Camberwell.



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



Les at 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 and no mechanical skill.

After training as a pilot, he was soon sent to embattled England. There he formed a full crew who went on to fly 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 took a joint decision to transfer together.

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 take part in celebrations when medals were handed out.

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 against German dams during the Second World War.

The squadron was formed under great secrecy on 21 March 1943. It included Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force and Royal New Zealand Air Force personnel, and was formed for the specific task of attacking 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 VI, depicts the bursting of a dam in commemoration of *Chastise*." (Wikipedia).

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. His 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.

Film:

In 1955, the British made a film simply 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 Mohne, 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 in the process of delivering it.

The film was widely admired and became the most popular motion picture at British cinemas 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.

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. Code-named “Garlic”, their mission was 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 carried against the Eder Dam.

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, out of the murk, a tall clump of trees appeared. 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 he 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 that might 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 later recalled the struggle to keep the Lancaster in the air. *“We had crossed the Dutch/German border and were about half way 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 veering to port and he could not fly her home. To get so far had been a superhuman effort.

Last Roll of the Dice:

Journalist Jamie Seidel, who wrote an article on the last flight in the Herald-Sun in 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, as he firmly held the wheel keeping the aircraft 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.”* 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 that 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. He was buried by the grateful villagers 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.

The Aftermath:

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 which initially marked his plot.



Les Knight's wartime grave, initially marked by a wooden cross.



Knight's current Official headstone

Les' crew survived. Two were quickly taken prisoner by German Forces. The remaining five were found by villagers. 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 eventually safely made it back to England. Their gratitude knew no bounds.



A memorial stone stands where Les Knight's plane crashed.

The village of Den Ham also never forgot the courage of Knight's final act, as you will read below. His (relocated and permanent) gravesite is always well maintained.

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 them died. On the ground, about 1,300 were killed by the bombs and floods.



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

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 will be family members of the local underground resistance movement which helped several of the 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 often visited, flowers laid, his headstone cleaned, respects and thanks paid. Les Knight has never been forgotten by Den Ham."

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



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.

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

As mentioned earlier, a special Order of Service was prepared for the unveiling of the plaque. Sadly the copy I have does not reproduce very 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---

"Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

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 a number of 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, D.S.O., R.A.A.F.

Killed in Action, Sept. 16th, 1943.

LET US BE WORTHY."

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.

In 2018, he set up a blog as a service to anyone who would like to find out 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 first 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 gave me various articles over time on Les Knight his bravery and ultimate sacrifice, as we acknowledged the contributions made by former members of our congregation to making a better life for us all.

*

*

*



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”



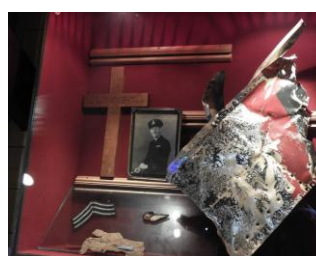
A note attached to a wreath from a crew members family which reads, in part, “It hurts so badly when I think what you have done. I want to leave you behind but I can’t.....”



Village children paying their respects



Wreath laying by the village's leaders



Honouring Les' sacrifice