

## LES MUNRO STATEMENT

It was a travesty that it took some 67 years before the loss of 55,573 lives in Bomber Command during World War Two was finally recognised by the unveiling of an appropriate memorial at Green Park, London.

I served with many of those named thereon, a Roll of Honour that includes the 1,679 New Zealanders who travelled 12,000 miles to serve in Bomber Command in support of the struggle for freedom and democracy. During his visit to the U.K. in 2013, Prime Minister John Key visited the Memorial to lay a wreath in their memory.

Today, the Memorial is under the guardianship of The Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, a leading welfare charity that continues to assist New Zealanders who served in the R.N.Z.A.F. and R.A.F. - since 2011 the charity had spent nearly £60,000 on 32 cases in New Zealand.

The Memorial is a magnificent tribute to Bomber Command's fallen and is a real credit to Robin Gibb - who kick-started the fund raising appeal - and to the architect Liam O'Connor and the sculptor Philip Jackson.

My reasons for donating my medals and my flying log books to the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund and, more particularly, the Bomber Command Memorial, were prompted by my visit to the Memorial in May 2013 - I could not help but think of the cost of its ongoing maintenance and with the feelings of the descendants of those 55573 in mind believe that every effort be made to maintain the Memorial in the best possible condition..

Before the war, I had only a casual interest in aircraft. I used to look at commercial planes flying past my farm on which I worked on their scheduled routes. Following the outbreak of war I gave thought to the options available and decided that my preference was to be a pilot - to be in control of my own destiny.

Thus ensued my operational career in 97 Squadron and, of course, in 617 Squadron, initially under Guy Gibson but afterwards Leonard Cheshire. I had a great personal regard for Cheshire, an outstanding human being blessed with a droll sense of humour. He flew with me on D-Day during "Operation Taxable".

I have often been asked how I felt when a crew did not return from an operation, with some questions directed specifically to the losses of the Dams Raid. In respect of the latter I would make the point that we were only together for a matter of six weeks. We were extremely busy training for the raid and the circumstances were not really conducive to the development of close friendships. The situation changed somewhat

after the Dams Raid as quite a number of originals continued to survive successive operations and I became quite friendly with several of these. One of these was Micky Martin, for whom I was privileged to be Best Man at his wedding many months later.

When fellow officers that I knew relatively well were lost on operations, I would feel a brief period of sadness but that had to be quickly relegated to the background of my thoughts. There was a job to do and the loss of a colleague could not be allowed to influence how I carried out that job. My duty as the Captain of Aircraft was to carry out the next operation without emotional distraction and to ensure that I did so to the best of my ability with the safety of my crew paramount. Grief could not be allowed to distract from duty.

For my own part, I consider myself a fortunate survivor, 'Lady Luck' having sat on my shoulder on several occasions. Yet I think that I left New Zealand on the basic premise that if I was going to cop it, so be it. I am first and foremost a fatalist - what will be, will be.

I have never regretted my service in the war. It may have supplanted a period in my life when I normally would have been formulating and fashioning my future career, but on the other hand my war service moulded me as a man: it gave me the confidence in my own ability and, very importantly, it taught me to get on with my fellow men and to value comradeship.

It is because of that sense of comradeship - and the equal importance of the act of remembrance - that I now part company with my medals and flying log books for the benefit of the Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park, London.

Squadron Leader Les Munro, C.N.Z.M., D.S.O., Q.S.O., D.F.C.