

Geoffrey Walter STRONG –born March 20th, 1912 Died June 23rd, 1943

Geoff STRONG was my father's cousin- i.e. Geoff's father Arthur was my grandfather's (Fred) younger brother. His mother was Grace Strong nee Davis.

He was born at Gisborne 20th March 1912 and educated at Christchurch Boys' High School and then a year at Digby's commercial college.

He was working in the spare parts department of the Ford Motor company in Lower Hutt when he applied in March 1939 for a short service commission in the Royal Air Force. His service number was 413905

He enlisted in the Initial Training Wing Levin on 6th July, 1941 and went to No.1 Elementary Flying Training School, Taieri on 16th August, 1941 this was terminated during September and he returned to Levin on 17th December and embarked on 17th December, 1941 for Canada to train under the Empire Training Scheme.

He trained at various places in Manitoba and after several courses graduated as a navigator and promoted to Sergeant and subsequently in England on 1 June 1943 to Flight Sergeant.

Sailed to England from Halifax on 6th September, 1942 arrived Bournemouth on 6th January, 1943 and proceeded to No. 11 Operational Training Unit, Westcott, Buckinghamshire for crewing-up and completion of training on Wellington bombers. Posted 25th March to unit for conversion to Stirling four-engined bombers and posted 5th May to No.75 (New Zealand) Squadron at Newmarket, Suffolk.

From this base he took part in 10 operational flights at targets including Dortmund, Dusseldorf (2), Wuppertal (2), Krefeld and Mulheim in Germany, also sea mining to the Friesian Islands and Bordeaux and Le Creusot in France.

In an operation to attack Wuppertal on the night of June 24/25th, 1943 his aircraft failed to return and all of the crew were classified as missing. The aircraft was either shot down by German night fighters or hit by flak on the way to the target or returning.

Through the Red Cross it was reported that the body of Flight Sergeant Strong was washed up on the shore of the island of Nordbeueland and he was listed as killed in action. He is buried in the Flushing general Cemetery, Holland.

The aircraft was a four engined Stirling III Bomber EH902 (the Stirling's own serial number) AA-K (AA indicates 75 Squadron and K the aircraft's call sign) it took off at 23:27. It had a crew of seven - 3 New Zealanders and 4 from the UK. The captain was Pilot Officer Norman Bradford Bluck RNZAF aged 22 and from Otorohunga The navigator was Flight Sergeant James Brett Cooksley RNZAF aged 23 from Dargaville and the air bomber (bomb aimer) was Flight Sergeant Geoffrey Walter Strong RNZAF aged 31 and from Christchurch.

The remainder of the crew were: Sgt. J.W.Gillard RAF. Flight Engineer. Sgt. M.Kendlan. RAF Wireless Operator. Sgt. D.Armitage RAF. Mid-upper Gunner. Sgt.L.R.Cant RAF. Rear Gunner.

The aircraft had been delivered from the builder The Austin Car Company to 75 Squadron on June 10th, 1943. It seems possible from the dates that the crew may have flown other aircraft before taking delivery of EH902

The Stirling was the first heavy four engined bomber developed for the RAF and was designed by Short Bros. of Belfast (of flying boat fame) and came from an initial specification in early 1936. Several alterations with regard to takeoff run and bomb load and ability to fit into existing hangars resulted in an aircraft with some serious faults. Whilst crew generally liked her as a aircraft-she was roomy and very maneuverable-the Stirling rapidly developed a reputation as an aircraft whose operational ceiling was not high enough. The very upright stance on the ground also resulted in a series of undercarriage problems that persisted throughout her operational life. It is said that when crews of the Avro Lancaster heard that Stirling were to be part of an operation there would be cheer raised as the lower flying Stirlings would be more likely to cop the flax fired at them. The Stirling EH902 was a Mk III as were most operational Stirling aircraft. The Stirling was withdrawn from frontline operations at the end of 1943 and were used at D-Day and in subsequent operations as a glider towing aircraft-with guns removed.

The Stirling EH902 was powered by four 38 litre Bristol Hercules 18 cylinder radial engines. Each engine with two banks of 9 cylinders. Each engine developed about 1600 hp and generally ran on 110 octane fuel stored in wingtanks.

Not one single example of the Stirling bomber exists today.

That night 75 Squadron sent 13 aircraft to Wuppertal 24/25th June, 1943. One aircraft returned early owing to an unserviceable rear turret and one failed to return. The attack was made with incendiary bombs both 30 lb and 4 lb. Flak was heavy over the target and night fighters were also encountered. The attack was considered to be very successful.

By Roger Strong

*In foreign field she lay,
Soggy; shattered where she passed that way,
Mud encrusted, fragmented far-to some a mere unpleasant scar.
A fractured wing, a sorry shoe,
Among the reeds of polder new
With heavy power plants silent now since one night long ago
When fighter foe had closed in fast
To bring the Stirling down at last.
Soaring larks survey that spot
Where October night over Zuyder Zee
Seven Stirling men fell-for you and me.*