

## CLINKARD, DEREK CHARLES GRAY - Died 8<sup>th</sup> March 1940 aged 24

39855 Flying Officer (Pilot) Royal Air force, 61 Squadron



Photograph courtesy of John Williams, nephew of Zillah Marris.

Derek was born on 19th April 1915, the eldest son of Cecil Henry and Margaret Tessier (nee Gray) Clinkard of Wanganui, New Zealand. He had a younger brother named Ian Gray Clinkard and their father, a lawyer, became a Member of Parliament for Rotorua at the 1925 General Election.

In 1921 Derek went to St. John's Hill School in the town. He enrolled at the Wanganui Technical College in 1929 and swam and played rugby and tennis for them.

He moved to Wellington and became a clerical worker for the Shell Oil Company. Derek joined the Waiwhetu Golf Club and also got a private pilots licence. With an 'A' licence and 10 hours flying experience, in April 1936 he applied to join the Royal Air Force under the Dominion Special Service scheme. He was accepted and guaranteed a Short Service Commission when he enlisted in Great Britain.

Derek came to England at his own expense, working in the engine room of a cargo ship, the Port Bowen, to get his passage, arriving in March 1937.

He trained at Brough Civil School, Yorkshire and then at No.7 Flying Training School in Northamptonshire. Of the 40 trainees on his course who passed out and were allocated to various Squadrons, only 10 were left by the end of 1940..

On 19th February 1938, Derek reported to RAF Hemswell, where he joined 61 Squadron, part of 5 Group, Bomber Command, and was nicknamed Clink.

Derek married Zillah Christina Marris at St. Peter's Church on 11th December 1939. Their witnesses were his friend Charles Glover and her father Harry Marris, who ran the butcher's shop on Messingham Road.

The couple set up home at 'Lyndene', Scotter Common and if he was returning from a mission, would fly the plane low over their bungalow to let his wife know he was safe.

Derek took part in the Heligoland and Wilhelmshaven raids, reconnaissance flights over Germany and spent Christmas Day 1939 flying over the North Sea in a snowstorm. He was promoted from Pilot Officer to Flying Officer on 10th January 1940, with 475 flying hours.

At 20:18 p. m. on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1940, Handley Page Hampden Mk1 bomber, serial No L4111, took off for an offensive patrol to attack the Luftwaffe base at Sylt, one of the German Frisian Islands. At some point during the raid the aircraft suffered severe damage and the crew struggled to return home. The aircraft was plotted just off the English coast at 2:00 a. m, but no requests for bearings were made until 3 hours later. They flew up and down the coast, but enemy action and mist over the whole of England stopped them landing. Eventually the crew managed to get as far as R.A.F. Digby, near Lincoln. Instead of using the normal left hand turn to carry out the landing, a right hand turn was attempted, possibly due to rudder problems. With the flarepath not lit, and still in darkness, the plane crashed into a nearby field at 5:30 a. m.

No recommendations were made for posthumous decoration as the difficulty of their situation was not known, however it is probable they had been in contact with the enemy, because LAC Wood's body had sustained gunshot wounds.

They were the first aircrew of 61 Squadron to be lost in the war.

Derek's comrades were:-

- Sergeant Charles Carlile Hobbs 740516 (aged 22), Second Pilot - Haltemprice (Hessle) Cemetery Compartment 59 Plot 3 Grave 4.
- Sergeant Ronald Philips Glasson 580651 (aged 19, Observer/Air Bomber - Vale Road Churchyard Extension Clewer Section B Row B Grave 11.
- Leading Aircraftman Winston Kitchener Wood 550803 (aged 20), Wireless Operator/Air Gunner - Blackpool (Layton) Cemetery Section JJ Grave 97.

The medals Derek received for active service are:-

- 1939-1945 Star
- Air Crew Europe Star
- Defence Medal
- War Medal 1939-1945
- New Zealand War Medal
- New Zealand Memorial Cross

Family and friends were informed the funeral service was to be held on 12th March 1940. Zillah wrote:-

*'Our life together was short and sweet,  
But our love will live forever'*

The service for Flying Officer Derek Clinkard was held at St. Peter's Church and officiated by the Reverend A.R. Johnson, who had performed his wedding service just three months earlier. The coffin was draped with his cap and the Union flag. It was conveyed through the village from the Church to the cemetery and all the houses along the route drew their curtains as a mark of respect.

Derek was accorded full military honours and after a short service the Last Post sounded and a volley was fired over the grave. About 200 of his colleagues filed past to pay their last tribute to a brave comrade. Among the many wreaths and tributes was one from his parents in New Zealand.

The location of F/O Derek Clinkard's grave is PLOT - Sec B. Row D. Grave 38

In June 1954 Derek's mother travelled to see her son's resting place. As well as regularly placing fresh flowers on his grave, she ended each visit by reading a verse from Clifton Chapel, a poem by Sir Henry Newbould, which is inscribed on the gravestone:-

*'To count the light of battle good,  
And dear the land that gave you birth,  
And dearer yet the brotherhood  
That binds the brave of all the Earth'.*

Underneath are the words 'A son of the Southern Seas' (His tombstone shows his age as 25. (Surprisingly, this is almost certainly incorrect.)

F/O Clinkard is also remembered on the Roll of Honour, Wanganui Technical College and at the Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, East Kirkby, near Spilsby.

Two years after returning to New Zealand his mother died in a motor accident.

The best man at the wedding, Charles William Glover, lost his life just 2 months after his friend when Hampden L4119 crashed at Croxton Kerrial, Leicestershire, during the return from a raid over Denmark. (The other three crew members were also killed)

Zillah married Cecil Hague in 1947 and passed away at Scothern, Lincoln in 1992.

