

Sqn Ldr Wilfred Ira Collett 34232 RAF

Wilfred was born on 24 January 1912 in Lower Hutt City, Wellington, New Zealand, the son of Edgar Arnold Collett and Louise Amy Collett nee McMahon. In 1937 he married Doreen Williamson Nicol in New Zealand.

Educated at Gisborne High School and Gisborne Technical College, Wilfred was initially employed by his father in his motor business; however, on qualifying for his civil pilot licence at the Hawkes Bay and East Coast Aero Club, he was employed by Gisborne Air Transport Ltd.

In March 1934 Wilfred applied, and was accepted, for a Short Service Commission in the RAF and embarked for the UK in June. In September 1935 Wilfred was awarded his RAF wings and posted to 14 Sqn, operating in the Middle East. In January 1936 Wilfred was posted to 45 Sqn and further posted in April 1937 to 4 FTS at Abu-Sueir, Egypt, for instructor duties.

In August 1939 Wilfred returned to the UK and joined 38 Sqn at RAF Marham, Norfolk and, after a tour on 149 Sqn, was posted to 75(NZ) Sqn at RAF Feltwell, Norfolk, in May 1940.

On 3/4 August 1940, nine squadron crews were tasked with individual attacks on Horst, NW Hamburg, Germany.

At 21:15 on 3 August Wilfred and his crew departed RAF Feltwell in Wellington 1c R3176 (AA).

Due to heavy ground haze over the target, a number of the aircraft could not locate the main target, but attacks were made on alternatives with good success.

On return from the op, the majority of the crews encountered poor weather and were ordered to divert to other airfields - Wilfred's crew were instructed to divert to RAF Mildenhall. At 04:20, one of the Wellington's engines failed and a wheels up forced landing was attempted.

The aircraft crash landed at Barton Mills, 11 miles SW of Thetford. Landing on uneven terrain, significant structural damage was done to the aircraft, this damage caused a fire to break out which injured three of the crew, including Wilfred, who was so seriously injured that he died later that day.

Wilfred is buried in St Nicholas Churchyard, Feltwell, Norfolk

Wilfred is commemorated on Wall Panel 146

Photo Source: aucklandmuseum.com

