

From Kiwi Farmer to World War Two Bomber Command

Linda Selby, Ken Ryba and Peter Rhebergen

This is the story of how a young New Zealand farmer joined the NZ Air Force, trained in Canada, and served in Bomber Command. It describes his training as a wireless operator, his flying career in Bomber Command, surviving his Stirling Bomber being shot down, and two years spent as a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Poland.

A Call to Action

Keith Neilson lived and farmed in Kohi near Waverley in the Taranaki region. Keith attended school until the end of his third form. Although he was a very capable student, he did not have an opportunity to attend high school as he was required to help support the family. He worked as a farmer, shearer and timber mill worker. Keith was 21 years of age when World War Two broke out. He decided to join the Air Force, however entry requirements included matriculation in mathematics. As he had not gained his matriculation, he studied for these exams by correspondence. Passing the exams with flying colours, he was then accepted into the Royal New Zealand Airforce (RNZAF) and began his training in Levin in preparation for joining the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) in Canada.

On 27 March 1941, he embarked for Canada on the troop ship *Aorangi* via Fiji and Christmas Island. On arrival in Vancouver, Keith and his fellow recruits boarded a Canadian Pacific troop train and travelled through the Canadian Rocky Mountains and across the prairies to their destination in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



LEFT: Keith in London, England. ABOVE: Number 3 Wireless School in Winnipeg Manitoba Canada. PHOTOS/SUPPLIED

Keith Neilson trained as a wireless operator at the Number 3 Wireless School at the School for the Deaf in Winnipeg. The old school building had a high tower which looked out across the plains, making it perfect for wireless operator training. When he had completed his training, he was granted a temporary commission to the rank of pilot officer (on 29 September 1941) and sent to England where he was stationed at RAF Stradishall, Suffolk as a member of 214 Squadron.

British Commonwealth Air Training Plan: Canada

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) was a large-scale multi-national military aircrew training programme created by the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand during World War Two. Keith Neilson, like so many other young men from New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries, completed his initial training under this scheme. Canada had an abundance of training space beyond the range of enemy aircraft, excellent climatic conditions and terrain for flying, as well as proximity to the United Kingdom across the North Atlantic.

The BCATP remains one of the single largest aviation training programmes in history and was responsible for training nearly half the pilots, navigators, bomb aimers, air gunners, wireless operators and flight engineers who served with the Royal Air Force (RAF), Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm (FAA), Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) during the war. Trainees from many other countries also attended schools under the Plan, including Argentina, Belgium, Ceylon, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, Fiji, Free France, Greece, the Netherlands, Newfoundland, Norway, Poland, and the United States. At the peak, 94 schools operated 231 sites across Canada, 10,840 aircraft were involved, and the ground organisation numbered 104,113 men and women. A total of 131,553 aircrew graduated. The construction of training schools was a massive undertaking. Eighty new airfields were built in Canada during 1940-41. On the prairies, farmers' fields were transformed within a few months into operational schools.

Along with learning to fly, specialised training was provided on bombing and gunnery, navigation, and wireless operation.

Keith Neilson's training as a wireless operator involved learning to maintain contact with base stations and other aircraft using morse code while airborne. This required learning how to transmit and receive code through classroom training. Students were tested in an 'aircraft simulator' designed to simulate the restricted working space for wireless operators on an actual aircraft.

Following the 'aircraft simulator' experience, the students completed actual airborne training with wireless equipment. Keith's photos show the types of aircraft used in training including Gypsy Moths, Norsemans, Harvards, Avro Ansons, Cessnas and Fairey Battles. There was a lot to learn but Keith's photos also show that the trainees had some time out for social events – dates, movies, visits to local homes, sightseeing trips etc.

On a visit to Winnipeg in 1993, Keith's daughter Linda arranged to visit the School for the Deaf that served as the Number 3 Wireless Training School that Keith attended. Surprisingly, the tower that served as the 'control tower' was still in place! By climbing up an old, rickety ladder, Linda was able to view the original training room complete with benches and green paint typical of a World War Two colour scheme.

It was wonderful for her to see the actual place where her father completed his wireless training. Linda also had an opportunity to meet with Sybil Shack who, as



ABOVE: Frankie and Keith in London.

LEFT: Keith on ladder showing NZ 'nose art' on a Stirling Bomber.

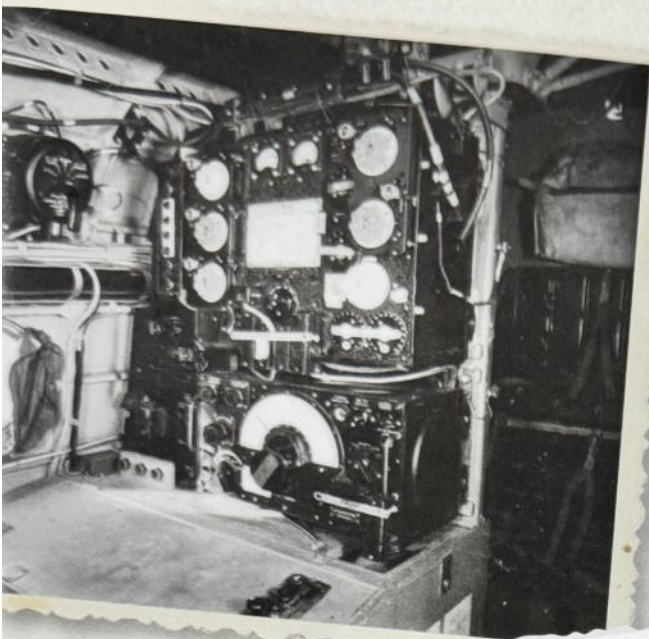
TOP RIGHT: Wireless operator's position in Stirling bomber. PHOTOS/SUPPLIED



a young woman, had met some of the recruits from New Zealand. Sybil described how the 'boys' would escape the school at night by climbing over the fence to meet with her and her girlfriends!

Crossing the Atlantic to Join Bomber Command

Following their training and generally a few weeks of leave, the young airmen would travel by train to Halifax, Nova Scotia on the east coast of Canada. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean in troop ships (usually modified cruise liners) and would most often disembark at Liverpool. The airmen were given an immediate introduction to wartime life in Britain.



ABOVE: Stirling Bomber.
PHOTO/PETER RHEBERGEN

Keith Neilson along with other airmen who were assigned to fly bombers, were posted to an Operational Training Unit (OTU) to learn how to operate the heavy bomber aircraft used within Bomber Command. The flying conditions were more difficult (and dangerous) in the UK compared with the Canadian prairies where farm fields were neatly laid out in squares and a railroad track would lead to grain elevators with the name of the town on it. The UK weather was also more changeable, and the terrain made it necessary to fly by instruments rather than visual flight.

Royal Air Force Chedburgh

Keith Neilson was stationed at RAF Stradishall, Suffolk as a member of 214 Squadron. It was here he met his

future wife Frances (Frankie) Rimensberger in the officers' mess. Frankie, who had worked as an air raid warden during the London Blitz (1940), lost her house and all her belongings in the bombing. Strangely, the only item found from Frankie's house was her yellow knitting, picked up by another warden several blocks away from the house! With no clothes and nowhere to live, Frankie decided a good course of action would be to sign up with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). She was then stationed at RAF Stradishall where she did administrative work achieving the rank of Sergeant. While RAF Stradishall was 214 Squadron's original home, they transferred to the newly built RAF Chedburgh in October 1942. RAF Stradishall was about five miles from RAF Chedburgh.

Frankie and Keith had a whirlwind romance spending all their precious spare time together. Every morning when Keith Neilson was flying 'ops', Frankie and other WAAFs would rush down to check the list of aircraft that had safely returned. One day, returning to work and checking the list, Frankie discovered that Keith and his crew were listed as 'missing'. Keith had completed 29 out of 30 'ops' with his crew and pilot Nick Williamson, who had finished their tour. Keith was staying close to base waiting for his final 'op'.

On the night of June 25-26, he had a chance to complete his 30th 'op', volunteering to take the place of another crew member who had fallen ill. The crew were flying a Short Stirling bomber (BK 767). Keith was very keen to finish his tour as he had volunteered to fly with the Dam Busters 617 Squadron.

Short Stirling Bomber BK767 Shot Down in the Netherlands

The next part of this story is picked up by Peter Rhebergen who explains what happened to the aircraft and its crew. How Peter became involved is a story in itself!

In 1978 (quite out of the blue), Linda's family in New Zealand received a letter from Peter, a young Dutchman, who was researching the details of a Short Stirling bomber (BK 767) that had crashed on the outskirts of the village of Uzerlo close to where his family were living. Thus began his search for information about the aircraft and the crew that flew from RAF Chedburgh on that fateful night.

On 26 June 1943, Keith Neilson's aircraft took part in "a force of 630 bombers dispatched to

attack one of the most difficult targets in the Ruhr – the Elberfeld district of Wuppertal, a long built-up area that was almost impossible to locate visually at night”. Above the Dutch village of Ijzerlo, BK767 was intercepted and shot down by a Messerschmitt night fighter. On board were seven crew – Bernard Church, John Tritton, Edward Taylor, William Thompson, William Davis, Frederick Mills and Keith Neilson.

Sadly, the only two survivors were Keith Neilson and Edwin Taylor. They were captured by the Germans and taken by cattle truck to prison camps in Germany and Poland. Keith became a prisoner of war (POW) in Stalag Luft III.

The five airmen who lost their lives were buried with military honours in the local cemetery Berkenhoven in Aalten Holland on 29 June 1943. At that time, members of the Dutch resistance had put a wreath and ribbons on the graves to honour them. The text on the wreath read: “Gebroken Vleugels, Onsterlijke Roem, Het Nederlandsche Volk” (“Broken Wings, Immortal Glory, The Dutch People”). The German authorities did not allow this gesture of gratitude, and the wreath and ribbons had to be taken away the following day.

On the 50th Anniversary of the crash (26 June 1993), Peter Rhebergen contacted the next of kin of the victims and survivors to invite them to a special commemoration held at the crash site. Peter arranged with the Royal Dutch Airforce to pay tribute to these airmen by flying three F-16 fighters over the crash site.

It was an impressive display as the jet fighters flew overhead at a height of 300 metres with their landing lights on! At the initiative of the village (Christelijke Oranjevereniging Ijzerlo), a memorial was unveiled close to the crash site.

Each year since 1993, a commemoration has been held by the village residents and school students to honour the crew of BK767. The 80th anniversary of the crash (26 June 2023) was attended by Keith Neilson’s daughter Penny Taylor and Linda’s son Aidan Selby who is Keith’s grandson. It was also attended by Edwin Taylor’s two daughters. It is incredible to see that after all this time, the Dutch people have not forgotten the sacrifice made by these Allied airmen, many of them so far from home.



Indeed, there are many commemorations held each year across the country to remember the sacrifice of the men and women in the Allied forces who helped to liberate Holland.

Prisoner of War Camp: Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Poland

Stalag Luft III was a Luftwaffe-run prisoner of war camp that held captured Western Allied air force personnel. This camp’s 800 Luftwaffe guards



LEFT: Berkenhove Cemetery where the five aircrew are buried.
 BELOW: Frankie and Keith on the day of their wedding.
 BELOW FAR LEFT: Linda, Ken, Peter and Adelaide (Keith's Granddaughter) at BK767 crash memorial.
 BELOW LEFT: *Dominion Monarch* at Southampton).
 PHOTOS/SUPPLIED



were either too young for combat or young men convalescing after long tours of duty or wounds. Because the guards were Luftwaffe personnel, the prisoners were accorded better treatment than given to many other POWs in Germany.

The camp Deputy Commandant was a professor of history, geography and ethnology before the war, and he spoke several languages including English. He was generally sympathetic to the Allied airmen, unlike camps run by the Gestapo, and he extended military courtesies to POWs allowing, for example,

full military honours for POW funerals. Stalag III became famously known for two escape plots by Allied POWs – *The Wooden Horse* and *The Great Escape*. Unfortunately, these kinds of escape plans had limited success as the escapees were relentlessly pursued and most often found and shot. This drew the attention of the Gestapo and their attack dogs whose visits to the camp were frightening, brutal and often deadly, with the remaining prisoners usually suffering some kind of cruel retribution.

Despite these more reasonable conditions, food was always a great matter of concern for the POWs. Keith Neilson reported it became more and more difficult once Germany ran out of food for their own citizens. The staple diet became watery soup made from rotten cabbage and mouldy black bread.

Thanks to the ingenuity of the prisoners, Stalag Luft III had a well organised recreational and educational programmes, a news station and regular newsletters. Keith Neilson took an interest in academic subjects and attended the regular King of Quiz competition. His barracks held Canadian airmen, and one American. He reported they were a marvellous group of men who worked together sharing their skills and their rations and pooling their Red Cross parcels. Keeping warm during the freezing winters was a priority, so it was fortunate that Keith's mother had taught him how to knit! Keith knitted scarves and gloves for everyone in his barracks using materials that had been bartered for cigarettes and contents from Red Cross parcels. Others in his barracks, contributed particular skills for the good of everybody.

Russian forces were the first to arrive to liberate Stalag III in January 1945, however, this was not straightforward. Camp newsletters show that the men were very impatient to leave as you might imagine, but this was not so easy and required extended negotiations between the Russians and the newly arrived Americans. An excerpt from a Camp newsletter written by a senior British officer one week after the war ended said: "Hanging about is indeed a great trial for all ex-prisoners, but if we can maintain a philosophical attitude, the time of

waiting will be more tolerable and even quite interesting”.

Camp newsletters also report concerns about Russian soldiers stealing POW's watches at gunpoint.

“During yesterday's watch lifting operations by wandering Russians outside the Camp, guns were drawn and one Russian got in a fight with another and received a wound to his hand. On another occasion one member of the RAF was stopped and searched by three Russians. When he made it plain that he was British, the Russians handed back four of his cigarettes and a gold ring which they had taken from somebody else.”

Keith Neilson was part of a group who volunteered to do some engineering work in the town and once outside the gates they found their way to the Allied troops and eventually on to transport bound for England. Frankie received a surprise telegram from Keith to say he was returning home. She immediately rushed out of the gates at Stradishall Air Base and hitchhiked all the way to Southampton to meet him! Keith and Frankie were married at Paddington Registry Office in London on 2 June 1945. They had a small reception with family and, as food in England at that time was in short supply, they dined on spam sandwiches!

Frankie, along with a large group of war brides, was fortunate to get passage to New Zealand with the Māori Battalion on the *Dominion Monarch*, a grand ship at the time. Keith followed later onboard the troop ship *Orion*.

Freedom at Last

Keith and Frankie returned to Waverley where they farmed and raised four children. They first purchased a bush farm block in the Moeawatea where there was no power, or services of any kind. This was all quite a



ABOVE: Photo Collage courtesy of Peter Rhebergen.

PHOTO/SUPPLIED

shocking new experience for Frankie who had grown up in London and didn't even know how to boil an egg! They later purchased a sheep and cattle farm in the Waverley district. Sadly, Keith passed away at the young age of 50 in 1970 following bowel cancer. Their oldest son Roger took over the family farm, with Frankie and the three younger children moving to Whanganui. Frankie passed away in 1994 at the age of 75.

References

- British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (10 April, 2025). In Wikipedia, https://wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Commonwealth_Air_Training_Plan
- Burrell, D., *The Canadian Bomber Command Experience*. The Nanton Lancaster Society, 2023.
- Rhebergen, P. 'Remembering the Crash of Short Stirling BK767 26 June 1943'. Pp. 183-185 in Whitehouse, Jock & Adams, Spencer. *RAF Chedburgh 1942-1946*. RAF Chedburgh Memorial Trust, 2024.
- Stalag Luft III (10 April, 2025). In Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalag_Luft_III
- Tritton, Paul. 1994. *Broken Wings Immortal Glory*. Published and distributed by Tritton Family History, Khanspur Studio, Kent, England.
- Whitehouse, Jock & Adams, Spencer. *RAF Chedburgh 1942-1946*. Second revised edition edited and amended under the guidance of Jack Whitehouse. Published by RAF Chedburgh Memorial Trust, 2024.