

Let me share a wee story about a Petone lad...

Gordon Black was just another young man caught in a frightful war. A war he wouldn't really choose to be part of if it weren't for the flying. "I've never ever enjoyed myself so much as when I am in the air. I have the feeling that I own the world!" he wrote in early 1941 to his dear friend Mary Pritchard and her family back home in New Zealand.

Like so many other young pilots Gordon would tragically never see home again. He was barely twenty one when his plane went down over Northern England on a cold winters morning in 1941. Just another Kiwi boy buried on foreign soil, marked by a solemn white gravestone that his family would never visit. No loved one to sit by his bedside as he slipped quietly away and no one to lay flowers on his grave.

His story is not so remarkable in wartime. He was just one of nearly thirty two thousand Kiwi lives lost in those few short years. In fact, one in five who waved their family goodbye would never return. And an airman like Gordon had even worse odds. Allied airman had a life expectancy of a mere eleven days in World War Two. Gordon knew the risks and preferred not to dwell too greatly on them... "Still, in this game one has to take chances of a sort or else what good would one be?"

He spent the early months after elementary flight training in Kingston, Ontario. In mid-winter learning to fly in hazardous conditions and land in snow called for some pretty careful manoeuvres. "We had a rather good week this week having only six accidents but nothing serious".

"...this height and speed calls for pretty good judgement – just one mistake with four and a half tons hanging around the universe at that speed – well I'm afraid it would be curtains – the bits wouldn't be worth picking up."

What makes Gordon remarkable is a newly discovered letter he wrote friends back home in New Zealand. Seventy five years on this letter can be shared with the Black family in Australia and New Zealand and with the rest of the Pritchard family who knew and cared for Gordon like a brother.



Figure 2 the Black family of Australia. Gordon's father is first son on the left next to his father, John and little brother, Gordon (who Kiwi Gordon named after)



Figure 1 - BLACK, Gordon, Ty/Sub Lieutenant (A), RNZNVR – Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve. FAA. Air crash morning of 11th Nov 1941. Died of wounds.

The Pritchards, you see, or as Gordon called them 'the Pritch family' lived down the way a little in at number sixteen Bracken Street, Petone in Wellington and the Blacks lived at number seven. Mrs Rose Black, known to the family as 'Blackie' was a good friend of my Nana, Juliet Pritchard. Both had moved to Wellington as young women; Nana from London and Rose Black (nee Beyer) from a small town on the West Coast near Greymouth.

Gordon's dad was Walter Thomas Black ('Snowy' to his mates). Snowy was an Aussie lad, born 1885, he'd grown up in Casterton, Victoria, one of eleven children but he appears to be the only one to venture further south to the West Coast of New Zealand where he met and married Rose. He didn't forget his family though and named his eldest son Walter after his grandfather and his two other sons, Gordon and Stanley after his brothers. Gordon, in particular, had been named after Snowy's little brother who had perished in the battle of Passchendaele in October 1917.

There is no doubt from both the letter and the stories told by one of Gordon's Pritchard mates that the two families were close. The children often away adventuring around Petone beach, the Horokiwi hills and the Hutt River and later spending the weekends at dances and local events together. And when things got tough in the Great Depression it was Snowy who helped out Arthur Pritchard with a job in the wool stores. And while the parents were friends, young Stan hung out with the Pritchard boys and Gordon was part of Mary Pritchard's circle of friends. The Pritchards would have seen Gordon off to war service, just as they did their own son Larry.

"Thanks for the cake too, it arrived here in good order and condition and I didn't waste much time in getting rid of it!"



Figure 3 circa 1950. Larry and Allen Pritchard either side of Stan Black at a school fair in Petone

A few years on and it is not too clear what Gordon was doing that morning over Durham, England. We do know that he had completed his flight training in Ontario, Canada (where he'd written home from) and was then posted to the Fleet Air Arm base in Yeovilton, Somerset. Here, in 1941 he was listed as 'Fit for Full Duty; FFD' and may have spent time at this base completing his final practice of aerial gunnery or aircraft carrier landings before being posted in early November to the HMS Daedalus near Portsmouth with No.781 Squadron.

The Naval Air Squadrons based at the HSM Daedalus air station flew such planes as the de Havilland Sea Vampire, Tiger Moth, Hawker Sea Fury and the Fairey Swordfish. Its primary role was to train other pilots, so perhaps Gordon was gearing up for one such role when barely a week after being stationed there he crashed his Mark.1 Fairey Swordfish into a hillside outside of Durham. Although he survived the crash, he suffered terrible burns and died later the same day in the Durham hospital.

It is also unclear why he flew into the hillside near the Pennines. The countryside thereabouts is gentle rolling hills which should have been easy enough to navigate as he hadn't yet reached the Pennine mountain range when he crashed. Perhaps the clue to his fate lies in this very letter. While training in Ontario in February he writes "the country is of course covered in snow now and is a great sight from the air...but for us chaps it's just a pain in the neck". He goes on to explain the difficulty with judging height and perspective in snow.

"All we can see is snow and more snow, in fact it's a flaming nuisance."

Was it snowing that November morning? Was it a frosty, misty morning? Did the snow or mist blur the line between land and sky? One can't help feeling that his written words were prophetic? It is not hard to understand why this letter and the memory of the young Petone boy has lasted more than seventy-odd years in the Pritch family.

There isn't much to say about what happened next. Gordon was buried in the Castletown Cemetery on the 17th of November, attended by representatives from nearby RAF Usworth base in Sunderland.



Figure 4 Memorial posted three years later by Rose and Walter. Evening Post Newspaper, 11 Nov 1944

Rose Black outlived her son by forty five years. Gordon's good friend Mary Pritchard married her beau, John Fouhy that same year Gordon died and she is still living in her beloved Hutt Valley not far from their childhood home of Petone. Stan's mate Allen Pritchard lives near Mary too and they often recall fondly of those times in Bracken Street with the Black family. "Gordon was a lovely young man. A real gentlemen" Allen remembers; he was not just a loss to his friends or Bracken Street, but to his family on both sides of the Tasman.



Figure 5 Rose Black (nicknamed 'Blackie' to friends) at the back with hat. Daughter, Peggy (Rose's daughter) in the middle at the front and Juliet Pritchard ('Pritch' to her friends) at the back on the right. Circa 1950

My thanks to Leonie Pritchard for sharing this long-lost letter with us and to Allen Pritchard for providing his insights on the relationship between the two Petone families. C Callaghan, 1/1/2017