

Offer to keep 'Dambuster' medals in NZ

AUCKLAND — A solution may have been found to keeping veteran "Dambuster" Les Munro's medals in New Zealand.

Lord Michael Ashcroft has offered to donate \$150,000 to the upkeep of London's Bomber Command Memorial if Mr Munro withdraws his medals from auction.

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Philanthropist Lord Ashcroft will donate £75,000 to the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, which looks after the memorial, in return for Mr Munro donating his medals to the Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) in Auckland. MOTAT has offered to cover the auctioneer's fees and out of pocket expenses.

Mr Munro's awards, including the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Flying Cross, were expected to fetch between \$80,000 and

\$100,000 at auction.

The 95-year-old veteran had put the medals up to be auctioned on March 25 to raise money for the upkeep of the memorial, which commemorates his fallen comrades.

A consortium of New Zealand museums had been in talks with Mr Munro to find a way to keep the medals in New Zealand, but on Monday said they could not bid as a consortium, and did not have the resources to do so individually.

Lord Ashcroft donated more than \$2 million to build the Bomber Command Memorial, which commemorates the airmen who died while flying with the Bomber Command, known as the "Dambusters", during World War 2.

His proposal has the support of the NZ Bomber Command Association, and if successful, MOTAT will develop a travelling exhibition on the history of the Bomber Command.

He has also offered to personally collect the medals from the auction house in London and fly them to New Zealand.

Lord Ashcroft is a philanthropist and businessman who founded Crimestoppers UK and helped set up a similar service in New Zealand.

In 2007, he offered a reward of \$200,000 for the return of the medals stolen from the Waiouru Army Museum.

— NZME.



OFFER MADE: 'Dambuster' Les Munro put his medals up to be auctioned on March 25 to raise money for a memorial that commemorates his fallen comrades. However, a solution may have been found to keep the medals in NZ. NZ Herald photo

Squadron Leader LES MUNRO

ATTACK:
This painting depicts a Lancaster on the run in to target as it drops its "bouncing bomb" destined for a German dam.

Last of the Dambuster pilots dies



GLOBAL tributes have flowed for Gisborne-born and bred Les Munro, the last surviving pilot who flew in the legendary Dambusters raid in World War 2.

Squadron Leader Munro passed away in Tauranga yesterday after a short illness, at the age of 96.

Mr Munro was born in Gisborne on April 5, 1919, the oldest of three children. He attended Gisborne High School and left school at 14 to work on the family farm.

Mr Munro enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1941 and did his pilot training in Canada before going operational with Bomber Command in Britain.

He piloted a Lancaster bomber in the famous 1943 raid in which 617 RAF Squadron, flying by moonlight at very low altitudes, dropped Barnes Wallis's bouncing bombs that destroyed the Moehne and Eder dams.

His aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire on the way to the dams and he was forced to turn back from the raid, something that always disappointed him.

"With all its communication equipment destroyed, it was not safe to continue a low-flying operation with other aircraft flying in close proximity."

He was the last of the pilots who

flew in the raid, and only two crew members involved now survive.

One lives in Canada and the other in the UK.

Mr Munro flew 58 bombing missions during the war.

"I would be the first to admit that I was pretty lucky to survive."

He received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his war-time service.

"Les was invincible. He had a special aura about him," his friends said of his flying skills.

Head of the RNZAF Air Vice Marshal Mike Yardley said on Radio New Zealand that Mr Munro was a

distinguished and highly-decorated officer "who epitomised the values of the New Zealand Defence Force with his courage, commitment and comradeship".

"But Les would not have wanted to be described as a hero," one of his wartime friends has said.

After the war he returned to Gisborne and worked for the State Advances Corporation as a property valuer.

He married Betty Hill in 1948 and the couple had five children.

The Munros eventually moved to the King Country and bought a farm near Te Kuiti.

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Squadron Leader John Leslie (Les) Munro CNZM, QSO, DSO, DFC, JP gifted his war and service medals to the Museum of Transport and Technology in Auckland.

Country loses 'a remarkable man'

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Mr Munro was on Waitomo District Council for some time and was the mayor for a number of years.

He was a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit, a Companion of the Queens Service Order and was also awarded the French "Legion of Honour".

His wife Betty predeceased him. The couple are survived by four of their children, 11 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

A service to celebrate Mr Munro's life will be held at the Classic Flyers base in Mount Maunganui on Saturday, followed by private cremation.

Prime Minister John Key is among many to have paid tribute.

"New Zealand has lost a remarkable man who led a remarkable life."

Legendary Dambuster dies

by John Cousins, BoP Times

TAURANGA — The world lost the last surviving pilot of the legendary 1943 Dambusters raid when Les Munro quietly lost his hold on life, leaving behind a close circle of friends grieving for a man they simply called a good bloke.

Mr Munro, 96, who rose to the rank of squadron leader and was twice decorated by King George VI for his flying exploits during World War 2, passed away peacefully in Tauranga Hospital yesterday after a short illness.

The retired Te Kuiti farmer and former Mayor of Waitomo District left a huge legacy of service and achievement in the mould of another of New Zealand's great good blokes — Sir Edmund Hillary.

The comparison with Sir Ed struck a chord with Mount Maunganui RSA general manager Peter Moss.

"It's as if they could not achieve any more, but could not understand why people carried on about what they did achieve."

Jack Meehan, 94, who flew 30 missions as a wireless operator on Lancaster bombers in 1944, met Mr Munro after the Dambusters raid at a service club in London, subsequently enjoying his company on dozens of occasions.

"He was an honest sort of bloke, a very sensible sort of fellow who was very good at mixing with everybody," he said.

Recalling how the two men went through the war virtually unscathed, Mr Meehan said: "He was very lucky, like all of us who came home. Les



LAST DAMBUSTER: The visit of HM King George VI to No 617 Squadron (The Dambusters), Royal Air Force, Scampton, Lincolnshire, on May 27 1943. The King has a word with Flight Lieutenant Les Munro from New Zealand. Wing Commander Guy Gibson is on the right and Air Vice Marshal Ralph Cochrane, Commander of No 5 Group is behind Flight Lieutenant Munro and to the right.

had a great life, he enjoyed every moment of it."

An old friend from Te Kuiti, former Waitomo deputy mayor Bruce Williams, was readying himself to leave home yesterday to take Mr Munro's 87-year-old partner Christine Ross to hospital when the call came.

Mr Williams, who was comforting Mrs Ross at her home yesterday, said he always admired his friend's humbleness.

The retired funeral director,

who buried Mr Munro's wife Betty, recalled the time this year when Mr Munro visited him at his beach house at Kawhia. Asked if he would stay a couple of nights, Mr Munro declined because he had to return to Tauranga to make a decision about his war medals — whether to have them auctioned in London or accept a \$150,000 offer from British philanthropist Lord Ashcroft that allowed them to go on permanent display at Auckland's Museum of

The Dambusters

■ A RAF bombing mission to hit power supplies to Nazi Germany's industrial heartland.

■ A bouncing bomb that skipped across water was developed to be dropped from close range.

■ Airmen were trained in specially-modified Lancaster bombers.

■ The bombs breached two of the three dams in the Ruhr Valley.

Transport and Technology.

Mr Williams said his friend ended up very happy with the decision to go with Lord Ashcroft's offer, allowing the money to go towards the upkeep of the Bomber Command Memorial in London.

"It was very lucky the decision happened when it did because it meant no one else was left to make the decision."

The chief executive of Waitomo District during Mr Munro's five terms as Mayor, Dave Muir, described his



Prime Minister John Key shared his condolences yesterday from Rarotonga.

"I was sad to hear of Les Munro's death, New Zealand has lost a remarkable man who led a remarkable life.

"I was honoured to meet Les Munro in person when I attended the presentation of his medals to MOTAT just a few months ago. His contribution to his country and his generosity will not be forgotten."

friend as a wonderful guy.

"Les was very direct, you knew exactly where you stood. He had an absolute moral strength."

Mr Muir said the amount of work that Mr Munro put into the district was phenomenal.

"He just got on and did it, and he would take everyone along with him."

Classic Flyers chief executive Andrew Gormlie said Mr Munro made a huge contribution to the museum, including donating some of his aviation items that now formed part of a special display.

Mr Gormlie characterised Mr Munro as a giver, freely donating his time, energy and position in the aviation community to benefit Classic Flyers.

Mr Munro raised thousands of dollars at Tauranga's air shows where he signed programmes and models of the Lancaster aircraft that he flew in exchange for a donation to the museum.

"He was totally aware his signature was worth having and he was happy to do it for us. He had a lot of presence for a man of his age."



Les Munro, pictured at the Bomber Command Memorial, London.