

John Leslie Munro, Last of the World War II 'Dambuster' Pilots, Dies at 96



John Leslie Munro was in the daring "Dambusters" mission that struck at Germany's industrial heartland.

New Zealand Bomber Command Association

By Dan Bilefsky

Aug. 4, 2015

On the night of May 16, 1943, a squadron of bombers set out from Britain to conduct strikes against heavily fortified dams in the Ruhr Valley of Germany, using bombs that bounced on the water before exploding. Of the 133 crew members who started the mission, only 77 returned.

The last surviving pilot of those who came back was John Leslie Munro, who died Tuesday at 96 in Auckland, New Zealand.

His death, announced by the New Zealand Bomber Command Association on its Facebook page, elicited tributes from around the world, including in Britain and in his native New Zealand, for his role in the daring "Dambusters" mission that struck at the industrial heartland of the Nazi war effort and lifted Allied morale.



Mr. Munro, front center, with his crew in front of the bomber they flew on the Dambusters raid.

Mr. Munro, who was known as Les, was part of the Royal Air Force's 617 squadron, which was assigned to destroy three dams with specially designed bombs shaped like cylinders that had to be dropped from about 60 feet.

The bombs were made to bounce across the water, allowing them to avoid obstacles like antitorpedo nets, and then sink to the base of the dam walls before exploding, magnifying their effect.

During the mission, the Lancaster bomber piloted by Mr. Munro was hit by flak. The plane's communications abilities were destroyed, and he was unable to attack the dams. But he managed to fly to safety despite a large hole in the aircraft's body.

Mr. Munro was "very modest about what he did during the war," the BBC quoted Dave Homewood of the New Zealand Bomber Command Association as saying. "I think he was pretty proud to have been part of the Dambusters, although he was disappointed he never got to drop his weapon."



One of the dams hit in May 1943. The mission caused devastating flooding, and historians estimate that more than 1,300 people on the ground, including prisoners of war, were killed. (*Culture Club, via Getty Images*)

According to accounts of those who survived the mission, called Operation Chastise, the pilots and crew members had only a few weeks to prepare, and they learned of their targets just hours before the raid. The dams in the Ruhr Valley supplied [hydroelectric](#) power and water for steel making, and were therefore important to Hitler's war machine.

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The bombers were hailed as heroes, and the mission was immortalized in "[The Dam Busters](#)," a 1955 film starring Michael Redgrave and Richard Todd that told the story of a determined aeronautical engineer who persuaded initially skeptical R.A.F. leaders to embrace his innovative bouncing bombs.

In an interview with the BBC on the 70th anniversary of the Dambusters mission, Mr. Munro said he had not been afraid. "I approached most operations with a thought: 'If I'm going to cop it, so be it,'" he said.