

NEIL MUNRO (31-32)

The following has been kindly provided by Neil's sister Muriel and by her grandson Nic Maunder Taylor.

17 March 1922 – 26 February 1944



Neil died on active service with the Royal Air Force in 1944 when returning from a raid on Augsburg. However, before he joined the RAF he had already lived through eventful times.

His sister, Muriel, on occasion recounted the tale which led to him joining the RAF. During his college years when he was training to be a dentist, the Finns were recruiting young British men to join their air force and fight the Nazis, who had taken occupation of their country. Neil was taken with their plight, and along with some others, decided to join. Muriel remembers trying to dissuade him, however, he was not to be deterred. He left to join and with a 64-strong British contingent travelled to Oslo, Norway, to train. He was put into the City hotel with other, mostly British, young men, although there were some Americans there too. America, at that time, had not yet entered the war. He arrived at the hotel at 10am on 9 April 1940, just as the German invasion of Norway began.

The Nazi's took an interest in the hotel occupied by the British contingent. It was known that the British were being recruited to fight against them, and for that reason the Germans were rounding up everyone British. Anyone who was found to be involved in the fight against them would be shot.

In his hotel, the officer in charge had advised that it was now a case of every man for himself and the American Consulate had said that a train was expected to leave for Stockholm. Of the 64, four men, including Neil, decided to make a dash for it.

Neil and a friend were on an upper floor. Neil was washing his hands, and on seeing some Germans pull up in front of the hotel he realised that their lives were in danger. He told his friend to burn their passports, then follow him downstairs, saying nothing, and looking as if nothing was wrong. As they went down to the hotel lobby, Neil stole two American coats, and they then walked calmly through, Neil putting on an American accent, which, says Muriel, he was good at mimicking.

The Germans were very keen to keep the Americans out of the war at this time. Thus, when they saw two men with one speaking with an American accent, they did not stop them. Neil and his friend left the hotel and walked away. From newspaper articles we know that some others also managed to escape, though not all. We also know that the occupation of Norway and the event of British casualties was widely reported in Britain. Muriel remembers her mother as going almost out of her mind. She also says that she and her brother, Ken, both felt that Neil was alive and told her so. They had to wait three weeks before receiving any news.

Neil and his friend fled Oslo to try and make contact with the Resistance. On some occasions as they left Oslo they came across German patrols with automatic rifles. At these times they would speak aloud, reading the names from shop fascias in order to avert suspicion. They were lucky and were not stopped. After about 3 miles they were lucky enough to get a lift all the way to Honefoss, about 60 miles away. Half way there a group of children were gathered at a fork in the road and waved them to the right; a German patrol was only two miles away down the other fork.

After Honefoss Neil and his companions hitch-hiked towards Trondheim. We know that at some stage during the escape, probably on the hitch-hiking leg, they had to cross a quiet sentry post, manned only by one soldier who they killed with a knife. Muriel remembers that Neil was sorry they had to kill him. They were helped by Norwegians along the way, and at one time on a bus the passengers insisted on taking a collection for them. They eventually got to the coast where they were picked up by a British destroyer. They became passengers for five days whilst it searched inlets up and down the coast, dodging bombs (one of which went through the wireless aerial before hitting the water over which it hung). The destroyer eventually met with some troopships which carried them back to England. During the journey one of the troopship's guns scored a hit on a Dornier, fully laden with bombs. A British Warship which was with them signalled, "Congratulations, Your Bird".

Neil arrived in Victoria on the night of 23 April 1940, before his family even knew whether or not he was alive. The 24 April 1940 edition of The Evening News reported Neil's return on its front page, and stated it was believed that some 40 British escaped. The other 20 were believed captured.

After arriving back in England, Neil joined the RAF and was with 239 Squadron. Originally formed in 1918, the squadron disbanded in 1919 before being reformed in 1940 at Hatfield. In 1943 it was moved to Ayr to train as a night fighter unit, and was equipped with De Havilland Mosquitos which Neil flew.

In January 1944 Neil shot down a ME110 over Berlin at 26,000 feet. His aunt Madeline's notes state that the enemy pilot was believed to have had some 64 kills to his name. It is understood that Neil got onto his victim's tail and they managed to secure photographs of the plane on fire before it went down. During the event his Mosquito turned upside down and went into a spin, however, he managed to recover and survived.

On 26 February 1944 Neil was returning from a night bombing mission over Augsburg. During the day the USAF had bombed the Messerschmitt works in the town. This was followed during the night by a Bomber Command raid, devastatingly accurate, in which 239 Squadron participated. In the early hours of the morning Neil was flying in fog, crashed into the side of a hill and was killed instantly. His navigator, Dick Hurley, lived for a while, though unconscious, before he too died. Of the 594 aircraft which took part in the raid, 21 were lost.

When news of Neil's death was sent home, his mother and fiancée, Rene Chandler, were out shopping for fruit and other things for his birthday cake. They were told the news when they returned home at 4pm. Neil's 22nd birthday would have been 17 March 1944.

By 4 March it had been established that Neil's RT (Radio Telephone) system had stopped working, and fog had descended to within 100 foot of the ground. He was heard flying around trying to seek his bearings, however, apparently could not see and crashed 3 miles from the aerodrome. Neil's Squadron Leader told his father, Robert Clarke Munro, that to have gotten back at all without RT was magnificent work on the part of both pilot and navigator.

Neil was buried with military honours at Cambridge City Cemetery (Grave 13754) and he is named on a memorial at Framlingham College, where he was educated from 1931 to 1932



Sources: Muriel Maunder Taylor (nee Munro, sister)
 Letters from Robert Clarke Munro (father)
 Notes from Bruce Maunder Taylor (nephew)
 Notes from Madeline Munro (aunt)
 Letter from Wing Commander Paul Evans, 239 Squadron
 Evening News, 24 April 1940
 Framlingham College
 Wikipedia