

Reluctant hero dies peacefully

JOHN LESLIE (LES) MUNRO
BORN April 5, 1919
DIED August 4, 2015

ONE of New Zealand's most celebrated World War II heroes, Squadron Leader Les Munro CNZM, DSO, QSO, DFC, JP died on Tuesday, aged 96.

Mr Munro had been in hospital for two weeks due to heart problems and died peacefully surrounded by his family at 6.15am.

He was the last pilot of the Royal Air Force's 617 Squadron which flew the top secret mission that became known as the 'Dambuster' raids on May 16-17, 1943. Operation Chastise's objective - to destroy the Ruhr Valley hydro dams and flood the industrial heart of Germany.

Of the 19 Avro Lancaster bombers that left England only 11 returned, including the flak-crippled W-Willie flown by 24-year-old John Leslie Munro.

Mr Munro flew 58 trips without a break when it was decided his crew had done enough.

He then commanded the 1690 Bomber Defence Training Flight, flying Hurricanes for a year before setting sail for New Zealand, arriving home at Labour Weekend in 1945. He was 26.

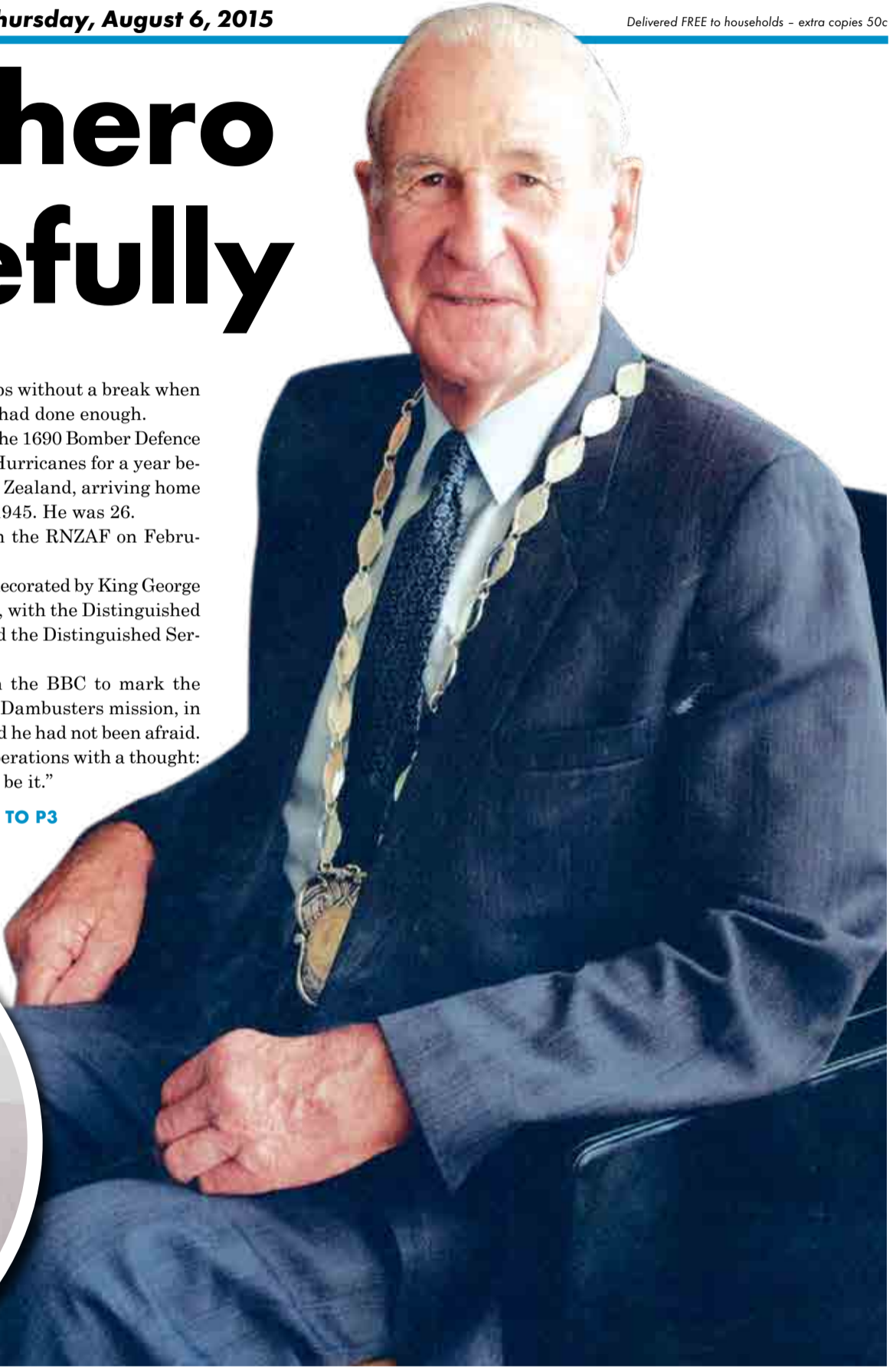
He was released from the RNZAF on February 5, 1946.

Mr Munro was twice decorated by King George VI for his flying exploits, with the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1943 and the Distinguished Service Order in 1944.

In an interview with the BBC to mark the 70th anniversary of the Dambusters mission, in May 2013 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.'"

TO P3



DISTRICT CHAMPION: After his war service with the Royal Air Force's 617 Squadron (left) and a post-war career as a valuer, Les Munro and his wife Betty took up a ballot farm at Mapiu in 1961. For the next 40 years he became one of the Waitomo district's most ardent champions especially in local government chairing the Waitomo County Council from 1979-1989 and as mayor from 1989-1995. PHOTO SUPPLIED

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ON THE AGENDA: Les Munro (seated centre) with his 1991 councillors – Ian Wards (back left), Rollo Edkins, Leonie McCaughan, Malcolm Lilley, Adrienne Tatham, John Kaati, Stan Glasgow, Steve Sanderson (seated left), chief executive Dave Muir, Bruce Williams (deputy mayor) and Mike Wagstaff. PHOTO SUPPLIED

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FROM P1

But for Waitomo residents it is his service to the community he lived in for 40 years that will be remembered most.

Encouraged by friends and neighbours, he entered local politics in 1979.

He served as Waitomo county's chairman until 1989, and as mayor of the Waitomo district from 1989-1995.

SISTER CITY

It was during this time, that Mr Munro formed Te Kuiti's sister city relationship with Tatsuno after striking up a friendship with a Japanese war veteran at a World War II veterans' reunion in 1994.

During a chat between the two, it was discovered Tatsuno was the home of the firefly and Waitomo the home of the glowworm. The sister-city connection was officially formed in 1995.

In 1998, the Japanese Garden was built on Rora St with help from Tatsuno representatives who also donated stone sculptures to cement the bond. Tatsuno has a Waitomo garden.

Waitomo mayor Brian Hanna and a delegation visited Japan in June to celebrate the sister city relationship's 20th year.

Throughout his years on council Mr Munro represented the district on numerous organisations and was a committee member of several locally.

In a *Waitomo News* special feature to mark the 100th anniversary of the Te Kuiti borough, published on April 27, 2010 – and without claiming credit for either – he singled out the building of the Waitomo Cultural and Arts Centre and Hillview Home and Hospital as the major achievements of his time in office.

Of Hillview he said: "The community spirit that was shown as funds were raised to build and develop Hillview was brilliant. There was real community support for the rest home and that support seems to still be there to this day."

On the civic centre: "I believe the erection of the civic centre made a huge difference to the community. It provides a focus – a central gathering point."

EARLY LIFE

The son of a Glasgow-born father who emigrated to New Zealand, Mr Munro was born on April 5, 1919, in Gisborne.

The eldest of three children, he was raised on a sheep station during the Great Depression and was educated at Gisborne High School.

He left school aged 14 to work on the family farm, then other East Coast sheep and beef farms before World War II intervened.

He enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Air Force on July 5, 1941 aged 21 to be a pilot, but was told his education wasn't satisfactory and a gunner's position was recommended.

A year later he enlisted again and was accepted for pilot training, learning to fly Tiger Moths at the RNZAF's flying training school at Bell Block, New Plymouth then Levin.

He chose to fly bombers and was posted to Saskatoon in Canada for initial training before being sent to England to fly Avro Manchesters and Lancaster bombers with the RAF 97 Squadron at Woodall Spa in Lincolnshire. From there as a Squadron Leader he joined the 617.

POST-WAR WORK

Mr Munro became a registered farm valuer in 1950 working in Blenheim, Gisborne, Nelson and finally Auckland from 1957-1961.

In 1959, as an associate of NZ Institute of Rural Valuers he was closely involved in the direct settlement of large numbers of returned servicemen who entered ballots for land at a predetermined price.

Having farmed before the war, Mr Munro and his wife Betty, whom he'd married in 1948 after a two-year engagement, won a 1961 ballot farm at Mapiu 32kms south of Te Kuiti.

There they raised five children – the late John, Graeme, Greg, Gail and Anne.

In 1975, the family moved to a 40ha property at Somerville Rd where they farmed until 1992.

Mr Munro then leasing the grazing rights to a neighbour former Prime Minister Jim Bolger.

He worked as a rural real estate salesman from 1977-82 before his commitment to local government demands and community involvement took over.

He was recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 1991 and awarded a Queen's Service Order. He also received a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (CNZM)

When he retired as mayor in 1995, the couple remained at their Somerville Road property until Mrs Munro died in 1998.

Guiding light gone

LES Munro's son Graeme says not only has the family lost a much-loved father, grandfather and great grandfather, but also their guiding light.

"He was a very humble and loyal man who had incredible values which he instilled in all of us.

"So in that respect his legacy of how he handled himself and how he communicated with others, will live on for generations to come."

Despite his father's well-documented World War II service, Graeme says he was more proud of his public service to the Waitomo community.

"Yes, he did have some significant achievements in the war and that's where he received a lot of recognition, but he actually considered his time in local government was where he gained more intense personal satisfaction.

"The war he did because it was expected of you, but he held his local government achievements

much higher and that is probably overlooked by a lot of people when they focus on his life.

FOND MEMORIES

"He really fondly remembers his time in Te Kuiti and Waitomo and working with the people there to establish the civic centre and Japanese Garden among many other projects.

"He certainly had a lot of town pride."

Reflecting on Mr Munro's life, Graeme says he'll simply remember his father as "a great dad".

"He'll be sorely, sorely missed because that leadership we all looked to him for will be gone.

"It's like the kauri tree has fallen.

"We all thought he was invincible and now when we wake up it's hard to believe that he's gone.

"It's a vacuum that we, as a family, will struggle to come to terms with for a long time."



Electronic Waste

The Waitomo District Landfill and rural Waste Transfer Stations accept e-waste for collection and recycling.

E-waste (electronic waste) is electrical equipment that has become obsolete, broken or unwanted; and includes computers, computer screens, fax machines, whiteware, TVs and electrical cables, basically anything with a plug.

E-waste is one of the fastest growing categories of hazardous waste in the world. Toxic chemicals in electronic products can leach into the land and contaminate water streams over time or are released into the atmosphere.

It is very important that e-waste is diverted from Landfill.

A fee does apply to e-waste. You can find out more by contacting WDC on (07) 878 0800 or visit our website waitomo.govt.nz/feesandcharges

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FROM P3

In 2001, Mr Munro sold the property and moved to Tauranga where he had family and where many close friends had retired.

FRENCH HONOUR

On April 14, he was honoured by the French Government for his "bravery and commitment to ending World War II".

French President Francois Hollande officially appointed him a Knight of the National Order of the Legion of Honour for "bravery and infallible commitment to ending the war."

France's highest decoration - the Legion of Honour - was presented to him by French ambassador Florence Jeanblanc-Risler at a ceremony in the National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy. (*Waitomo News*, April 16)

BOMBER COMMAND MEMORIAL

In May 2013, Mr Munro, who was patron of New Zealand Bomber Command, visited London's Green Park, and the Bomber Command Memorial to the 55,773 Bomber Command airmen who died, including 1671 Kiwis.

Aggrieved that such a memorial

had taken so long to build and feeling a heavy responsibility to contribute to its maintenance, he offered his medals and log books for auction earlier this year, with the proceeds going to the RAF Benevolent Fund for its upkeep.

In March he said: "My war service moulded me as a man; it gave me the confidence in my own ability and taught me to get on with my fellow men and value comradeship.

"It is because of that sense of comradeship and the equal importance of the act of remembrance that I now part company with my medals for the benefit of the Bomber Command Memorial."

Just when it seemed likely the medals would go to an overseas private collector and leave New Zealand's shores forever, philanthropist and owner of the world's largest collection of Victoria Crosses, Lord Ashcroft purchased and gifted them back to Mr Munro so he could present them to the Museum of Transport and Technology in Auckland.

At the ceremony on April 15, attended by Lord Ashcroft and Prime Minister John Key, Mr Munro said he was pleased his medals will be in the museum's public collection and



ULTIMATE SACRIFICE: Squadron Leader Les Munro sold his medals in April to fund the upkeep of the World War II Bomber Command Memorial in London, built as a tribute to the sacrifice of 55,773 airmen, including 1679 Kiwis. His medals are now displayed at MOTAT in Auckland. PHOTO DNW

available for future generations in the shadow of the museum's Lancaster bomber.

DEEDS LIVE ON

On Tuesday, following Mr Munro's death Lord Ashcroft said: "I only had the privilege of knowing Les very late in his long and extraordinary life, but my deepest condolences go out to his family, his friends, the New Zealand Bomber Command Association and to his entire home nation where he was, rightly, much revered.

"Les was a true hero in every sense of the word and his legacy and deeds and indeed those of Bomber Command will live on."

MOTAT chief executive Michael Frawley who met Mr Munro several times says he is "incredibly sad" about his death.

"But, from the museum's perspective, we're honoured to be able to tell his story so his legacy lives on, because he's one of New Zealand's - and indeed England's - great heroes.

"He gave you the impression that he was going to live forever. What a guy, what a hero."

A NZ Bomber Command Fund is being set up through the Perpetual Guardian Foundation and the long-

term plan is for MOTAT to create a travelling exhibition that will tell the stories of Mr Munro and other Kiwi members of Bomber Command.

Tributes to Mr Munro were swift including from many locals touched by his service to the people of Waitomo.

When he retired as mayor Mr Munro said: "I contributed the best I could in my time on council.

"When I retired the council had reserves of at least \$4.5 million... I felt I left the district in good shape."

He is survived by his partner Christine Ross, four of his five children - Graeme, Greg, Gail and Anne - 11 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

A service to celebrate Mr Munro's life will be held at Classic Flyers, Jean Batten Drive, Mt Maunganui on Saturday at 1.30pm, followed by private cremation.

The service is open to the public. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in his memory to Arthritis NZ or Waikato BoP Cancer Society.

TRIBUTES FLOW P5



MERCI LES: French ambassador to New Zealand Florence Jeanblanc-Risley awarded Les Munro the Legion of Honour, France's highest decoration in April, for helping liberate France from German occupation during World War II. PHOTO NZDF

Influenza season has started in Waikato!

The best way to protect yourself and your loved ones is to get vaccinated.

- It's not too late to get vaccinated.
- Vaccination is the best protection from influenza, and the best defence in preventing the spread of the illness.
- If you feel unwell you can help reduce the spread of the virus by:
 - Staying at home if you are unwell.
 - Covering your cough or sneeze and use disposable tissues.
 - Regularly washing your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water, and then drying your hands with a clean dry towel or paper towel.

**Influenza.
Don't get it.
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Vaccination is free for everyone over 65 and for those most at risk until 31 July, so call your general practice now.

Many pharmacies also offer flu vaccinations for people who are willing to pay.

For more information about influenza, and how it can affect you, visit www.fightflu.co.nz

Get protected and get immunised.

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Tributes flow for Les

IN the wake of the news that Waitomo war legend Les Munro died at 6.15am on Tuesday, tributes have flowed from all corners of the community to honour the man who represented his district and country with pride.

In a life well-lived, Mr Munro died in Tauranga Hospital, aged 96 after a short illness due to heart problems.

He leaves behind a legacy of achievements among those as one of the 19 commanding officers of the Royal Air Force's 617 Squadron that led the famous 'Dambuster' raids, as a Waitomo District Council chairman and mayor, farmer, husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

HUMBLE HERO

Mr Munro's deputy mayor for 12 years Bruce Williams of Te Kuiti, says he will remember his long-time friend as "a humble hero".

"I've introduced Les to a lot of people throughout the years and they have always been amazed at how humble the man is.

"Although he had been a national celebrity for a long time it was his humbleness that attracted me to him as a friend.

"He was exceptionally good for Waitomo because he was just a humble farmer

who had come home from the war and did an awful lot of good the area.

"I'll miss him dearly."

Former neighbour John Finlayson, who farmed next to the Munro family in Mapiu for many years, was "shocked" and "saddened" when he heard the news.

"He was a great character ol' Les.

"He'll be a huge loss for the district not only because of his war record, but also because of all the work he did helping others.

"And he sought no reward for it other than the odd thank you here and there.

"He had an amazing ability to get things done and everything he undertook he did very well.

"I'll remember him as a very good friend and neighbour and one of the most successful guys you'll ever meet."

IMMENSE RESPECT

Former Waitomo local authority chief executive Dave Muir knew Mr Munro for 43 years.

"After my dad died, Les became a surrogate father to me and I've been very close to him ever since.

"I respect the guy immensely – he was just a wonderful person.

"Personally he was a very humble guy and despite his status he treated everybody with equal respect."

Regarding his contribution to the Waitomo district, Mr Muir says Mr Munro's legacy is immeasurable.

"The guy was totally committed to the ratepayers," he says.

"He worked his butt off everywhere he could to get the best deal possible.

"He's the finest guy I've ever met or worked with and I'll miss him certainly."

Waitomo mayor Brian Hanna says he was "devastated" when he heard of Mr Munro's death.

"Les is without a doubt one of Waitomo's true legends. He had been a mayor of Waitomo for many years and really played an integral part in defining the direction of our district.

"His war history makes him one of New Zealand's real icons and I'm just numbed by the news.

"To his family, our thoughts are with you.

"This is a huge loss not only for Waitomo but for the entire country."

Mr Hanna says Waitomo District Council will hold a memorial to honour and remember Mr Munro's legacy.

Mr Munro's death has left just two surviving members of the 617 Squadron's 'Dambuster' raids – British bomb aimer George Johnson and Fred Sutherland, a Canadian front gunner.

Giving of his time

IN a Waitomo News special feature to mark the 100th anniversary of the Te Kuiti borough, published on April 27, 2010, Mr Munro said of his community service: "It wasn't a case of finding the time . . . but rather of giving it."

His record of "giving time" to the Waitomo district is lengthy and includes the following:

- Waitomo County Council 1965-1979
- Waitomo District Council chairman 1979-1989
- Waitomo District Council mayor 1989-1995
- District Roads Council
- Waikato United Council
- NZ Counties Association
- National Hydatids Council
- Waikato Catchment Board
- Mapiu School Committee chairman 1961-1969
- Mapiu Golf Club president/foundation member 1961-1974
- King Country Land Settlement Committee 1967-1987
- Mahoenui Inc Land Committee 1968-1978
- King Country Regional Development Council 1982-1992
- Patron, Police Recruit Wing 125, June-November 1991
- Made a Justice of Peace in 1970
- Te Kuiti Rotary Club, Paul Harris award 1988
- Te Kuiti RSA 1961 -2001
- Queen's Service Order (QSO)
- Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (CNZM)

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