Hugh Francis ROCHFORD, DFM (1916 – 1942)



40947 Sergeant

H.F.ROCHFORD DFM.

Bomb aimer/ Navigator
Royal N.Z. Air Force

30th October 1941 Age 21

138 Squadron, RAF



Flight-Sergeant H. F. Rochford, of Hamilton, awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal.

Hugh Francis Rochford was born on 14 December 1916 in Kumara, Westland, NZ, the son of James Patrick and Ethel Kennedy Rochford (nee Vallance). He had two older siblings, a sister Val born in 1912 and a brother Brian born in 1913. Their mother died in 1927 and an aunt, Mrs E M Duncan and her husband Mr O R Duncan who lived in Hamilton, Auckland became Hugh's guardians.

Before joining the RNZAF, Hugh was employed as a farm hand.

He enlisted on 19 April 1940 and after completing his training he was posted to England as a Sergeant, Navigator / Bomb Aimer with 14 Squadron, which, at the time, was based at RAF Stradishall flying Wellington bombers.
(photo right shows a Wellington at RAF Stradishall)

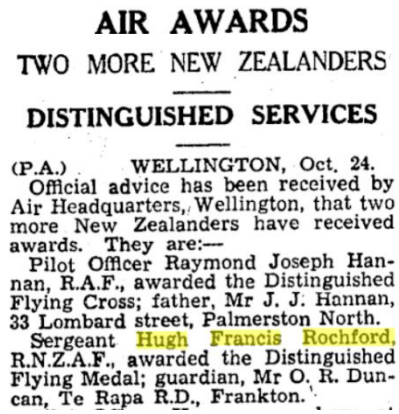






While with 214 Squadron RAF (Wellington) Hugh was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. This military decoration was awarded for 'exceptional valour, courage or devotion to duty whilst flying in active operations against the enemy'.

The Citation for his award dated 24 Oct 1941 reads: *Sergeant Hugh Francis Rochford has set a very fine example as an air observer throughout the many operational sorties in which he has participated. He has displayed great energy, fortitude and endurance which have had a beneficial effect on other members of the crew and helped to sustain them through a series of sorties which included a high proportion of very difficult targets. He has made himself a competent astronomical navigator entirely by his own efforts. He has at all times shown great coolness and courage.*



AIR AWARDS

TWO MORE NEW ZEALANDERS

DISTINGUISHED SERVICES

(P.A.) WELLINGTON, Oct. 24.

Official advice has been received by Air Headquarters, Wellington, that two more New Zealanders have received awards. They are:—

Pilot Officer Raymond Joseph Hannan, R.A.F., awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross; father, Mr J. J. Hannan, 33 Lombard street, Palmerston North.

Sergeant Hugh Francis Rochford, R.N.Z.A.F., awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal; guardian, Mr O. R. Duncan, Te Rapa R.D., Frankton.

Back home in New Zealand Hugh's family must have felt very proud to see news of his decoration printed in the Daily Times newspaper.

One can only assume that it was because of these qualities that Hugh was posted to the clandestine 138 Squadron which was also based at RAF Stradishall, Suffolk.

Reformed in 1941, No 138 was the first squadron of the Royal Air Force Special Duty Service initially based at RAF Stradishall before moving to RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire. The Royal Air Force Special Duties Service provided air transport to support the resistance movement in enemy controlled territories. Planes from the 138 Squadron were involved in top-secret missions to the heart of the war-torn Continent.

The squadron dropped supplies and agents for the SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) and the SOE (Special Operations Executive). The service helped develop and support the resistance by bringing in agents, wireless operators and supplies. They had to fly low and without lights in order to identify drop zones and deliver the supplies and secret agents that would help the resistance forces liberate Europe. Parachute drop was the primary method by which the Special Duties units delivered supplies and agents to the occupied countries. They also developed an air taxi service to pick up agents, political leaders and special communications from occupied Europe and bring them to England. They flew to target fields in Vichy and Occupied France, Belgium, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Greece.

On 30 October 1941, Whitley Mk V Z9223 piloted by F/Lt Albert John Oettle, DFC (who had only returned to flying two days previously after recovering from injuries sustained in a crash in April) with LAC Walter John Lee, both RAF and Sgt Hugh Francis Rochford, RNZAF, on board took off on a routine flight from RAF Stradishall. While returning to base the aircraft stalled short of the runway on approach to landing and crashed. All three men were killed.

Hugh was buried at Haverhill cemetery, Suffolk, England, grave 137, section U.

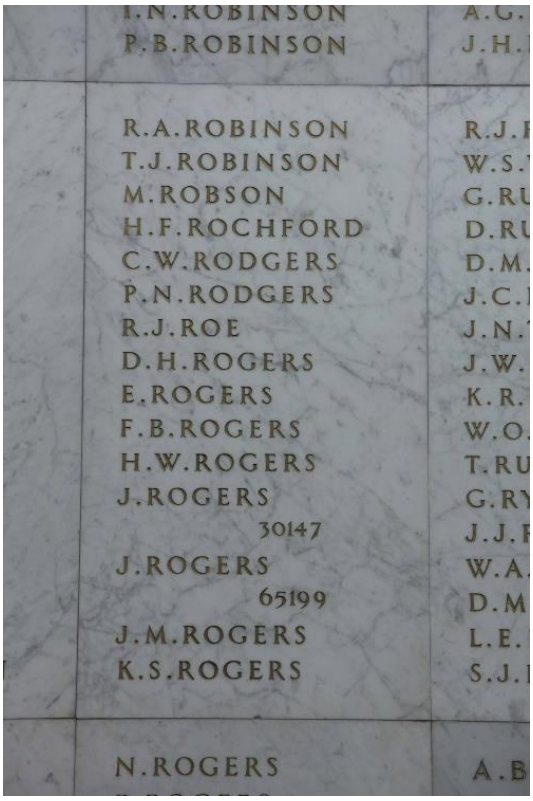
F/Lt Oettle DFC was buried at St Andrew Churchyard, Hove, Sussex. LAC Lee was buried in Huddersfield Cemetery.

AIR CASUALTIES

NEW ZEALAND VICTIMS

(P.A.) WELLINGTON, Nov. 11.
The following air casualties were announced to-day (all R.N.Z.A.F.):—
Sergeant Hugh Francis Rochford, killed in action; aunt, Mrs O. R. Duncan, Hamilton.

Barely three weeks after newspapers reported Hugh's military decoration they were now recording his death.



Hugh Francis Rochford's name is commemorated at Auckland War Memorial Museum, on the World War II Hall of Memories Panel R015



The pilot of the Whitley, F/O Albert Oettle, was educated at Brighton College joining the RAF in 1937 and receiving his commission in the same year. He was promoted to F/O on 12th May 1940, and to F/Lt on 12th May 1941. He was posted to 51 Squadron during which time he was awarded the DFC (Gazetted on 22nd October 1940).

After 51 Squadron he was firstly posted to 1419 Flight (a covert support unit) where he sustained injuries in an accident on 11th April 1941 in Whitley T4165. Two of the crew were killed and four injured. By the time he had recovered from these injuries 1419 Flight had become138 Squadron and he was posted there. He returned to flying duties less than two days before his death on 30th October 1941.

F/Lt Albert Oettle DFC is buried in Hove Churchyard, Sussex but has a special memorial as his grave position is lost. He was twenty five years old.

The following gives an indication of the type of work completed by the Special Duties squadrons.



On 10/11th. March 41 F/O Oettle returned Philip Schneidau, (photo right) a member of SIS (Secret Intelligence Service), to France when he parachuted to a location near his home in the Forest of Fontainbleau.

As a Sgt in the RAF in 1940, Philip Schneidau had been driver and interpreter to Air Marshal 'Ugly' Barratt, the AOC in C, British Air Forces in France. After the fall of France, at the age of 37, he was commissioned as a Pilot Officer. He was half French but opted for British nationality when 21. Before that he had played international hockey for France. He was dropped into France at least once by either 161 or 138 Sqdns. There are at least two photographs of him in the book, Agents by Moonlight. One in which he has changed his appearance slightly so as not to be recognised while in France (being a former international hockey player) and one in uniform.

It was not the first time Philip Schneidau had met F/O Oettle for he had dropped him in France on 9 October 1940. Eleven days later he was picked up at Montigny sur Loing by a Lysander flown by F/Lt. W.R. Farley. On this flight the radio went u/s on journey out and they lost the compass to a German bullet on return. They flew through bad weather until, with fuel exhausted, they crashed at their intended destination, RAF Tangmere near Chichester.

After being dropped by F/O Oettle on 10/11 March 1941 he spent several weeks in France before being picked up by S/L Knowles on 11 May.

After his work on the ground in France, he organised the Air & Sea transport of Agents both French & Polish, working at the British Embassy 1944-47 before returning to his pre-war occupation of Chartered Accountant. He died in Cheltenham on 14 January 1984 and was survived by his wife (who had been arrested by the Gestapo and tortured) and a son. His father in law was also in the Resistance and survived Buchenwald.