Roderick John HEATHER (1921 – 1943)





Pilot Officer

R.J.HEATHER

Navigator

Royal Canadian Air Force

12th March 1943 Age 21

427 (Lion) Squadron

TO LIVE IN THE HEARTS

OF THOSE WE LOVE

IS NOT TO DIE





Roderick John Heather was born on 25 August 1921, the son of Alfred Oswald Heather and Eileen Heather of St Clair, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

He attended Whitney School and Jarvis Collegiate and on completing his education, he found employment as a clerk. He had a younger brother William who also served with the RCAF, and a sister Bonnie Jean.

At the age of 18 he enlisted with the RCAF. A page from his military record dated 27 Aug 1940 identifies that he could speak French although not fluently. He was posted to No 1 Manning Depot as Air Crew (WO Gunner). He trained at Eglinton Hunt Club receiving his wings in March 1941 at Jarvis before spending another month in training at Rivers, Manitoba.

He went overseas in May 1941.

It is not known which squadron he served with on his arrival in England but he was later posted to No.427 "Lion" Squadron which started as a bomber squadron formed at Croft, 4 miles south-west from Skegness, on 7 November 1942 and spent its wartime entirely in England as a part of No. 6 Group RCAF, RAF Bomber Command. No 427 Squadron flew Vickers Wellington Mk IIIs and Mk Xs from its first operational mission, a minelaying sortie to the Frisian Islands, on 14 December 1942, until May 1943 when it was relocated to North Yorkshire. Wing Commander D H Burnside, although not a Canadian, was the first CO of 427 Squadron RCAF.

Following a raid on Essen on 5/6 March 1943, the 12/13 March saw a return operation. 457 aircraft - 158 Wellingtons, 156 Lancasters, 91 Halifaxes, 42 Stirlings and 10 Mosquitos took part in this raid. The centre of the bombing area was right across the giant Krupps factory, just west of the city centre, with later bombing drifting back to the north-western outskirts. Photographic interpretation assessed that Krupps received 30 per cent more damage on this night than on the earlier successful raid of 5/6 March.

All eleven R.C.A.F. squadrons participated in this raid, contributing a total of 113 aircraft, of which 89 attacked the target and three were reported missing (Nos. 420, 424 and 425 Squadrons lost one aircraft each). Weather conditions were excellent with no cloud and bright moonlight, though the usual industrial haze and later, smoke, obscured ground details. Defences had evidently been considerably strengthened and very intense and accurate heavy flak was experienced during the first half of the attack. Searchlights, operating in large cones of fifty or sixty and smaller cones of about twenty, were extremely active.

Pilot Officer Rod Heather was in the crew of Wellington, BK164 ZL-E for this raid. Other crew members were: the squadron's Commanding Officer, Wing Commander D.H. Burnside DFC, Flight Sergeant G.S. Keene DFM, Pilot Officer R.J. Hayhurst, and Pilot Officer D.B. Ross.

Their aircraft was hit by heavy anti-aircraft fire before reaching the target and navigator, Pilot Officer Rod Heather, was killed instananeously, while Flight Sergeant G.S. Keene, D.F.M., the wireless operator, who was in the astro-dome, had his right foot blown off and received cuts on both legs.



P.O. R. HEATHER LISTED KILLED

Had Participated in Raids Over Europe

P.O. Roderick John Heather, R.C.A.F., 21, mentioned several times for raids over enemy territory, was killed March 12 on active service over Germany, according to word received yesterday by his mother, Mrs. Eileen Heather, 14 Chatsworth Drive. He had been on active service overseas nearly two years, and at one time was reported missing for 48 hours.

P.O. Heather.

Mrs. Heather was expecting her son home in May. A letter received recently from a younger son, Sgt. Pilot William Heather, on active service overseas with the R.C.A.F., cautioned his mother not to count too much on Rod coming home in May. "Rod doesn't want to go home—he wants to stay here until he finishes the job," Sgt. Pilot Heather wrote.

The aileron control of the aircraft was affected and the windscreen de-icing glycol tank burst, drenching Pilot Officer R.J. Hayhurst, the bomb aimer, and filling the forward part of the bomber with suffocating fumes. Despite this, they managed to reach their target which was successfully bombed and a good photograph obtained. The aircraft was held by searchlights while over the target, but W/C Burnside managed to evade the defences and set course for home. On their return trip they encountered fighters, which Pilot Officer D.B. Ross, the air gunner, managed to beat off, at the same time issuing directions for evasive tactics which proved successful. W/C Burnside managed to crash land the damaged aircraft at RAF Stradishall with no further loss of life.

Roderick John Heather was buried in Haverhill cemetery, Suffolk, England, grave 145, section U.

He was survived by his mother, his brother, Sgt Pilot Heather and his sister, Bonnie Jean.



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The surviving crew members received gallantry awards. W/C Burnside was awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross, P/Os Hayhurst and Ross received the Distinguished Flying Cross, while F/S Keene was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal.

"Pilot Officer Heather was killed by the same explosion which wounded Flight Sergeant Geoffrey Keen my father and probably saved his life as a result, I therefore owe Rod (as my father knew him) a very great debt of gratitude. May they both now rest in peace." - Written by Martin Keen, son of Flight Sergeant Geoffrey Keen.