

AWM 65

[3756]

MUIRHEAD, MERVYN JOHN

427136

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES  
ACCESS STATUS

OPEN

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE  
OFFICERS & AIRCREW

Missing 298.144  
P.O.W 19-10-44  
Reported liberated by Soviets  
on or about 9/2/45

The following biographical details are requested for use as R.A.A.F. Overseas Headquarters, London.

Safe H.E. 16-3-45

Surname MURHEAD.....Number 427136

Christian Names MERVYN JOHN.....

Air Force Rank & Mustering SGT. OBSERVER.....

Degrees, Decorations, etc.....

Present Appointment & Location R.A.A.F. 11 P.D.R.C......

Date of Birth 8/7/20.....Place Mulland Junction West Aust.

Educated North Boys School West Aust......

Date of Entering Service 24/7/42.....

Previous Service Experience 2 months Army.....

Places of Training in R.A.A.F. 5173, W.A. (CANTON, W.A.) 3 A.O.S. (MILLERS VALLEY, SA) 2 B.A.G.S. (PERDIE, SA) 2 PANG HILL, VIC.

Civilian Career & Activities.....

Clubs, Recreations, etc.....

Father's Name Hugh Thomas Murhead.....

Wife's Name.....

Children.....

Home Address 29 Kathleen Ave. Maylands W. A.

Signature M. Murhead

Date 9/7/45

Date Embarked Australia.....

Destination United Kingdom.....

Personal

## Nazis failed to trick Australian prisoner

Evening Standard Correspondent

When 24-year-old Flight-sergeant M. J. Muirhead of Maylands, Western Australia, baled out of a flak-riddled Lancaster over East Prussia, in August 1944, he began adventures which led him through German prison camps into friendly Polish and Russian hands, and ultimately to the Middle East as one of the first repatriated prisoners.

Flight-sergeant Muirhead, a navigator, was on his twelfth operation with Königsberg as the target, when his aircraft was hit and the crew jumped. Muirhead and the pilot landed in a marsh.

Next day they were caught and taken to a prison outside Königsberg, where they met two other members of their crew—the bomb-aimer and rear-gunner.

### Taken to Frankfurt

From Königsberg the Australians were removed to Frankfurt. At this stage Muirhead was presented with a form purporting to be issued by the Red Cross, which he was requested to fill in.

Itemised headings sought details of name, age, rank, home address, civil occupation, squadron number, group number, type of aircraft flown, machine number of aircraft, names of members of the crew, target on the last mission, whether shot down by flak or fighters, and date of capture.

Muirhead read through the document and threw it down.

"I told him my rank, name and number, but would go no farther," said Muirhead.

"Half an hour later, I was interviewed by another soldier, who gave orders that the form was to be filled in. It was produced, but I waved it aside.

"Then I was again presented with the form, but I refused to fill it up. I was told that I had two days in which to change my mind.

"Next, I was told that it would be sufficient if I gave my name, rank and number. This I was prepared to do and to ensure that the rest of the form was not filled in with phoney details I drew heavy lines across it with a pencil."

### Escaped

Eventually, Muirhead and another captive—Sergeant Dyson—escaped on January 19, when 150 prisoners were being marched off to an unknown destination.

They hid in a brick-kiln until the Germans had gone and later, with other escaped men, halted Russian tanks advancing towards Carlsruhe.

They were sent by train to Odessa, and 10 days later sailed to a Mediterranean port.

The son of Mr. Hugh Muirhead, of Maylands, Western Australia, Flight-sergeant Muirhead was educated at Perth Boys' School. Two of his brothers, Alan, 28, and Keith, 22, are serving in the Australian Army.

RAAF  
Release  
No 1065

*Evening Standard*

11-4-45

ONE BOMB FLOODED KRUPPS AND STOPPED PRODUCTION - MANAGER TELLSEFFECTS OF AIRRAIDS

One bomb stopped the nerve centre of the mighty Krupps armament works at Essen. It was dropped from an Allied four engine aircraft on October 23rd of last year and cut the main water supply from the river. Great parts of the Krupps area were flooded and it took several weeks to restore the vital water supplies to set the Krupp machinery going again. The steel production line - which is only part of the prolific output of Krupps - dropped within a few minutes from 42,000 tons a day to nil. After a few weeks it rose again to 3,000 tons, less than 8 per cent of the pre-bombing output.

This is only one example of a raid on Krupps cited by the general manager, Professor Dr. Eduard Houdremont, one of the world's most noted metallurgists who since June last year has been in supreme command of the works, which then employed over 50,000 men in the Essen district alone.

Power than 150 persons were killed or wounded in all the 14 saturation raids on the factory area, according to the medical officer in charge of the Krupp hospital, Dr. Gerhard Wiele, who said that there were never more than 20 or 30 casualties among the 50,000 workers after any one air attack. Factory workers, office staff, crews of the mines and blast furnaces left their work on the first blast of the sirens, and consequently apart from the material damage caused by the air attacks production was completely interrupted for a considerable number of man-hours during every raid.

Engineers had to do scavengers' work. They helped to reconstruct some of the damaged buildings and sheds to keep up skeleton production, but since the raid of the 26th July, 1944, no complete gun of any kind left the Krupps workshops. Since the last raid, on the 11th March this year, production stopped altogether. The men could not cope any longer with the devastation. They made some haphazard attempts to clear roads between shattered sheds but did not succeed.

In the villa of the Krupp family technical and business experts continued to plan the rebuilding and reconstruction of the factories. Their offices and draughting rooms were in the bedrooms; they worked in the famous picture gallery and in Frau Krupps' boudoir.

In spite of all the wreckage Krupps' self-supporting organisation catering for nearly a quarter million people could continue to function to some extent. There were still electric lights in the underground offices, workshops and stores. There was enough food to see all employees through till the next harvest, and enough water for household purposes but not sufficient to run the steam boilers which produced the power for the works.

There were no trains running through Essen after the 8th March this year. Train-loads of coal, tools, spares for tanks, for aircraft and guns, were blocked in the choked railways. The secret plans for new weapons were still in the safe of the chief constructor, Professor Brich Mueller, but the laboratory was wrecked. Part of it had been transferred to Silesia and Austria where experiments continued, but by the time the serial blueprints came back to Essen the toolsheds had been bombed.

Personal file - F/Sgt. M.J. Muirhead

NAAF Release No. 1065

March 27, 1945.

ESCAPED AUSTRALIAN P.O.W. MEN  
ADVANCING RUSSIANS

When 29 year old 427136. Wm 467 Sqdn. <sup>now</sup> Russian,  
Flight Sergeant M.J. Muirhead, of Maylands, Western Australia,  
baled out of a flak riddled Lancaster over East Prussia, in August 1944,  
he embarked upon a saga of adventures which led him through German  
prison camps thence into friendly Polish and Russian hands and  
ultimately to the Middle East as a member of the first party of  
repatriated prisoners of war from Germany.

A member of a Royal Australian Air Force Lancaster squadron  
operating from an English air base, F/Sgt. Muirhead is a navigator.  
It was on his twelfth operation, with Konigsberg as the target, that  
his aircraft was hit by flak. After it had released its bombs, the  
Lancaster was hit in the port outer engine and then in the port  
inner engine, the wing caught fire and as the machine spiralled down  
out of control, the pilot gave the order to the crew to jump. The  
aircraft was then at 15,000 ft. Muirhead and the pilot landed  
within a hundred yards of each other in a marshy field. They buried  
their parachutes, stripped off their insignias of rank and wings  
and set off walking. It was now 1.30 in the morning and they  
continued on their way until dawn when they came to a railway siding

and hid themselves in a goods shed. They remained there until dusk and then resumed their walk along a main road, their intention being to pass through Konigsberg and cross the border into Sweden.

From dawn until dusk on the following day, they hid in a cowshed and having taken to the road again they hailed a passing lorry. Posing as Italians unsuccessfully tried to obtain a lift into Konigsberg. They continued their hike and as they were passing the entrance to an airfield they were challenged by a guard. They quickened their pace but when the guard yelled "Inglander" they thought it best to turn back. Another sentry emerged from the shadows and the two Australians were marched to the watch tower where they were subjected to mild interrogation. They were then taken by car to a neighbouring barracks where they were lodged for night. In the morning they were removed to a prison outside Konigsberg where they met up with two other members of their crew, fixing the bomb aimer and P/Sgt. Stockdale of Perth, Western Australia the rear gunner.

In the afternoon captives were taken to a railway station and saw the destruction wrought in the city. Many buildings were still smouldering as a result of the attack launched two nights earlier.

From Konigsberg the Australians were removed to an interrogation camp outside Frankfurt. Here they were thoroughly searched and had their possessions taken away from them. At this stage Muirhead obtained a revealing insight into German methods of interrogation. Shortly after he had been placed in his room, furnished with a bed, pallaise and one blanket, he was sent for and presented with a form purporting to be issued by the Red Cross which he was requested to fill in. The itemised headings on the document sought details of name, age, rank, home address, civil occupation, squadron number, group number, type of aircraft flown, machine number of aircraft, name of member of the crew, target on the last mission, whether shot down by flak or fighters and date of capture. "The form", said Muirhead, "was handed to me by a soldier whose rank I was unable to guess. As I entered his room, I stood to attention but speaking quite good English he told me to sit down and make myself comfortable".

"I am only a soldier like yourself," he said, "there is no need for formality".

I read through the document and threw it down.

"We merely want those facts to establish that you are not a spy", he said, "and he read out items listed on the form.

"I told him my rank, name and number but would go no further".

"You are being very silly", said my interrogator, "don't you want your people to know what has happened to you?".

Making no headway he sent me back to my room half an hour later. I was interviewed in my room by another soldier who told me that the Commandant had given express orders that the form was to be filled in. It was produced for my benefit but I waved it aside. Then he threatened that, unless I complied with the request I would go without food for three days. Since the daily ration was two slices of black bread and a plate of cabbage soup, I wasn't very much shaken, and quite cheerfully submitted to the three days fast. At the end of it, I was once again presented with the form but once more refused to have anything to do with it. I was told that I would be allowed two days in which to change my mind. Next in this series of wearisome interviews, I was told that it would be sufficient if I signed my name, rank and number. This I was prepared to do and in order to ensure that the rest of the form was not filled in with phoney details, supposed to have been supplied by myself, I drew heavy lines across it with a pencil.

From the interrogation camp the prisoners were removed to another camp at Wetzlar and after a short spell in a temporary camp were taken, in early November, to a permanent camp at Barkau. Conditions here were reasonably comfortable, our rations comprising one sixth



of a loaf of bread per day, soup, a spoonful of sugar and an occasional portion of margarine and jam were fairly appetizing if not wholly satisfying.

The prisoners heard of the Russian advances by the sound of heavy gunfire drawing increasingly nearer. At dawn on January 19, the prisoners numbering 150, all aircrew members were told that the camp was being evacuated. Under an escort of 50 guards they were marched off to unknown destination. When the order to march was given Muirhead and another captive, an English engineer, Sgt. Byson, decided that the occasion was propitious for an escape attempt. An opportunity was presented in the early evening when, having marched 26 kilometres, the party was ordered to halt and rest up for spell. On the pretext of searching for firewood with which to brew some tea, Muirhead and his companion, together with a Canadian wireless operator, Warrant Officer Marini, wandered off to a brick kiln and hid themselves in a shaft. At 8 o'clock they heard the cries of the German guards who had obviously discovered their escape. For two hours a search, in which dogs took part, was conducted. The searchers entered the kiln but failed to examine the shaft and after remaining in hiding overnight the three men set out on the road. Calling at a house for food, they were met by three Poles who told them that six other Englishmen who had escaped from the camp party were hiding in

a nearby kiln. The two bands of escapees joined forces, provided with tea and food by the Poles, and at 7 o'clock that night had the stark heartening experience of hearing tanks which were the spearhead of the Russian advance towards Carlsruhe.

The nine aircrew members hitch-hiked their way on Russian transports to the Polish border and proceeded by easy stages to Lublin. The first Britishers to be seen in the city, they were lodged in a Polish camp but subsequently transferred to a camp specially set up for British prisoners of war.

While at Lublin Blairhead took the opportunity to inspect the notorious German concentration camp where thousands of Poles were massacred. "The experience," he said, "was not one to be relished by anybody with weak stomach. The place could be described as a butcher's shop with human beings on mass as victims. There were rows of ovens, each of which was large enough to hold four bodies. There were gallows from which coils of rope still dangled suggestively. Chopping blocks from which heads had tumbled, poison gas chambers into which victims had been herded alive and pits 20 ft. in depth in which piles of bleached bones were still visible. Possibly, saddest of all, was the spectacle of a huge mound of boots and shoes -- men's, women's and children's -- which the Germans had

economically removed from their victims. Over the entire place hung a forbidding air of death and horror".

From Lublin the P.O.s were taken by train to Odessa, where a repatriation committee was sitting and 10 days later the first party sailed to a Mediterranean port.

The son of Mr. Hugh Muirhead, of Haylands, Western Australia, P/Sgt. Muirhead was educated at Perth Boys' School. A woodyard manager before he joined the RAAF in May 1942, he went to England in July of the following year and a year later was posted to an RAAF Lancaster squadron. Two of his brothers Alan 26 and Keith 22 are serving in the Australian Army.

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RAAF MEN FREED BY RUSSIANS

Six members of the RAAF - five aircrew and one ground staff - are among Allied prisoners of war released for captivity in Silesia as a result of the Russian offensive. They are (427136) Warrant Officer M.J. Muirhead, of Maylands, Western Australia; (427323) Warrant Officer P.P. Hardwick, of Wembley Park, Western Australia; (428623) Flight Sergeant W.F. Sutherland, of Melbourne; (426648) Flight Sergeant C.A.F. Murray, of Brisbane; (426379) Flight Sergeant M.J. O'Leary, of Brisbane, and (6532) AC1 J. Goodall, of Brisbane. They have now reached the Middle East from Odessa.

All the members of the RAAF liaison office in the Middle East, headed by the Liaison Officer, Group Captain J.E. Graham, gave the released airmen a warm welcome and they were re-equipped with clothing and other necessities.

Goodall, whose father is a prisoner of war in Malaya, went to the Middle East in July, 1940, with the first Australian squadron to come there - it is now flying Mustangs with distinction in Italy. He was taken prisoner on April 8, 1941, at Fort Mechili, in Cyrenaica, while on loan as a ground wireless operator to an RAF

squadron. Fort Mechili was surrounded and occupants captured, including members of the Third Anti-Tank Regiment, AIF.

Goodall was sent from Tripoli to Italy, where he was held for nearly two and a half years, and then to Germany in September, 1943, after the Italian armistice. His treatment by Germans was much better than at Italian hands and food in Germany was also better. In Silesia he went to work in the coalmines.

On July 31, 1944, Goodall and Gumer E.V. Cox, of Marrickville, New South Wales (of the Third Anti-Tank Regiment) gave the Germans the slip and played hide-and-seek with them for five and a half months until the Russians arrived in January. The Russians treated them as well as they treated their own men. They were taken to Lublin, in Poland, where they were interrogated and then to Warsaw, where they were also interrogated, and then by train to Odessa.

Murray was member of Australian Baltimore squadron operating from Italy and was shot down over Northern Italy in August last year.

Muirhead, Sutherland, Hardwick and O'Leary were all members of different Lancaster crews operating from England and were shot down over Germany between June and October last year.

Muirhead was shot down following a raid on Koenigsberg in August, the Germans interrogated him for eleven days. He was then put into a Silesian prison camp and remained there until the Germans began to march their prisoners westward because of the victorious Russian advance. He and two companions hid in a brick kiln, where they were found by Poles next day. That night the Russian tanks appeared and Muirhead rode into Karlsruhe on top of a Churchill tank. He was then sent to Poland and slowly made his way to Odessa.

O'Leary (shot down in July) Hardwick (shot down in June) and Murray escaped together when being marched back. They fell out in a village, under plea of exhaustion, and waited there fourteen days for the Russians. They were then marched back forty five miles to a reception centre and later taken by motor lorry and train to Poland and subsequently to Odessa.

All six escapees are well.

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