

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

FLGOFF THEODORE 'TED' VICTOR BENNO KLEINIG

Barossa teacher killed on Xmas Day 1943 only months after arriving in theatre



While we often acknowledge and honour the exploits and sacrifices of our well-known military heroes, for everyone one of these, there are numerous others whose stories are unknown and whose acts of heroism also warrant recognition. All too often, these unsung heroes are overlooked or forgotten inevitably left hidden in the annals of Australia's war records waiting for someone to uncover them.

In 2014, RAAF Edinburgh staff were contacted by Playford Council in relation to the log book of a RAAF pilot who served in World War 2. The log book had been found during the demolition of a suburban property and handed to the council for safe-keeping. RAAF officers researched the log book and its owner and uncovered the tragic story of unsung hero Flying Officer (FLGOFF) Theodore 'Ted' Victor Benno Kleinig.

Son of Johann Hermann and Dorothea Kleinig, Theodore Kleinig was born in Stockwell in the Barossa Valley on 9 October 1917. He became a teacher and taught at Truro Primary School, just down the road from Stockwell. In 1941, he made the decision to join the Royal Australian Air Force in response to the Nation's call to arms. He was 24 years old.

After completing his preliminary training at No. 4 Initial Training School in Victor Harbor, in 1942 he commenced pilot training at Parafield Airfield – then a RAAF base. Following time as a Staff Officer, Kleinig was posted to No 100 Squadron in August 1943. Although fully operational, 100 SQN were flying the Beaufort light bomber aircraft in the Southwest Pacific Area. On 2 December 1943, Kleinig was transferred to 8 SQN.



Figure 1 - A Beaufort Mk. VIII (A9-404) Circa 1943. Image: Mike Mirkovic ADF-Serial Image Gallery.

Based around the Milne Bay area of south-eastern modern-day Papua New Guinea, 8 and 100 SQN were heavily involved in the Allied Air Operations in the Southwest Pacific. In particular, they were conducting maritime interdiction and land strike missions around New Britain. Rabaul, captured by the Japanese in January 1942, became a major Japanese base with five airfields, searchlights, strong anti-aircraft artillery defences and fighter aircraft.

As part of "Operation Cartwheel", an Allied strategy aimed at isolating Rabaul and reducing it by air raids, the US Fifth Air Force, the RAAF and the RNZAF began a sustained bombing campaign against the airfields and port of Rabaul. The initial mission was delivered by 349 aircraft on 12 October 1943.

After transferring to 8 SQN on 2 December 1943, Kleinig successfully conducted several bombing missions against Japanese forces at Rabaul. On 6 December he had been one of eight pilots who flew in a raid with 8 SQN. On 13 December he had been one of 13 pilots sent on a mission to strike Lakunai Airfield near Rabaul. This was the same target he would strike on 25 December, 1943.

Prior to taking off on 13 December 1943, a visiting photographer took a photo of FLGOff Kleinig and his crew.



Figure 2- (Left) Flying Officer Ted Kleinig (back left) along with his crew, who were killed on 25 December 1943 after a strike mission. Image Australian War Memorial.

On Christmas Day 1943, FLGOff Kleinig took off in RAAF Beaufort Bomber A9-444, in one of the mass air raids against the Japanese over Rabaul. He and his crew would no doubt have been looking forward to returning to base safely that same day to enjoy the Christmas festivities the Squadron had planned. It was hot, humid and basic. Kleinig's camp had been devastated by malaria over the preceding weeks, so the prospect of Christmas festivities was a great incentive to get the job done and return safely to base.

Kleinig's crew dropped their bombs over the target area, but one failed to release. They had a 'hung bomb'. As they came into land at Vivigani Airfield on Goodenough Island, New Guinea, their emotions must have been running high. They had survived another dangerous mission and were returning to base to enjoy Christmas festivities but now they had to land safely – with a hung bomb?

Kleinig circled the airstrip, and according to accounts, came in to land a little high. The aircraft bounced, and as it did, the hung bomb exploded on the starboard side. The tail of the aircraft rose and the rear section disintegrated. As the wreckage slid forward, the fuel tanks in the wings exploded and two airmen were thrown out of the aircraft. The two other airmen were

incinerated within. All four aircrew were killed; the same airmen photographed just twelve days earlier.

FLGOFF Kleinig had only arrived in theatre one month prior and had commenced duties with 8 SQN a few weeks before his untimely and tragic death. Initially buried in Milne Bay War Cemetery, FLGOFF Kleinig's remains were later relocated to the main Port Moresby War Cemetery at Bomana in Papua New Guinea.

Christmas Day would never be the same for his parents, Johann and Dorothea.

Today, FLGOFF Ted Kleinig's log book, a photo of his crew, and details of their tragic deaths, are on display at the RAAF Edinburgh Officers Mess; a tribute prepared by RAAF Edinburgh after his log book was given to them by Playford Council.

Figure 3 – (Right) *Mr Rodney Kleinig, a nephew of FLGOFF Ted Kleinig, views the Airman's log book on display at the RAAF Base Edinburgh Officers Mess.*



Greg Weller
History Group Member
GPCAPT RAAF