



Wing Wa **FIRE**



With his bomber hit and on fire, a brave New Zealander attempted one young man's extreme bravery which led to New Zealand's

Returning from a 'milk run' over Munster, Germany, the crew of one 75 Sqn Wellington were initially grateful for their lack of opposition that night; next to no flak and a small scattering of probing searchlights. They had taken off from RAF Feltwell at 11:10 pm on 7 July 1941, just hours after receiving their new Wellington IC, L7818, AA-R, which they had flown for a 15-minute air test before the operation. She joined nine other 75 Sqn aircraft

on the operation, with a total of 41 Wellingtons in the force. After releasing their bombs over the already burning target, the crew of L7818 felt safe enough to orbit the area for a while before setting course for home. As one young crew member, James Ward, remembered:

"It had been one of those trips that you dream about—hardly any opposition over the target; just a few searchlights but very little flak—and that night at Munster I saw more fires than I had ever seen before"





Walking FIREFIGHTER

Completed the impossible in order to get his aircraft back home. **John Ash** tells the story of the first Victoria Cross of the war and the only VC awarded to a Wellington crew member.

Ward, the Wellington's co-pilot and on only his sixth operation, was positioned in the aircraft's astro-dome. Scanning the sky above the Netherlands, the young New Zealander picked out a fast moving silhouette against the night over the shining and silvery Zuider Zee. With the intercom system out of order, Ward was unable to do anything. He had no guns to engage with, and no way of warning the crew. Meanwhile, the shape quickly became clearer; a Messerschmitt 110 night-fighter. Rapidly, it sped up from beneath the Wellington on the port side. >>

LEFT:

Humble and modest, James Allen Ward VC.

MAIN IMAGE:

75 Sqn RAF's Wellingtons assemble ahead of their mission.





WING WALKING FIREFIGHTER

Sgt James Ward - New Zealand VC

RIGHT:

Two 75 Sqn Wellingtons in flight. (RNZAF)

BRIGHT TRACER WHIZZED PAST

The German fighter had been stalking the bomber at 13,000 feet, within sight of the Dutch coast – and relative safety. A tremendous racket resounded throughout the aircraft which shuddered violently. High-pressure hydraulic oils sprayed around the aircraft as deadly cannon shells hit the belly of the bomber, sending fragments and red-hot splinters everywhere. The cockpit filled rapidly with smoke, and bright tracer whizzed past the nose of the bomber.

The Wellington's 'tail end Charlie' Sergeant A. J. R. Box, was positioned in the bomber's rear turret and had been silently watching for enemy aircraft. Startled by the attack, the 19-year-old gunner was hit in the foot and, looking around in shock, he saw the Me 110, almost certainly of NJG 1, race past the stern of the Wellington, climbing, and then banking away. The fighter exposed his underside, seemingly mere feet from the tail of the bomber. Armed with four Browning .303in machine guns, Box let rip, hitting the underside of the predatory fighter. The German fell back on itself, the bright moonlight easily allowing Sergeant Box to confirm his 'kill', as the bomber-hunter spiralled downward, smoking and burning. That said, despite Box's confirmations, no Me 110 was lost that night – though two returned with heavy damage.

Unaware of what was going on behind the aircraft, Ward and the

crew dealt with the aftermath of the surprise attack. The Canadian pilot, Sqn Ldr R. P. Widdowson, had put the aircraft into a steep dive to escape the danger, but upon levelling out it was evident that the German's aim had been devastating. The Wellington's hydraulic lines were ruptured, the bomb doors had fallen open, the radios were destroyed, and the already faulty intercom system was permanently knocked-out. The undercarriage had become lodged half way down, unable

to be raised, but unless it could be lowered it would be useless for landing. Sergeant T. Evans, the front-gunner, was also wounded.

GUSHES OF BURNING FUEL

With deadly precision, the German pilot had also directed some of his cannon and machine gun fire into



BELOW:

Ground crews at RAF Feltwell 'bomb up' Mk.I Wellington 'J for jig' of 75 Sqn, 1940. (BOB UPPENDAUN COLLECTION)





the starboard engine of the stricken new Wellington. A fuel pipe had been damaged in the attack, spitting fuel everywhere which soon ignited as gushes of burning fuel spewed out over the wing. Soon, a continuous five-foot spurt of flame was shooting out of the engine as the pilot stood in the cramped cockpit to observe the inferno on his wing which was now lighting up the cockpit. Turning the bomber parallel with the Dutch coast, Widdowson barked at Ward to order the crew to ready their

ABOVE: AA-Y of 75 Sqn is checked over by ground crew - the unsung heroes of the RAF's war, certainly in Ward's eyes, who was sure to thank them. (ANDREW THOMAS)

BELOW: Wellington Mk.III Z1572 survived the war, serving with 16 OTU. However, she also served with 115, 75, 419 (as depicted) and 427 Sqns RAF. (CANADIAN FORCES)

parachutes. He paused, hesitated for a second, and added: "...and see if you can put out that bloody fire."

Ward moved aft toward the centre of the aircraft, passing on the skipper's orders to the rest of the crew. Then, with the assistance of Sergeant L. A. Lawton, the navigator, and Sergeant W. Mason, the wireless radio operator, Ward cut a hole into the side of the fuselage as the three used the gap and tried to battle the raging engine fire with their extinguishers. However, the slipstream simply blew the liquid away and, as it was, the engine was barely within range, anyway. Next, the three airmen reached for their coffee flasks, but attempts to douse the fire by throwing coffee over it were utterly futile in the slipstream.

However, Ward noticed that at the very least the fire wasn't getting any worse.

The crew now ready to bale-out, Ward reported back to Widdowson: "The squadron leader said, "What does it look like to you?" I told him the fire didn't seem to be gaining at all and that it seemed to be quite steady. He said, "I think we'd prefer a night in the dinghy in the North Sea to ending up in a German prison camp." With that he turned out seawards and headed for England."

'THINK I'LL HOP OUT WITH THIS'

Back in the fuselage, Ward again assessed the situation and then picked up the canvas cockpit cover, turned to Sergeant Lawton and said: >>



 Sgt J A Ward VC

James Allen Ward, 22 at the time of earning his VC, was born on the 14 June 1919 in Wanganui, New Zealand. The son of English immigrants, Ward was an athletic type with a passion for New Zealand's history and culture, and could also speak some Maori. He was very much influenced by the Baptist faith of his mother and father, and was brought up with a strong sense of responsibility for protecting those around him. His interest in aircraft developed through the making of model aeroplanes. Ward attended Wanganui Technical College and opted to pursue an academic career, training to become a teacher in Wellington. In 1939 he began teaching at Castle Cliff School, Wanganui, but on the outbreak of war volunteered to join the Royal New Zealand Air Force. He was trained in New Zealand as well as in Scotland, joining 75 Sqn at RAF Feltwell, Norfolk. On his 22nd birthday, he was involved in his first operation over Düsseldorf.



WING WALKING FIREFIGHTER

Sgt James Ward - New Zealand VC Hero



ABOVE:
75 Sqn aircrew leave their pre-ops briefing, early 1941.
(WW2 IMAGES)

RIGHT:
Ground crew pose alongside one of 75 Sqn's Wellingtons.
(ANDREW THOMAS)

"Think I'll hop out with this." He later reflected: "I had a good look at the fire and I thought there was a sporting chance of reaching it by getting out through the astro-dome, then down the side of the fuselage and out on to the wing... [Lawton] said he thought it was crazy."

Insistent, Ward convinced the crew to let him venture out of the aircraft. Lawton made him wear a chest parachute, and also forced Ward to be tied to a rope. He commented: "Take the ruddy thing, you fool", to which Ward replied, "Oh, Ok, then."

The men stripped their emergency dinghy of its rope,

and tied it around Ward's waist with the courageous New Zealander now anchored with the other end of the rope tied around Lawton. Ward remembered: "There was a rope there; just the normal length of rope attached to the rubber dinghy to stop it drifting away from the aircraft when it's released on the water. We tied that round my chest, and I climbed up through the astro-dome. I still had my parachute on. I wanted to take it off because I thought it would get in the way, but they wouldn't let me."

VIOLENTLY BUFFETED

The pair had removed the astro-dome hatch, and Ward climbed through the opening, roughly two-and-a-half feet across. Instantly buffeted by the slipstream, Ward secured himself the best he could and then rested, analysing the situation. Carefully, and fighting for grip, Ward scrambled down the three feet to the wing root, anchored by Lawton. Gripping the edge of the dome, Ward



RIGHT:
Home safe. Wellington Mk Ic T2835 AA-C shortly after returning from a mission over Germany.
(WW2 IMAGES)





kicked holes into the side of the aircraft, easily breaking through the fabric skin and resting his boots on the Wellington's geodetic structure. As he remembered: "I reached out with one foot and kicked a hole in the fabric so that I could get my foot into the framework of the plane, and then I punched another hole through the fabric in front of me to get a hand-hold, after which I made further holes and went down the side of the fuselage on to the wing. Joe was holding on to the rope so that I wouldn't sort of drop straight off." Ward then tried to lay flat along the wing of the bomber, but his chest parachute and the bulk of the canvas underneath his body prevented him from doing so and he was violently buffeted by the slipstream. His only option was to cut out further holes in the wing of the aircraft, and to cling on for dear life.

"The fire was burning up through the wing rather like a big gas jet, and it was blowing back just past my shoulder. I had only one hand to work with getting out, because I was holding on with the other to the cockpit cover. I never realised before how bulky a cockpit cover was. The wind kept catching it and several times nearly blew it away and me with it. I kept bunching it under my arm. Then out it would blow again. All the time, of course, I was lying as flat as I could on the wing, but I couldn't get right down close because of the parachute in front of me on my chest. The wind kept lifting me off the wing. Once it slapped me back on to the fuselage again, but



I managed to hang on. The slipstream from the engine made things worse. It was like being in a terrific gale, only much worse than any gale I've ever known in my life."

UNRELENTING BURNING PAINS

Ward edged inch by inch down the wing, covering about four feet. He discovered a large hole in the side of the starboard engine, and holding on only with his left hand, tried to stuff the hole, filled with flame, with the canvas. Holding the canvas in place with one hand, and clinging onto the aircraft with his other and battling the wind and the cold, exhaustion set in rapidly. The heat from the fire was also a problem, and unrelenting burning pains in his right hand forced him to let go. Gripping on

to the aircraft with his left hand, the slipstream mercilessly pulling at his body was also excruciating. The cover began to instantaneously blow away in the high speed winds, but Ward reached over and with all his remaining strength rammed the canvas back into the engine fire. Barely a few seconds later, the canvas had again shifted and this time escaped Ward's grasp. He commented: "The rear gunner told me afterwards that he saw it go sailing past his turret. I just couldn't hold on to it any longer."

He could do no more. A quick glance confirmed that although the fire was still raging, the flames had died down and that all the surrounding fabric material had been burned away or torn off. Somehow, Ward had achieved >>

ABOVE:

An example of the Me 110 Night Fighter which attacked Ward's Wellington. Although the rear gunner logged a 'kill', it seems that the heavily damaged bomber-hunter managed to land.

(1940 MEDIA LTD)

BELOW:

75 Sqn Wellington AA-N is prepared for a night mission to Berlin on 11 April 1941.

(WW2 IMAGES)





WING WALKING FIREFIGHTER

Sgt James Ward - New Zealand VC Hero



ABOVE:

Returned 75 Sqn air crew walk by one of their Wellingtons, presumably heading off for breakfast and well earned kip! (WW2 IMAGES)



RIGHT:

Sergeant James Allen Ward in the cockpit of Wellington Ic L7818 at Feltwell, July 1941. (ANDREW THOMAS)

a miracle and undoubtedly saved the wing from burning through. Shattered and fatigued, he turned around and clambered slowly back to the main fuselage, using the footholes he had made for himself. Lawton battled to keep Ward's safety line taut, and was vital in helping Ward climb back into the Wellington, albeit with great difficulty. For a while, Ward became wedged in the astro-dome hatch, with his right leg stuck outside the aircraft. Lawton, cursing, lifted Ward, reached out, and unstuck Ward's leg. The young New Zealand then fell into the fuselage through the hatch.

BATTLE DAMAGED AND STILL BURNING

Resting inside the bomber, dazed, Ward likened the interior

to that of a tomb; eerily quiet and deathly still when compared to the crazy buffeted world outside on the wing. A tired Lawton reported back to the pilot, Widdowson, that Ward had been successful in his attempts to stop the blaze spreading along the wing. The pilot once again stood to observe the fire, understandably amazed at Ward's valiant achievements. As the relieved pilot sat back down, he set a course for home.

Despite the fire erupting again on the journey back to base, Ward's efforts had ensured that it didn't spread. There was now little danger, and the fire eventually died out. The London Gazette reported that this second blaze was caused by petrol which had pooled up inside the wing. Just after 4.30am on 8 July, after the crew had manually cranked down



the landing gear, the battle-damaged and still burning Wellington finally touched down at RAF Newmarket – a landing which in itself was a great feat of skill and bravery as the night fighter attack had ruptured the hydraulics controlling the landing flaps and the bomber's brakes.

L7818 ran the entire length of the runway before running on and striking both a hedge and a reinforced security fence. The aircraft was a write-off, and never flew again. Ward, Lawton, and the others were taken the 20 miles back to their home base by road and, on arrival, told their experiences to the Intelligence Officer before returned to their beds, thankful for another chance of sleep, which, at altitude just hours before, was far from a certainty.

'FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW'

As the men slept, Wing Commander C.E Kay, DFC, wrote his report. In this official summary of the night's operations, he recommended that Widdowson be awarded the DFC, Box the DFM, and for James Ward, the Victoria Cross. The Wing Commander's recommendations were approved, and Ward's VC was announced in The London Gazette on 5 August 1941. By now, Ward was first pilot and commanding his own bomber. When it was announced he was summonsed to meet Winston Churchill and on seeing the shy young hero and the great man said 'You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence', to which Ward could only croak

RIGHT:
A press photograph of Wing Commander C E Kay, the New Zealander who commanded the Wellingtons of No. 75 Sqn RAF. (WW2 IMAGES)



'Yes, Sir.' To which with evident compassion and admiration Churchill replied, 'Then you can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours.'

When bestowed with his decoration, the humble Ward credited only his ground crew. Alan Mitchell described the celebratory dinner in honour of Ward in his book 'New Zealanders in the Air War'.

"The band became inaudible. "We-want-Jimmy-Ward. We-want-Jimmy-Ward. We-want-Jimmy – Ward." Officers and sergeants, pilots, air-gunniers, observers, wireless operators—all took up the chorus, bawling from the table-tops, swaying, laughing, >>

BELOW:
The damage to Ward's Wellington. 'A' denotes the cannon shell hit which ruptured the fuel lines, causing the fire in the engine. The numbers show the holes Ward cut into the skin of the stricken bomber. The unlabelled hole in the side of the L7818 was made by Ward and his crewmates in their first efforts to fight the fire.



The Wellington

James Ward VC is not forgotten in the village where the New Zealander was based, Feltwell in Norfolk. A pub in the village is currently named 'Wellington' in honour of the brave VC recipient. The pub features a unique sign which depicts a 75 Sqn Wellington and serves two locally brewed ales, 'Feltwellington' and, inspired by Ward, 'Almost Home'. The story of James Ward's VC action, replicas of his medals, and interpretive artwork of the event, proudly adorn a wall of the premises. A memorial dedicated to 75 Sqn RAF can also be found in Feltwell's churchyard highlighting their important role and was installed in 2003. (IMAGE COURTESY OF ROB PRITCHARD)





WING WALKING FIREFIGHTER

Sgt James Ward - New Zealand VC Hero



ABOVE:
An annotated photograph of the damage Ward's Wellington received, also identifying the source of the second fire.
(ANDREW THOMAS)

RIGHT:
Two officers stand in front of the very aircraft Ward carried out his heroic act.
(ANDREW THOMAS)

holding one another up. Suddenly the chant burst into cheering. A short, slight boy stood by a microphone in front of the band. His head was bowed, his face pale, contrasting with his mat of dark hair. His sensitive mouth was twisted in an embarrassed smile as he looked at his feet and shuffled them. His thumbs were stuck in his trouser-pockets. Outside the pockets his fingers worked uneasily against his uniform. He wore a sergeant's stripes, and tabs on his shoulders bore the words "New Zealand." Under his wings he wore a scrap of maroon ribbon bearing a miniature bronze medal. The din died. The sergeant pilot threw off his nervousness, and, in a boyish voice,



RIGHT:
The eye-catching nose art of one of 75 Sqn's bombers.

edged with precision, he said: "We've got here to-night a number of chaps hiding themselves in a corner who've done more than we've ever done. They're the ground-crews who look after our kites. They don't get anything like this. There are no V.C.s for them, but if they didn't do a first-class job for us, as they all do, we wouldn't get back. Those chaps—they keep our kites in first-class order." Then, as the cheering welled out again, he slipped away to a window. He sat on the ledge, his head bowed, half smiling nervously as the cheers gave way to the singing of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."



Ward later explained: *“I can’t explain it, but there was no sort of real sensation of danger out there at all. It was just a matter of doing one thing after another and that’s about all there was to it.”*

Tragically, Ward, the reluctant hero, would only survive another three missions over Germany. His tenth mission saw him in action over France, striking at the port of Brest, when flak damage forced him to land his aircraft at RAF Honington. His eleventh and last mission took place two days later

on the night of 15 September 1941. This flight, in which a dozen of 75 Sqn’s Wellingtons were involved, saw Ward hit the city Hamburg, flying in Wellington IC X3205, when his aircraft was hit repeatedly by flak and set ablaze in multiple places as the aircraft approached the target, although he still dropped his bombs. Two of his crew, Sergeants Peterson and Watson, were able to escape the burning Wellington as it spiralled toward the ground as Ward tried to hold the aircraft under some sort of control to allow

the rest of his men to escape. James Ward VC, along with Sergeants Sloman, Toller, and Toothill, perished in the fireball – likely before it hit the ground. James Ward and the crew who died with him are buried in Ohlsdorf Cemetery, Hamburg. His Victoria Cross was presented to his brother by the Governor General of New Zealand, coincidentally in the aptly named city of Wellington on 16 October 1942. Ward’s VC, with the permission of his great great nephew, is on public display at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. 📍

ABOVE: 75 Sqn aircrew stand by their Wellington. The figure third from the right is occasionally mistaken as James Ward. However, this photo was taken in October 1941, and tragically Ward had already been killed in action.

📍 VC Hero's Wellington

The Crew of Wellington L7818, AA-R
Pilot: Sqn Ldr R. P. Widdowson (Canada)
Second Pilot: Sgt J. A. Ward (NZ)
Navigator: Sgt L. A. Lawton (NZ)
Rear Gunner: Sgt A. J. R. Box (NZ)
Front Gunner: Sgt T Evans (Wales)
Radio Operator: Sgt W. Mason (England)

