

CHARLES ROWLAND WILLIAMS

There is an individual story to be told concerning every one of the fifty-nine past students or staff from the School who were killed in conflicts from World War One to the Vietnam War. In this From the Archives I would like to write about **CHARLES ROWLAND WILLIAMS** who is soon to be part of a BBC documentary on the Dambusters' Raid in 1943. I would like to acknowledge the help given to me by the John Oxley Heritage Library [Brisbane] in preparing this article. In many respects it is a story not only of heroism but also of great love that wars can often generate.

Charles Williams was born at Torrens Creek in 1909 and attended Townsville Grammar as a boarder from Torrens Creek from 1921 to 1923. Little is known about his time at the School except that he played, on occasions, for the 1st XIII rugby league team. On leaving Grammar he returned to the family property where he worked with his father and brother, **DOUGLAS WILLIAMS [1919-1921]**. Soon after the outbreak of World War Two, Charles and Douglas both enlisted in the 26th Battalion based in Townsville. After serving for twelve months in the 26th Battalion Charles enlisted in the RAAF as a Pilot Officer in 61 Squadron before moving to the 617 Squadron as a Flying Officer.



While serving with the 617 Squadron Charles met Gwendoline [Bobbie] Parfitt, a secretary working for NAAFI in Nottingham. In spite of Charles being engaged to a girl in Townsville he fell in love with Bobbie and asked her to marry him. Fortunately Bobbie kept all the letters written between them, including press cuttings relating to the Squadron and after the war presented these to the John Oxley Library. It has been a privilege to read these letters and to understand the great sadness that can ensue from war.

While training for the Dambusters' Raid the 617 Squadron was based in Lincolnshire. As a result of censorship regulations Charles would often address his letters as coming from "the chamber of horrors: Lincolnshire" or just "room 12 Lincolnshire". There were never any details as to what training was being undertaken except that Charles would write that they were flying at all times of the day and night. On 16 May, 1943 Charles wrote his last letter apologising for not being in contact for a couple of weeks but would explain when next he saw her. He was to die that night when his plane 'E for Edward' was shot down over the Mohne Dam.

The news would have been shattering for Bobbie as they were to be married on the Saturday following the Raid. At first Charles was listed as 'Missing in Action' but in spite of Bobbie writing for information to the Red Cross in Geneva and the Vatican she was not to know until 14 August that Bobbie had been killed and been buried in the North Dusseldorf Military Cemetery.



It must also have been a time of great sadness for the family in Torrens Creek. Bobbie had also kept regular contact with Charles' mother, Helena, and sister, Sheila. In one letter Mrs Williams writes that "I never failed to pray for his safe return, but it was not to be." To add to the tragedy Charles' father was seriously ill in a Townsville hospital and died a few days after Charles was posted as 'Missing in Action'. The family never passed on this news to the father so he died never knowing the fate of his son.

In a handwritten notebook kept by Bobbie Parfitt and now in the John Oxley Library she writes: "To all who read this book may they say proudly and with humility... to Bomber Command. May they find the courage that I have found inasmuch as these men were my friends and Flying Officer C.R. Williams, DFC and Bar, who had asked me to become his wife on that fateful May of 1943. To the end of my life I shall never forget them." Leader of the Raid, Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC, was later to say "Such men are the cream of our youth. They die bravely and they die young."

Fifty-nine Grammarians have died young and died bravely. As P.F. Rowland said in 1917 at the unveiling of the Pro Patria Honour Board "*Boni intraverunt; meliorem exierunt*" Good men have entered: Better men have gone out."

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