

DAVID JULIUS IRWIN MACLEOD

14 JANUARY 1923 TO 24 FEBRUARY 1945



The son of Julius and Barbara MacLeod, he was born in Perth but gained his early education at Margaret River and after success in the Junior Examination in 1937, attended Hale School (1938-39) where he was known as “Jock” MacLeod. He enrolled in the Faculty of Arts at The University of Western Australia and came to St George’s College in 1940 and 1941.

Gregor MacLeod was living with his parents in Claremont when he joined the Australian Army in Fremantle on 18 July 1942 and became a gunner, no doubt in consequence of his father having served in Gallipoli and France with the 8th Battery AIF during the Great War. After initial

training he was posted to 29 Anti-Aircraft Battery, but decided that the air force held better prospects and was discharged on 30 April 1943. A week later he joined the RAAF, enlisting in Perth, and rose to the rank of Flight Sergeant after qualifying as a pilot. Having skipped a year of university he decided to re-enroll for a part-time Arts course in 1943 to study philosophy, but withdrew from the university in September that year.

The new role suited Gregor. Josh Reynolds wrote of him: *I used to see him from time to time while he was in the Forces and remember being struck with the new sense of purpose which came to him when he went into the Air Force.*

Aircrew in Australia were generally trained in three different streams: pilots, observers and the combined role of wireless operator and air gunner. Observers, who were an aircraft's navigator, got their "wings" as a half wing with an O on the other side. The home-based RAAF squadrons had a primary focus on maritime reconnaissance during much of the war, since the greatest threat to Australia was regarded as sea-borne attack or invasion, submarine activity and the laying of mines in our principal sea routes. Much of the training for Observers was over the ocean, and they needed to have pinpoint navigational skills so as to determine the precise position of enemy craft up to 300 miles offshore – the point from which an enemy ship might be able to reach our coast overnight.

Gregor was posted to Bairnsdale on Victoria's Gippsland coast where the RAAF's General Reconnaissance School had replaced No. 1 Operational Training Unit on 24 April 1943. It was one of those historical coincidences that Bairnsdale was originally a pastoral property owned by pioneer settler Archibald MacLeod and named after a variation on the Clan MacLeod's family home on the Isle of Skye. It is highly likely that Gregor was well aware of this, since one of his uncles had at one time laid claim to the title of Chief of the MacLeods.

Bairnsdale air base already had a reputation for fatalities – in its 10 months there, No. 1 Operational Training Unit had trained 631 pupils, flown 38,875 hours, experienced 53 crashes and suffered the loss of at least 71 young airmen.

The General Reconnaissance School operated Avro Ansons, a more docile aircraft than the 1OTU's Australian-built Beaufort Bombers, and in consequence there was a lower accident rate. However, before the end

of the war a further 15 men and one WAAF member were lost in crashes or aircraft missing over the sea, bringing the known lives lost at Bairnsdale to at least 87.

The circumstances of Gregor's death greatly embittered his parents. His mother, Barbara MacLeod, wrote to Josh Reynolds:

Greg's loss has been a terrible blow to us, the more so because we have learned that it was quite unnecessary. It was due to criminal carelessness on the part of the ground staff, in their failure to arrange to put up flares on the landing ground until too late. There was a heavy fog. But he should have been alive and well today – of course I have not been told this by official sources. I heard it unofficially from someone who should know.

Alas, the story of Gregor's death was much more complex than a lack of flares. Gregor had taken off on the night of 24 February 1945 in Avro Anson AX225, piloted by Flight Sergeant Kevin M. Moloney, and crewed by G.S. Liles and Pilot Officer A.M. Ward. In May 2002, at the age of 83, Kevin Moloney wrote this first-hand account of the crash for an Australian internet site:

The cause of the crash (which the Court of Enquiry called a phenomenon of the weather) was a low cloud bank, right down to the deck (and) up to about 2000 feet which rolled in from the sea enveloping our base at Bairnsdale, which is near the coast.

The 13 aircraft engaged in this night navigation exercise were out at sea. My crash was caused by the lack of fuel. I was the first to take off that night and was about 100 miles from the coast when I sent a signal to base reporting that weather conditions prevented some parts of the navigation procedures being carried out. Base notified all aircraft to return to base. Probably about half of them were able to land at Bairnsdale.

After exploring every option available to me the only hope was to bail out because Eastern Victoria was completely covered.

So I was about to climb to 5000 feet when we saw a hole in the clouds and a row of lights which could have been a flare path. After checking the fuel and the time we had been in the air I calculated that I still had 30

minutes of fuel which was sufficient to investigate. The lights proved to be a stationary train.

I immediately started to climb out when the starboard motor cut at about 2000 feet above sea level. The crew managed to bail out just before the port motor cut. I went into crash landing procedure hitting four trees and losing a large section of one wing and a portion of the other. The aircraft was a write off.

The Avro Anson crashed-landed in the fog three kilometres north-west of the Victorian village of Rosedale, but Gregor MacLeod was killed as a result of his low-level parachute descent. An Avenue of Honour at Bairnsdale commemorates Gregor and his 86 Bairnsdale compatriots.

--oOo--

“Gregor MacLeod was always a fighter, always trying to beat down shams and falsehoods, always trying to build up better things. With such disposition, he looked for and found problems which were cheerfully assaulted and often surmounted. He would have been a useful man in the difficulties which lie ahead. He had a warm-hearted generosity about him, and those who knew him mourn the loss of a true man and friend.”

The Dragon, 1945 (attributed to Josh Reynolds)