



remembrance ni

First RAF VC of WW2 awarded to Irish pilot this week



The RAF mounted a near-suicidal attack in an attempt to halt the advance of the German blitzkrieg. The attack on 12 May 1940 on two bridges in Belgium came at a heavy price; four of the five bombers were shot down.

Donald Garland in a painting by Frank Ernest Beresford

This week in 1940 the German forces were rampant in the invasion of Belgium.

Two bridges over the Albert canal at Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven, were being used by the invading army, with protection from fighter aircraft, anti-aircraft and machine-guns.



The RAF was ordered to demolish one of these vital bridges, and five [Fairey Battle](#) bombers were despatched with Flying Officer Garland leading the attack. They met an inferno of anti-aircraft fire, and the bridge was hit but not put out of commission.

The attack was led by Flying Officer Donald Garland and his navigator, Sergeant [Thomas Gray](#) of 12 Squadron. At Veldwezelt they met an inferno of anti-aircraft fire, and the bridge was hit but not put out of commission.

They died either crashing in the village of [Lanaken](#), or in the hospital in [Maastricht](#), Netherlands. Only one bomber managed to return to base.



Garland and Gray's graves are side by side in Heverlee War Cemetery - perhaps the only place where two VC holders are so found together.

Flying Officer Donald Garland and Sergeant Gray were awarded the VC posthumously for this action in a joint Leading Aircraftman Reynolds, the third member of the crew, did not receive a medal because he was not in a "decision making" position. Garland's Victoria Cross is displayed at

the [Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon](#), England.

Donald Garland was accepted for a short service commission on 12/07/1937, he undertook elementary flying training at Hamble and was confirmed in rank as a Pilot Officer on 5th September before starting his Service training at No 2 Flying Training School. On graduation on 07/05/1938, he was posted to his first unit, No 12 Squadron, based then at Andover, and still in the process of complete conversion from biplane Hawker Hind bombers to the new monoplane Fairey Battle light bomber aircraft. Promoted to

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Flying Officer in 1939, Garland was serving in B Flight when 12 Squadron was alerted for an imminent move to France at the end of August 1939.

When the Germans invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, Operation Panther was begun – to transfer all Battle Squadrons to the Continent. No 12 Squadron's 17 Fairey Battles flew into Barry-au-Bac, and settled in quickly, and on 17th September flew the first operational sorties. During the icy winter, few missions were completed, and it was not until March 1940, sorties over German held territory began. Finally, on 12th May, the 12 Squadron was selected for a vital mission, to destroy two bridges at Vroenhoven and Velwezelt. Garland was selected to lead the three Battles to attack the Velwezelt bridge, while Flying Officer Norman Thomas led the three Battles against Vroenhoven bridge. Garland was accompanied by his observer, Thomas Gray, and rear gunner, L.R. Reynolds.

He stayed below the cloud base at 1,000 feet and on reaching the Veldwezelt area started a shallow bombing run through an inferno of anti-aircraft fire – from an estimated 300 guns – only to be blasted to the ground. Behind him, Pilot Officer McIntosh began his run, but his petrol tank was hit and he scraped a forced landing and survived, as a POW. The third Battle, piloted by Sergeant Fred Marland, released its bombs but was then hit and crashed. When the smoke cleared, parts of the bridge had been destroyed mostly by Garland's bombs.

Victoria Cross citation

The announcement and accompanying citation for the decoration was published in supplement to the London Gazette on 11 June 1940 -

“Air Office, 11th June, 1940

The KING has been graciously pleased to confer the VICTORIA CROSS on the undermentioned officer and non-commissioned officer in recognition of most conspicuous bravery :-

Flying Officer Donald Edward Garland (40105)

563627 Sergeant Thomas Gray

Flying Officer Garland was the pilot and Sergeant Gray was the observer of the leading aircraft of a formation of five aircraft that attacked a bridge over the Albert Canal which had not been destroyed and was allowing the enemy to advance into Belgium. All the aircrews of the squadron concerned volunteered for the operation, and, after five crews had been selected by drawing lots, the attack was delivered at low altitude against this vital target. Orders were issued that this bridge was to be destroyed at all costs. As had been expected, exceptionally intense machine-gun and anti-aircraft fire were encountered. Moreover, the bridge area was heavily protected by enemy fighters. In spite of this, the formation successfully delivered a dive-bombing attack from the lowest practicable altitude. British fighters in the vicinity reported that the target was obscured by the bombs bursting on it and near it. Only one of the five aircraft concerned returned from this mission. The pilot of this

aircraft reports that besides being subjected to extremely heavy anti-aircraft fire, through which they dived to attack the objective, our aircraft were also attacked by a large number of enemy fighters after they had released their bombs on the target. Much of the success of this vital operation must be attributed to the formation leader, Flying Officer Garland, and to the coolness and resource of Sergeant Gray, who in most difficult conditions navigated Flying Officer Garland's aircraft in such a manner that the whole formation was able successfully to attack the target in spite of subsequent heavy losses. Flying Officer Garland and Sergeant Gray did not return.”

Almost exactly a year later, Garland's mother, accompanied by his brother, Patrick, attended the investiture at Buckingham Palace.

Donald Garland had three brothers, all of whom served with the RAF and also died on service:

- Pilot Officer Desmond William Garland – killed in Belgium on 5 June 1942 aged 27
- Flight Lieutenant John Cuthbert Garland – died on 28 February 1943 aged 32
- Flight Lieutenant Patrick James Garland – killed in Holland on 1 January 1945 aged 36

Born in Ballinacor, Co. Wicklow, Garland was a pupil at [Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School](#), Holland Park, London from 1929 to 1935, and left with a good all-round School Certificate.

After spending some time at an insurance office, he joined the RAF on a short-term commission. Mgr. Canon J. Vance,

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who became headmaster of Cardinal Vaughan School in 1928: "In those days I questioned young men closely before recommending their applications for short-term commissions because of a lurking fear that they might be forced to start life again at an awkward age, for Donald I had no misgivings whatever. He could start his life again at any time and was bound to succeed because of his independence and of his resourcefulness. I salute Garland's great heroism"

In the newspapers - May 14

Belfast Newsletter, 14 May 1915

DRAGOONS AND CYCLISTS AT COLERAINE.

A section of the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons visited Coleraine yesterday. A company, consisting of 7 officers and 110 men of the Dragoons, with transports, and 5 officers and 180 men of the 36th Divisional Cyclists' Corps, passed through the town en route for Magilligan, where, it is understood, they are to encamp. Each section on arrival from Ballymoney halted for a few minutes on the Diamond.

Northern Whig 14th May 1918

Ulster Division Rank and File Fatalities

Private William John McAuley, 41556, 9th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, Formerly 1759, North Irish Horse, who died of wounds received in action, 11th April, 1918. He was a son of John McAuley, of Tamlaght, **Randalstown**, Co. Antrim. Deceased is buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Belgium.

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Rifleman Henry Purdy, 1999, 12th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, killed in action 11th April, 1918. Son of Sapper William Purdy Royal Engineers and Annabella Purdy, of 15, Thames Street, Broadway, **Belfast**. Deceased was 19 years of age and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial, Belgium.

Corporal Charles Edward Crooks, 19446, 12th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, killed in action 16th April, 1918. Deceased was a son of John Crooks, of 61 Mill View, **Muckamore**, Co. Antrim. Deceased was 22 years of age and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial, Belgium.

Private Thomas G. Miller, 12405, 1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers (Ulster Division) killed in action 24 March, 1918. Son of the late Thomas and Mary Millar and Husband of Alice Millar, of 3 Taylor Street, **Belfast**. Deceased was 32 years of age and is commemorated on the Pozières Memorial, France.

Rifleman Richard McVeigh, 2816, 15th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, killed in action 24th March, 1918. Son of William John and Mary Ann McVeigh, of 346 Crumlin Road, Ardoyne, **Belfast**. Deceased was 19 years of age and is commemorated on the Pozières Memorial, France.

Roll of Honour - May 14

Representing their comrades who died on this day

1915

+STANFIELD, William Hughes

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RMLI. Private. CH/282(S). (Previously 213160). Chatham Battalion, RND. Died 14/05/1915 of wounds aboard Hospital Ship "Letitia" and taken ashore at Gibraltar. Age 30. Enrolled 11/01/1903 for 12 years. Re-engaged 19/09/1914. Chatham Battalion MEF 06/02/1915 - about 10/05/1915. He was being invalided to UK from Alexandria. Born Belfast 11/01/1885. Son of the late William and Mary Josephine Stanfield, Pine St., Belfast. Next-of-Kin: Aunt, Miss Maggie Stanfield, Pine St., Belfast. Gibraltar (North Front) Cemetery. ADM 188/373/213160

1916

+NORTON, James

7th Bn. Royal Irish Rifles, Rifleman. 1212. Died 14/05/1916. Aged 18. Born 24/04/1898. Son of Henry and Jane Norton, McDonalds Row, Ballycastle. Bethune Town Cemetery. Ballycastle WM

1917

+BENTLEY, James Edward.

South Irish Horse. Private. 1742. Died 14/05/1917. Aged 22. Born at Hillsborough, he lived and enlisted in Dublin. Son of James Edward and Henrietta Sophie Bently of 11 Rialto Buildings, Dolphins Barn, Dublin. Philosophe British Cemetery, Mazingarbe, France

+JOHNSTON, Alfred

South Irish Horse. Private. 1742. Died 14/05/1917. Born in Hillsborough. The details here concerning service number, regiment and date of death are the same as for James

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Edward Bentley, see above. Could Bentley have served under an assumed name?

1918

+PASCOE, H 112368, Sapper, Royal Engineers,
Royal Engineers. Sapper. 112368. Died 14/05/1918.
Dundonald Cemetery

1943

+NAPIER, H V
Royal Air Force. Corporal. Died 14/05/1943. Dundonald
Cemetery

1945

+LYNAS, Robert

RAF. Corporal. 530316. Died 14/05/1945. Son of James and Margaret Lynas, of Portadown, Co. Armagh. Naples War Cemetery, Italy

On this day - May 14

1940

The British Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden calls for volunteers to form the Local defense Volunteers force (LDV).

Admiralty order requires all owners of large boats to send in particulars within two weeks.

German forces break through the French front at Sedan.

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British and French aircraft are unsuccessful in destroying the German-built bridges across the Meuse and 50 bombers are shot down by AA fire.

60 Luftwaffe He-111 bombers not having received the countermanding order attack besieged Rotterdam, devastating the center of the city.

Germans take Rotterdam as the Dutch government arrives in London.

1941

Admiral Darlan reports back to Vichy after meeting Hitler and von Ribbentrop. Vichy Cabinet approves German concessions and French counter-concessions unanimously.

British aircraft launch attacks against airfields in Syria which have been put at axis disposal by the Vichy French authorities.

3,600 Jews arrested in Paris.

Large Royal Navy and Royal Airforce reinforcements arrive in Singapore.

1942

The U.S. Congress establishes The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), under the direction of Oveta Culp Hobby, editor of the Houston Post.

The damaged British escort cruiser Trinidad returning from Murmansk is sunk by Luftwaffe dive-bombers off the northern Norwegian coast.

The British Army, in retreat from Burma, reach India.

1943

The U.S. 8th Air Force attacks Kiel with 125 aircraft, destroying 3 U-boats.

SS day is celebrated in Oslo.

1944

French troops in Italy break through the Gustav Line.

1945

U-858 surrenders off Delaware, USA, becoming the first German warship to surrender to U.S. forces after the war ends.

Vienna radio announces the re-establishment of the Austrian Republic. The Anschluss with Germany is declared null and void. British troops occupy the German island of Heligoland in the North Sea.

The Norwegian resistance movement (Milorg) is officially disbanded.

USAAF B29's firebomb Nagoya, the heaviest raid on the Japanese homeland so far, with 3,500 tons of bombs being dropped, which destroys the Mitsubishi works.

Acknowledgments

ADM - admiralty records

Belfast Newsletter

CWGC

Friends' School, Lisburn

Northern Whig

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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