

2019 ANZAC SPIRIT SCHOOL PRIZE

FLIGHT SERGEANT PHILIP KENNETH ROSS GERICKE (1923-1944)

By: Tabitha Zdanowicz

Phillip Kenneth Ross Gericke

Part A



Flight Sergeant Philip Gericke, aged 20.

In the skies of Berlin on a Friday night of January 1944 there was a foreboding air mission to bomb Berlin, in which the Allies lost one fearless, soldier, mate and leader. A South Australian, family lost a son, brother, grandson, nephew and cousin leaving an unfillable hole in their family. Philip Kenneth Ross Gericke was a young man who confidentially demonstrated the true values of the ANZAC Spirit, in his fight for his country during the horrors of WW2. In unfamiliar circumstances Philip proved to be a leader and example to his fellow comrades

Flight Sergeant Philip Gericke (Ken) was involved in many threatening bombing missions across Europe. His role was as the rear gunner of his aircrafts, first the Stirling EE907/C and then the Lancaster ED610/C. In 1943 and into 1945 the Allies made many bombing raids on European countries, on Germany occupied areas, in an attempt to weaken the German hold and end the war. These smaller sorties were leading up to a monumental bombing of Berlin, in which Ken paid the ultimate sacrifice. The thinking behind the Berlin Bombings were summarized in the word of Arthur Harris (head of Bomber Command). *"We can wreck Berlin from end to end if the U.S. Air Force come with us. It will cost us between 400 and 500 aircraft. It will cost Germany the war."* (History Hit 2017). This statement proved to be very relevant to the story of Ken.

Ken was born on the 22nd of September 1923 in Naracoorte, to parents David and Shelia Gericke. His mother died when Ken was just two years. His father remarried in 1930 and 11 months later Ken received a young brother, Keith. The two boys grew up on their family farm at Struan. Ken loved farm life and later when he was transferred to England, in his free time, he loved to wander in the English countryside and gaze across the green landscape (his English friend Betty 2008). He attended the Naracoorte primary and high schools where he passed English, History, Arithmetic, Geography but Algebra he failed, not his strong point! (Carol Foster n.d.). Ken loved to play cricket before his enlistment, which would have been a favourite leisure time with his friends and family growing up in the country. Another one of his pastimes was to play his guitar down by the Naracoorte Creek. His love of music and nature suggest he may have been a dreamy character.

Up until his enlistment Ken worked on his father's farm where he was a resourceful, hard worker, carrying out the necessary farm duties. When in September 1939 WW2 broke out, Ken would have been just sixteen and too young to enlist. He joined the RAAF on the 23rd of March 1942, aged eighteen and from there he was posted to the 4th ITS at Victor Harbour on the 28th of March 1942 where he received his basic training (figure 1.). After finishing this training Ken was posted to the 1st WAGS at Ballarat in the May of 1942 with the ranking of Leading Aircraftsman. He was relocated to the 3rd Bombing and Gunnery School of the RAAF in West Sale Victoria, November 1942. At this stage he would have been nineteen years old. Here he received his Air Gunner Training, learnt all the theory to the roles of the rear gunner and also practised his firing aim. After impressing at this training Ken was promoted to the rank of Sergeant and awarded his Air Gunners Brevet (figure 2.)

Ken returned to Naracoorte on short leave, which was to be the last time he saw the place of his childhood, his home. On the 4th of January 1943 Ken left his home land. Embarking the vessel for England on a transmuting mission that would take him, a young farming boy, naive to the terrors of war soon to confront him, and turn him into a valiant ANZAC.

In England he disembarked on the 6th of March and was sent to the 11th PDRC, where all RAAF aircrew were posted whilst waiting to be sent to an Operational Training Unit. He received his posting to 12th OTU. To form the crews, the new aircrew and pilots would assemble in a hanger and the pilot would begin picking the rest of his crew, which was made up of seven men. Ken was stationed as the rear gunner, a dangerous and imperative job that would have been unnerving for most. In this position the gunner would be prime target during air missions, to enemy aircraft, such as the Luftwaffe. In this position Ken had the responsibility of defending his aircraft and the lives of his crew mates. He was cramped into the small compartment of the Frazer Nash turret (figure 4.) Later when on missions he would sometimes spend up to twelve hours in this position.

On the 3rd of June 1943 Ken and his crew were posted to 1651st CU for the last stage of their training. Here they converted to the Short Stirling bomber (Figure 5.) which they would fly on operations. It was also here on June 10th that Ken was promoted to Flight Sergeant. Ken and crew were posted to Squadron 15 RAF. Arriving at the base in Bomber Command in Mildenhall Suffolk they were given a tour of the base and then completed several cross county and navigation sorties to familiarise themselves with the area. Each day the new crew checked the operation board to see if they were on for night mission. This would have been exciting and nerve-racking time for Ken and his crew (Figure 6.). After all their training they would have been eager to put their training to use and prove themselves capable.

A day at the Bomber Base for Ken would have involved as much sleep as possible until midday. Meetings with the ground crew, talks with the armourer and checking the turret and guns. After a bit to eat and a quick shave Ken and his crew would have made their way to the meeting room where all crews arrived to uncover the maps and see for the first time where they were headed on their mission that night. Ken would have been separately briefed as the gunner, on Fighter fields and enemy aircraft encountered etc. Then came the gathering and putting on of the gear. Ken would have dressed himself in all the necessary apparatus. Then he and his crew would have made their way by crew truck to their Stirling EE907. Before take-off Ken would squeeze himself into his Turret quarters make sure all was working and then inform the pilot he was ready.

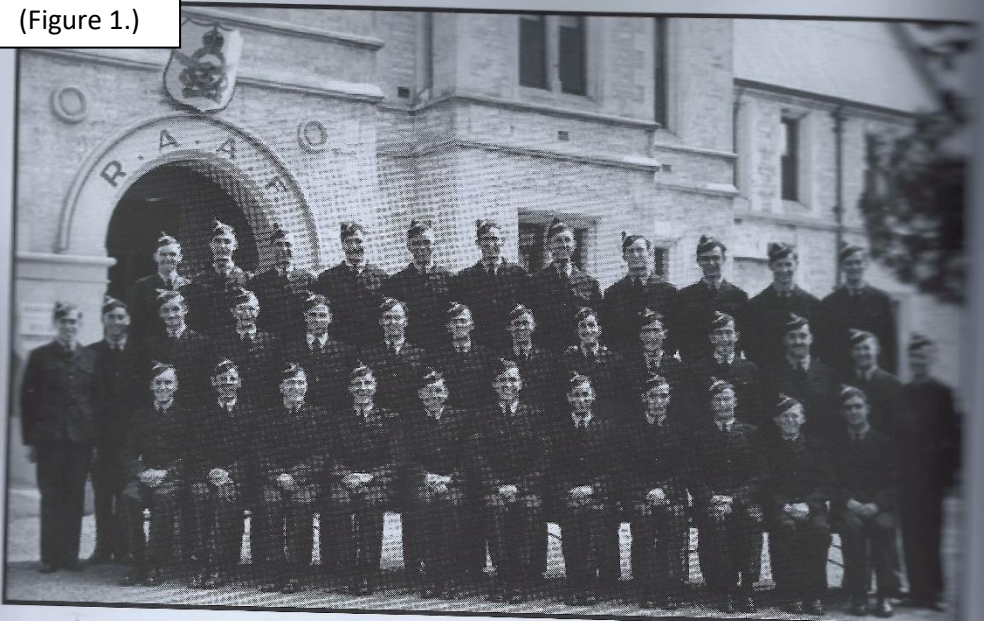
His first operation in the Stirling was on the 27th of July 1943. At 22.30 (10.30pm) the crew took off on route to Hamburg. At the target they commenced the bombing at 01.16 from 14,000 ft. Before returning to base at 04.00 hours. Ken completed 16 missions similar to this one in the Stirling on targets such as Turin, Berlin and Nuremburg. An example of Ken's proficiency at his role was on a mission to bomb Kassel.

On Sunday the 3rd of October 1943 the crew set out at 19.03 hours. The crew were successful in bombing the target. The pilot's report from the raid state that bombing was very well concentrated as smoke was seen rising at a great height. However Ken's crew were attacked in the air by a German night Fighter, a Junkers 88. The aircraft sustained extensive damage and Ken's reflector sight was badly damaged. Aided by the skilful piloting of the Flight Lieutenant, Ken withheld his fire as he struggled with a damaged reflector to line up the target. With a long burst of fire Ken shot down the attacker in flames, showing great superiority and nerve in mastering his machine. Due to his leadership and cool, steadfastness in the air his crew made it through that mission. The crew accomplished three more operations in the Stirling before changing to the ED610 Arvo Lancaster in December 1943

On another operation on the 14th of January, 1944, to bomb Brunswick, where the *“target was obscured by cloud, enemy fighters were very active”* (target/pilots report January 1943). Here Ken spotted a Messerschmitt ME110 before it attacked and warned his pilot to take evasive action. However when the attacker closed in 600 yards, Ken fired 1200 rounds and drove off the enemy (Naracoorte Herald 24/4/2014).

On the 29th of January the crew were assigned an operation to bomb Berlin (Figure 7.). At 00.10 hours (12.10pm) the crew took off into the night sky (Figure 6. (Map)). That night 667 bombers were despatched by the Bomber Command and 46 were lost on the raid. Ken and his crew knew the routine, they had done it many times before and each time had returned safely. This occasion was different. The crew went missing and never made it home. They were shot down and killed over the North Sea by a night fighter. Their bodies have never been found but the Flight Lieutenant's wallet was found in the North Sea. They were likely shot down by German night fighter Heinz Vinke.

(Figure 1.)



4 Initial Training School Victor Harbour 1942. Front Row: Ken second from left

Figure 2.



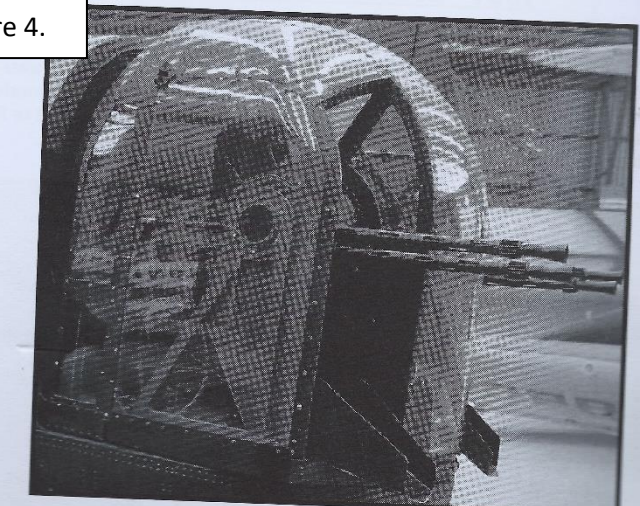
An Air Gunner Brevet such as the one Ken would have had

Figure 3.



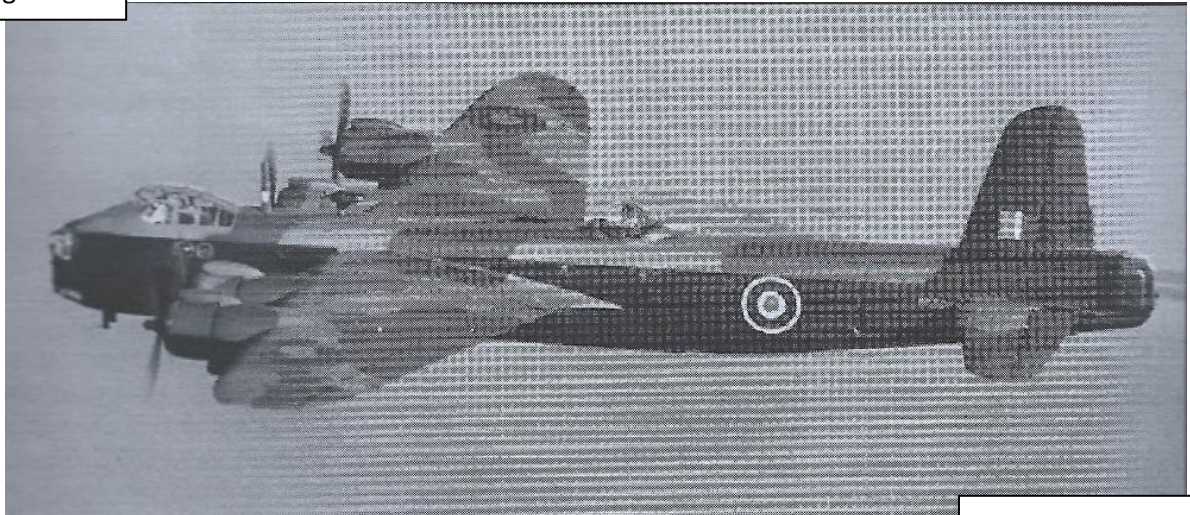
Ken and crew at 12 OTU 1943

Figure 4.



The Frazer Nash Turret, the same as the one Ken used

Figure 5.



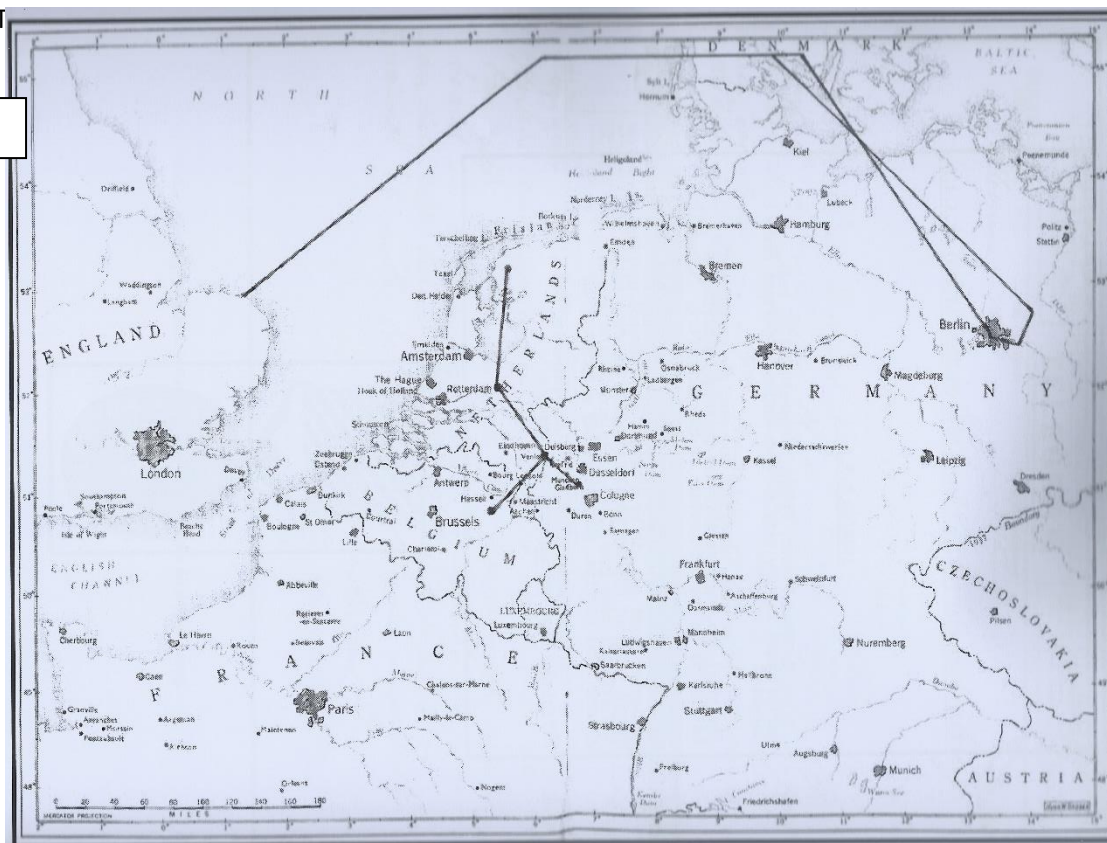
A Short Stirling Bomber

Figure 6.



Ken and his crew

Figure 7.



Berlin 28/29 January 1944. A map of Ken's last operation

Figure 8.

NAME **GERICKE, Phillip Kenneth Ross**

Award **D.F.M.** Reg.No. **417298** Rank **F/SERGT.** Service **R.A.A.F.**

Recommended by Governor-General on **O - R**

Promulgated in *London Gazette* on **15/2/44.** } G. H. File **R.A.A.F. 2.**

Promulgated in *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* on **17/2/44.** }

Citation (G. H. File **RAAF 549**) Numerous sorties against the enemy as Gunner.

Insignia received from London **12/7/45. PN LONDON. 18/3/46.** G. H. File **L/53.**

Insignia presented by **The Governor of South Australia,**

At **Government House, Adelaide,** On **15/2/46.** G. H. File **ADELAIDE/8.**

Address of recipient on presentation date **N/A**

Remarks **DECEASED.**

D.F.M. presented to **D. P. GERICKE, Esq., (Father)**

Other Awards

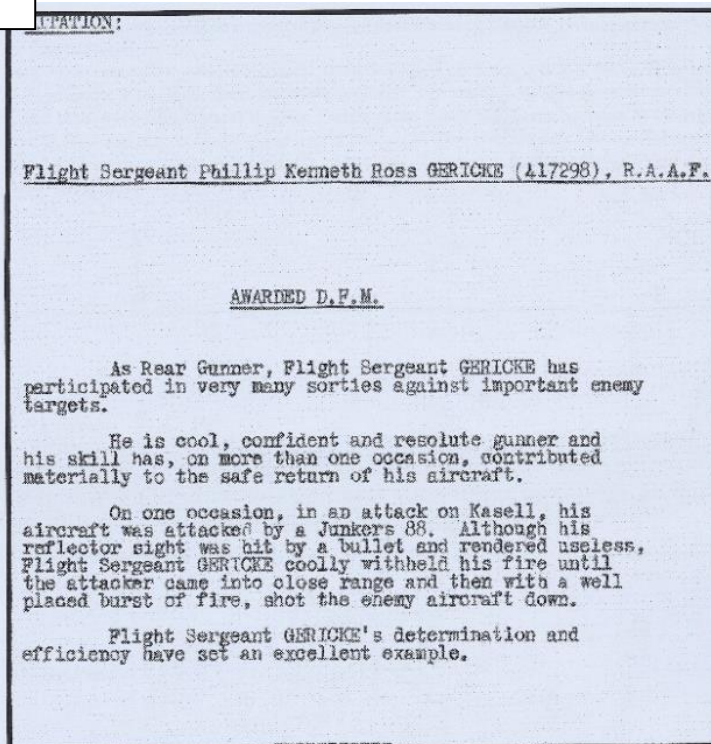
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

2876.

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Details of Ken's award

Figure 8.



Details of Ken's award



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