

**LARGE PRINT COPY**

**RAWDON  
MIDDLETON  
V.C.**

IN THE FACE OF  
OVERWHELMING ODDS

# DESTINED FOR ADVENTURE

Born on 22 July 1916 in Waverley, Sydney, Rawdon Hume Middleton was destined for a life of adventure—perhaps fittingly, given that he was distantly related to the famed Australian explorer Hamilton Hume. The son of Faith and Francis Rawdon Middleton, he spent his formative years immersed in the vast landscapes of central western New South Wales, where his father managed farming properties.

By 1927, the Middleton family had settled in Gilgandra, where Francis took on the role of station manager at **Alloway**. It was here that young Ron, as he was known to his family, and his brother attended the one-room **Buramilong School**, before moving on to **Gilgandra School** for their Intermediate Certificate (1930–1932). Since the school didn't offer the Leaving Certificate, Ron boarded in Dubbo during 1933 and 1934, completing his final years of education in this building, then the **Dubbo High School**.

Rawdon thrived both in and out of the classroom, he was a keen athlete, despite being slightly built. He was a good-looking young man, but described as very quiet and a little moody, but with a strong 'streak of honest determination'.

He competed fiercely in Gilgandra's tennis circuits, played for the Berida Cricket Team, and was a formidable force in rugby football. At Dubbo High, he proudly represented the school in tennis for the Astley Cup (a rival sporting competition between Dubbo, Orange and Bathurst Public High Schools), demonstrating the same drive and determination that would later define his legacy.

The family eventually moved once more—this time to Leewang Station near Parkes, where Francis resumed his role as station manager. Rawdon joined his father, embracing the rugged life of a jackaroo, working the land with the same grit and perseverance that would soon propel him into history. It was from here that he made the life-altering decision to enlist, setting the stage for his remarkable journey.

# GETTING UP TO SPEED

On October 14th, 1940, with **World War Two** (1939-1945) raging in Europe and the Pacific, Ron enlisted in the **Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF)** as part of the **Empire Air Training Scheme**. He commenced his pilot training at **No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School** in Narromine, New South Wales, before proceeding to Canada to complete his instructions.

By September 1941, he had arrived in Britain and was promoted to Flight Sergeant in December. In February 1942, Middleton was posted to No. 149 Squadron of the **Royal Air Force (RAF)**, marking the beginning of his operational service. His early missions, targeting the Ruhr region, were flown as second pilot aboard Short Stirling bombers. By July 1942, he had advanced to the role of First Pilot.

His first mission in command of his own plane and crew would be on July 31<sup>st</sup>. His mission was to bomb the strategic, but heavily defended target - Düsseldorf, the industrial heartland of Nazi Germany.

Middleton and his crew would continue to fly together and take part in other prestigious missions, particularly across Italy, in Genoa on the 7th of November and Turin on the 20th of November. His 29th mission would take place on the night of 28/29th November 1942.

As his 29th mission, completion of this flight would leave him one short of the thirty required for completion of a 'tour' and thus mandatory rotation off combat operations.

# THAT WAS THE KIND OF MAN HE WAS

Following the launch of **Operation Torch**—the Allied Forces (United Kingdom, United States, Soviet Union, and the Republic of China) invasion of North Africa—industrial sites in Italy were targeted to divert Axis (Nazi Germany, Kingdom of Italy and the Empire of Japan) forces. Turin, an industrial hub near to the Italian/French border, became a key Allied focus. It was bombed heavily leading up to the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, with raids on November 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> 1942.

On the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> November, Middleton took off in a **Stirling BF372** with 227 other aircraft, heading for the Fiat aircraft works in Turin. His crew included: Ft.Sgt. Leslie Anderson Hyder, Ft. Eng: Sgt. James Ernest Jeffrey, Bomb Aimer F.O. G. R. Royde, Wireless Operator: Sgt. John William Mackie; Gunners: P.O. N. E. Skinner, Sgt. D. Cameron, and Sgt. H. W. Gough. Three had already completed their 30-operation tour but stayed on out of loyalty to Middleton.

By the time **Stirling BF372** climbed to 3,660 metres over the Alps, it was consuming excessive fuel. Weaving through the mountains and uncertain of his position, Middleton considered turning back when the front gunner spotted Turin, illuminated by flares and bomb bursts. Knowing they might not have fuel to return, Middleton pushed on, *'We're going down.'*

Flying through heavy firing, Middleton had just identified the target when an artillery shell burst into the cockpit, shattering the windscreen and wounding both pilots and the wireless operator. Middleton suffered severe injuries—his right eye torn from its socket, his jaw shattered, and shrapnel wounds across his body—knocking him unconscious. The bomber plunged into a dive, wings and fuselage hit by shrapnel. As the co-pilot pulled the aircraft up just metres from the ground, Middleton regained consciousness and helped stabilise the bomber. He then resumed control, pressed on, and successfully released their bombs.

# FORTITUDE AND STRENGTH OF WILL

The crew considered abandoning the aircraft or landing in Northern France, but Flight Sergeant Middleton was determined to reach the English coast so his crew could parachute to safety. Aware that his own injuries and weakening condition would likely prevent his survival, he remained resolute in his mission to get as close to home as possible.

Despite his severe wounds, failing vision, and laboured breathing, Middleton fought to keep the crippled aircraft aloft. Throughout the return flight, he reassured his crew over the intercom, repeating, *"I'll make the English coast. I'll get you home."*

After four gruelling hours, the aircraft reached the French coastline at 6,000 feet, where it was once again struck by intense anti-aircraft fire. Though barely conscious, Middleton managed to take evasive action. As the plane crossed the Channel, the fuel supply dwindled to mere minutes.

Middleton turned the aircraft parallel to the coast and ordered his crew to bail out. Five did so safely, while two, Flight Engineer, James Jeffery and Wireless operator John Mackie stayed, urging him to attempt a forced landing—an option he knew risked civilian lives. He steered out to sea off Dymchurch and ordered the remaining two crewmen to jump. They bailed out but would not survive the night. Middleton remained with the aircraft, he turned the plane away from the populated coastline and crashed into the English Channel. He died on impact.

Rawdon Middleton was 26 years old.

# TRUE TO THE END

The shattered body of Ft. Sgt. Middleton washed ashore at Dover on 1st Feb 1943. The **RAF** gave him a Warrior's funeral, taken to Mildenhall, he was afforded an all-night vigil in the Chapel before a burial with full military honours at St George's Church Cemetery, Beck Row, Suffolk.

His epitaph reads, "True to the End" .

For his action, dedication and bravery, Ft. Sgt. Middleton was posthumously promoted to Pilot Officer and awarded the **Victoria Cross** (V.C.), the first to any serving member of the **R.A.A.F** in **World War Two**. The **Victoria Cross** investiture took place on October 30th, 1943. His father, Francis, was presented with Rawdons' medals by Lord Gowrie, V.C. Gov General of Australia.

Thirty years later, in 1978, Middleton's V.C. was presented to the **Australian War Memorial**, in Canberra for safekeeping and preservation, where it remains to this day.

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of **World War Two**. As time passes and these events fade into history, the stories of those who served remain as powerful and moving as ever. Young men and women from our own communities—like Rawdon—answered the call to do the extraordinary. Their courage and sacrifice continue to inspire us today, reminding us of our own ability and responsibility to step up and make a difference in the world.



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