

1062567 Robert Joseph Henri 'Balbo' Roelandt

Born at Woluwe St. Lambert on 27th July 1910, Robert Roelandt studied Greek and Latin Humanities and a licence in Commerce and Consular Sciences (Maritime and Finance) at the St. Ignace Institute, Antwerp before being designated for the draft into military service on 21st December 1928.

Recorded as being on active service with the rank of Corporal in the 1st Regiment of Aeronautics on 30th September 1929, it was on December 1st that he was admitted as aircrew. Promotion to Sergeant C.S.L.R. followed on 6th June 1930, and on 21st October that year he qualified for his Observer Brevet, being posted on unlimited leave 8 days later.

Recalled for 3 weeks from 21st September 1931, and again on 4th August 1932, Roelandt was promoted Second Lieutenant of the Aeronautical reserve on 26th March 1933, and was designated to the 1st Regiment of Aeronautics, taking his Officers Oath on 17th May. He was recalled for a further week on 21st August, and for 4 days on 11th October. On 29th September 1934 his records show him as C.S.L.A. On 1st October 1934, Roelandt re-enlisted for 2 years service and was admitted as aircrew for pilot training at Wevelghem, receiving his Elementary Brevet on the 4th. Resigning his commission on 7th November by personal request, he became a Sergeant on the 12th.

On 13th December 1935, he re-engaged for a further 2 years, with effect from 1st October 1936, and on 8th January was made Assimilated Adjutant. His Military Brevet followed 8 days later on the 16th, whereupon he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant-Pilot, and 2 weeks later, on 30th January 1936, he was posted to the 3rd Regiment of Aeronautics.

On 22nd July he was designated to the 1st Regiment of Aeronautics with the rank of Adjutant Pilot. His promotion to Second Lieutenant then came through, commencing from 26th March 1937, and posting him to the 1st regiment. He once again took the Officers Oath, on 10th April 1937, and was detached to 'Cours Technique Automobile' (Technical Automobile Course) at Borsbeek from 16th May to 30th June, and was further detached to the Air Gunnery School from 3rd January until the 18th March 1939. He subsequently attended the Air Gunnery School at Ostend from 26th June.

Roelandt was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 26th March 1940. Less than two months later, and a week after the German invasion of Belgium, he passed into France with his unit on 17th May 1940. Reaching Cazaux on 28th and Fabregues on 21st June, he re-entered occupied Belgium on 20th August, being imprisoned at Beverloo by the Germans on 23rd August. He escaped from here on 25th October, and on 8th January 1941 left Belgium for France. 3 days later he had reached Montpellier in the south, and on 25th April left Perpignan for Barcelona, across the border in Spain, where he was arrested the following day, being imprisoned at Carcel Modello. On 29th June he was transferred to the prison camp at Miranda de Ebro, from which he was released on 1st August. 3 days later, on the 4th, he arrived in Gibraltar, from where he sailed for England, arriving on 13th August 1941 and being taken into the Belgian forces in Great Britain. Following his arrival, he was commissioned into the

Royal Air Force with the rank of Pilot Officer on 5th September 1941, with the Belgian Government-in-exile promoting him to Captain on 22nd April 1942.

On 22nd January 1942, whilst flying a Supermarine Spitfire Mk.VB in formation with Flight Lieutenant Jean 'Peike' Offenbergl of 609 Squadron, a Spitfire of No. 92 Squadron piloted by French Sergeant de Renzl, made a practice attack on F/Lt Offenbergl's aircraft. This resulted in a collision which killed both pilots.

Promotion to Flying Officer (War Service Rank) followed on 5th September 1942, the same day that he and Jean 'Le Canard' Creteur attempted to intercept a high-flying aircraft, believed to have been a Junkers Ju 86 P-1 reconnaissance bomber, reaching a maximum of 34,700 feet in their Typhoon (with the German machine estimated to be at least a further 12,000 feet higher still). They first sighted it near Luton, where they observed it dropping its bombs. Following its contrails, they followed it as it flew over Halton, North London, Colchester and Clacton, weaving continuously so as not to overtake it. Following on from this, Roelandt asked for a third supercharger, which was promised to him for Christmas. He was officially posted to the RAF Depot at Uxbridge on 19th November, but was still flying in 609 Squadron in December 1942. From there, Roelandt went to No. 57 Operational Training Unit at Hawarden on 2nd January 1943 for further training on Spitfire aircraft before receiving an operational posting again with No. 609 (West Riding) Squadron - on 16th April 1943. On 21st May he attended No. 10 Gunnery School at Barrow -in-Furness as a Monitor Pilot, before returning to No. 1 RAF Depot at Uxbridge on 24th June. On the 12th July he moved again, this time to the RAF Belgian Depot. Promoted to the War Service Rank of Flight Lieutenant on 5th September, his records show "Administration squadron" on the following day.

28th January 1944 saw Roelandt detached to another staff administration job, Cie EM / III Group Ground Forces, before returning to the RAF Belgian Depot on 24th March. His next posting was to Headquarters Air Defence of Great Britain on 6th July, a month after the invasion of Europe, and a week later, on the 15th, he was posted to No. 3 Tactical Exercise Unit at Aston Down. From here he went to No. 84 Group Support Unit at Thrupton, before re-joining 609 Squadron on 13th August 1944, who were then stationed at B-7 Martragny.

On 26th August 1944, whilst flying Hawker Typhoon MkIB MN142 PR-Z, Flight Lieutenant Robert 'Balbo' Roelandt was shot down by flak over Forêt de St. Saens near Bully-en-Bray in France. Initially posted as Missing, his remains were found on 29th October in the woods amongst the debris of his aircraft by Doctor Valles of St. Saens and a woodcutter, Mariette, of Martincamp, and were subsequently buried in a small oak coffin at Bully Cemetery on 3rd November 1944. Here they remained until being re-interred in Air Force Plot IV / 43 at Evere Cemetery, Brussels, Belgium on 18th September 1950.

An extract from the Circumstantial Report filed by fellow Belgian, Flight Lieutenant Andre 'Le Men' Blanco on 26th August 1944 reads as follows:

"I was detailed to lead 8 aircraft of 609 Squadron on Task D.D.247 to attack MET east of Rouen. The 8 aircraft split into two sections, red going north of the Seine to Croissy, yellow Section, F/O Cooreman leading, attacked scattered MET at M.2938

and at 3040 near Forêt St. Saens where uncamouflaged lorries were attacked. Yellow 1 went in and got one vehicle, Yellow 2 (F/Lt Roelandt) followed in the dive and fired three pairs of R/P's. Yellow 3 then saw No. 2 come out of the dive and climb normally but with grey smoke coming out from behind him. Then at about 2,500 or 3,000 feet the aircraft turned over on its back and dived straight into the forest bursting into flames. Yellow 3 saw no parachute open and there was no R/T call.

It would seem that the two lorries were a decoy for a nearby 20mm gun and there is little doubt that F/Lt Roelandt was hit by flak. Yellow 1 was also hit by this gun but managed to return to base. In conclusion it may be stated that Yellow 4 fired R/P's into the gunpost silencing it."

F/Lt Roelandt received the following awards.

Chevalier de L'Ordre de Léopold II on 8th April 1940.

Croix des Evadés on 14th February 1946.

Médaille commémorative de 1940-45 avec 2 Sabres croisés on 24th April 1946.

Chevalier de L'Ordre de Léopold avec palme et attribution de la Croix de Guerre 1940 avec palme (Posthumous) on 30th September 1946. The citation reads:

Pilot de Chasse plein d'allant et de courage, témoignant dans l'exécution de son travail, des plus belles qualités de sang froid et d'audace. Officier pilote de l'active, participe a la campagne de 1940 et fait prisonnier de guerre. S'évade en 1940 et rejoint les Forces Belges en Grande Bretagne, après avoir subi les rigueurs des camps de concentration en Espagne. Entre a la RAF VR (Section Belge) ou il participe a plusieurs missions offensives en 1942. Tombe en plein ciel, le 26 Août 1944, au cours d'une mission de guerre lors de l'offensive libératrice de Normandie.

“Gallant and courageous fighter pilot, who during the execution of his job gave proof of his cold-bloodedness and audacity. Career officer and pilot, who took part in the 1940 campaign when he was taken prisoner of war. Evaded in 1940 and joined the Belgian Forces in Great Britain, after having experienced the ordeal of the camps in Spain. Entered the RAF VR (Belgian Section), where he participated in many offensive missions in 1942. During the course of a combat mission on 26 August 1944, he was killed in the air during the liberating offensive in Normandy.”

In addition, he also received the following British campaign medals on 3rd March 1953:

1939-45 Star.

France and Germany Star.

Aircrew Europe Star and Clasp.

War Medal.