

## **Memorial to L7576, St Sauveur 29 July 1945-2019.**

On the 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> July I took a trip to NE France to take part in an unveiling ceremony for a 622 Sqn Lancaster L7576, GI-K that was lost on operations 75 years ago to the day. The ceremony brought to an end a 75-year-old mystery as to what happened to just one aircraft and crew on that fateful night in 1944. The final mission of L7576 began at 2200 on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1944. The aircraft GI-K had flown an epic 98 missions and was one of a very small number pushing to reach the 100-mission milestone. When you consider the odds of achieving anywhere near this number of missions you would realise how special GI-K was. (if of interest please collar Howard Sandall who has some background information concerning this "push for 100" and how it involves his 622 Sqn relation)

L7576 was part of 496 aircraft raid, the last of a series of heavy attacks on Stuttgart. The bomber stream crossed the French coast at 23:16 hours and were quickly identified by the German radar plotters. Around 200 night fighters were scrambled on a bright moonlit night-perfect conditions for hunting. The first aircraft were shot down in the Orleans area of France. From this point onwards the fighters were able to stay in the Bomber stream, as the fires burning on the ground from crashed aircraft acted like a beacon. In total 39 Lancasters were lost, 8% of the mission. The aircraft loss total of 39 in a single raid can be seen in a different light if you consider this is now 273 airmen either killed, captured or for a few, on the run deep in enemy territory. This is one crew's story out of the many taken from us that night and of course one tiny part of the 55,573 airmen of Bomber Command lost during the war.

What was known at the time was that three of the crew perished in the attack and were buried in the local communal cemetery at Petitmont. Two of the crew were known to have parachuted from the stricken bomber. The Engineer was badly injured and subsequently captured; the Bombardier landed safely and went on the run. The Captain and Navigator were reported missing but believed to be killed in the crash, but as no bodies were found they had no known grave- their only memorial was as a name on the Runnymede memorial. In 2015 Jon and Robert Peck, whose late Mother was the Captain's Harold Peabody's cousin, decided to investigate the mystery. Having reached positions of influence as a CEO of a mining company and a career diplomat, the brothers Peck financed a research project for three undergrad students from Bishop's University in Quebec. Their first act reunited two families who had not known of each other; The family of the Captain were now in touch with the nephew of the Navigator, James Doe- Rick Doe, an American atmospheric scientist now residing in California. The research team very quickly dismissed the 1947 Missing Research and Enquiry Service (MRES) report that the missing crew were probably vaporised in an explosion of aircraft's ordnance. They tracked down eye witness reports, sightings, physical evidence and critically a British Army War Crime Investigations Team's (WCIT) report into Nazi activity in the Vosges mountains. This report led the investigators to the

almost certain knowledge that Peabody and Doe had indeed survived the crash but had been captured by the SS and taken to the Natzweiler-Stuthof camp, the only concentration and extermination camp on French soil. Interviews of former Allied prisoners, German prison guards and Nazi War criminals led to the belief that within a few days of the crash the captured airmen were executed, cremated with their ashes scattered in a communal pit purpose built at the death camp. The 70-year-old mystery was essentially solved.

During a village celebration in St Sauveur in 2017, Alain Foune, a former pilot of the French Air Force and member of a local aeronautical heritage society, realised that there was no memorial to the crew and many in the village were unaware of the event. "it was as if, the Lancaster L7576 had fallen twice – the first time in combat in the forest during the night of 28/29 July 1944. Then, over time, fallen a second time and much less gloriously – into oblivion". Aware of the research project, Alain decided to organise a ceremony to raise a memorial stone, to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the loss. The Peck brothers immediately proposed the financing of the memorial.

So 75 years on, in a forest clearing of the community of St Sauveur the crew of L7576 finally received a memorial to their actions, and the crew were brought back together. The event drew large crowds from the local community, representatives of the British Embassy, the RAF and FAF, RAFA and most importantly families of 5 of the crew from Canada, England, USA and Ireland. I felt honoured to have represented 622 Sqn- another fitting piece of the puzzle had been put in place. The crew also received two military flypasts, the first being a patrol of Mirage fighter-bombers overflying the ceremony and its guard of honour. The second flypast of special significance occurred thousands of miles away with the Canadian Lancaster from Mount Hope, Ontario taking part in an aerial tribute to L7576; it had been painted in the livery of 622 Sqn.

With such a massive loss of life experienced by the largely volunteer force of Bomber command it is often difficult to focus on the individual. So what do we know about the crew:

Wireless operator/Gunner Sgt Arthur Payton RAFVR, 30 years of age along with Mid-upper Gunner Flt Sgt Richard Proulx RCAF aged 21 and Rear gunner Sgt Percy Buckley RAF, did not survive the crash and their final resting place is at Petitmont cemetery. Percy Buckley had just turned 18 and was one of the youngest members of Bomber Command who paid the ultimate sacrifice. So little is known of these three airmen from service records simply because of their age, and their time with Bomber Command defines their short lives. The research pointed to the likelihood that all the Gunners were killed during the repeated attacks by an ME110 night fighter, leaving the Lancaster defenceless as it tried to escape using "corkscrew" manoeuvres. These three airmen were laid to rest in the local cemetery and have been cared for by a grateful community ever since.

Flight engineer acting Flt Lt George Wishart RAF, was the Squadron's Engineer leader and was a late replacement for the crew's standard Engineer Sgt David Cosgrove who was unwell. He survived the crash but was captured and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp. While declared missing he was awarded a DFC backdated to the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1944, the date the crew took off on that fateful mission. His citation reads "Flt Lt Wishart, as Flight Engineer Leader, has completed numerous operations against the enemy, in the course of which he has invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty". As a POW he was constantly moved from camp to camp, including the infamous Stalag Luft 111, he was forced on the "Long March" the first use of a mass human shield to cover the German retreat, and was finally liberated by allied forces in May 1945.

27-year-old Fg Off Ronald Lewis Fiddick RCAF from Victoria, British Columbia Canada bailed out of the stricken Lancaster and went on the run. He evaded capture with the aid of local villagers before joining members of the French underground. Three weeks after the crash he joined an SAS unit operating behind enemy lines and for 3 months he took part in sabotage operations against the German occupiers. He finally crossed enemy lines with an SAS Captain with sensitive information that was passed to advancing US troops. Lew was made an honorary SAS member for his wartime exploits. After the war Lew became one of Canada's first Federal Forest Rangers and lived a long and active life before passing away in his 100<sup>th</sup> year.

Twenty-three-year-old Harold Sherman Peabody (known as Al) of Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada was notable athletic and part of Bishop's University's golf and hockey teams and a popular man on campus when World War II broke out. He dropped out of school to join the war effort and enrolled in the flight-training program in Quebec. After training he joined 622 Sqn at their Mildenhall home. He was the Captain of Lancaster L7576, and was on his 9<sup>th</sup> operation with his crew.

Harry Doe was born in Calgary in 1922, the son of a First World War pilot, a keen sportsman who cut short his education to enlist with the RCAF at the age of 18. He was posted to Chipping-Warden training unit in the East Midlands where he met up with Peabody, Fiddick and Buckley all destined to be crewed together when they reached 622 Sqn at Mildenhall in June 1944.

The charmed life of Sgt David Cosgrove, the crew's standard Engineer unable to fly on this fateful mission owing to an illness lasted two weeks. On his next flight, guesting as Engineer on Fg Off Busby's crew, he took off on a mission to bomb the Opel works in Russelheim. The crew were shot down, five lost their lives, two became POW's and one evaded back home.

The research story wouldn't be complete without the part played by the "villain" of the piece. At 0130 hours Lt Walter Swoboda claimed his first victory when he shot down L7576 into woods near the village of Petitmont. Lt Swoboda, an Austrian flying with the Luftwaffe, was subsequently killed along with his crew, piloting a Me110 on 18 Dec 1944; his aircraft was shot down by an American Field Artillery unit near Felsberg. L7576 was his only victory.

At the ceremony I met many locals whose lives have been deeply affected by the events that happened so long ago. Pierre Vinot was 17 at the time and was one of the first people to reach the crash site. His testimony was crucial in finding out the fate of the missing crew. Madelaine Schultz, now 97, remembers the aerial battles overhead, and never forgot the sacrifices made. She has tended the grave site of the three Gunners ever since. I was introduced to a man who worked for the owner of the house where the injured George Wishart was taken. He explained that the master of the house refused to hand over the injured airmen to the Germans until he had received medical assistance and been stabilised. This delay may have ensured that George was handed over to the right authorities and thus avoided the grisly fate of his Captain and Navigator. I met an old man who said "if anyone says they didn't know what was going on, they are lying, we all knew". This cryptic comment was explained to me: St Sauveur was in the very NE of France very close to the German border and had been under occupation for 5 years. The village was split between acceptance and simmering resistance and the presence of a death camp so close to their homes has scarred the village ever since. It is hoped that this memorial, the solving of a decade's old mystery and the inclusivity of the memorial will help in the healing.

The memorial to L7576 is composed of a Lancaster tail fin mounted on 3 distinct levels of rock. The background blocks were mined from the forest valley where the aircraft crashed. The base is formed from a granite block from Harold Peabody's home in Quebec, and the marble plaque bearing the names of all the crew came from the Austrian home of the Luftwaffe pilot Walter Swoboda. This brave and challenging design was the idea of the captain's family to provide a fitting finale to the story of L7576. It is a story of individuals from many countries fighting for a cause that they believed in and as such earned their part in this story.

It is our aim to preserve the memory for future generations so that the noble sacrifice of those who lost their lives in Bomber Command will always be remembered. A total of 55,573 of the 125,000 who served in this largely volunteer service, formed from so many nations, lost their lives in the Second World War.

We will remember them