

FAILED TO RETURN – BK710

1943

The Second World War claimed the lives of 116,000 men and women of the Air Forces of the Commonwealth, of which 55,000 were from Bomber Command. Those lost in operations from bases in the UK and Europe, with no known graves – more than 20,000 - are commemorated at the Air Forces memorial at Runnymede.

Appropriately the Runnymede Memorial overlooks the meadow where the Magna Carta was sealed by King John in 1215, enshrining man's basic freedoms.

This is the story of one aircraft which failed to return. My father, Flying Officer H. S. Winchester, was one of the seven crew members who died.



The crew in photo from L to R are: Sgt F. A. Williams, Sgt H. S Scott, F/O W. E.L. Morse, Sgt J. C. Percival , Sgt J. H. Uden, Sgt L.G. Hadden, F/O H.S. Winchester

On the night of 25/26 May 1943, 759 aircraft attacked Dusseldorf, and 27 failed to return, amongst which was Stirling BK 710 from 149 Squadron, the aircraft in which my father was Bomb Aimer/Front Gunner.

This is a review by the "Aircrew Remembrance Society"

BK710 took off at 23.44 hrs from Lakenheath, Suffolk, England to bomb Düsseldorf. 759 aircraft took part (323 Lancaster's, 169 Halifaxes, 142 Wellington's, 113 Stirlings and 12 Mosquitoes)

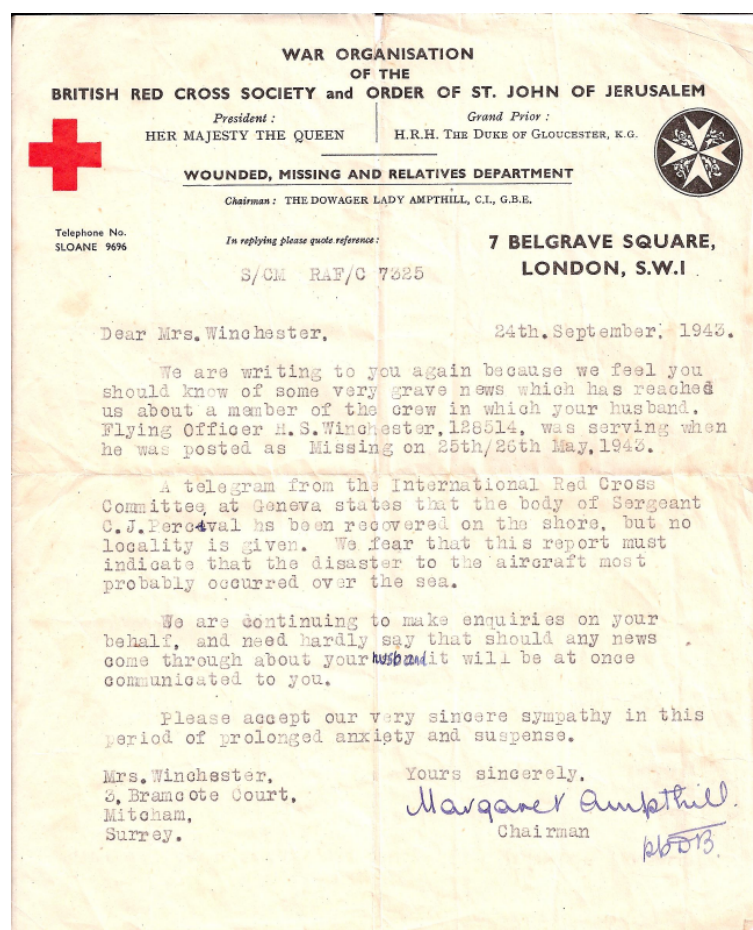
The raid was considered a failure - there were two layers of cloud over the target and the pathfinders had great difficulty in marking it. It is also believed that the Germans were operating decoy markers and fire sites resulting in the main bomber force becoming scattered over a large area. No concentrated bombing fell in the target area of Düsseldorf, which recorded only 50 - 100 buildings destroyed and some 30 people on the ground killed.

The raid cost was high with 27 aircraft lost, 161 crew members killed and another 7 injured (405 Squadron, Halifax II HR806 LQ-D crashing shortly after take off) A further 27 were made Prisoners of War.

Stirling BK710 OJ-A was shot down on the journey home by Uffz. Georg Kraft of 12./NJG1. The claim stated the attack was over the North Sea, 40 Km North West of Texel (North Holland, Salzhering) at a height of 800 mtrs. at 03.04 hrs on the 26th May. Uffz. Kraft had a total of 13 kills credited before he was shot down and killed on the 17/18th August 1943 by a 141 Squadron Beaufighter flown by W/Cmdr Braham.

Most of the crew of OJ-A had done 8 -10 sorties, and were due a few days leave upon their return. Wives and girl friends had arranged to meet under the clock at Waterloo Station. After many anxious hours waiting it became obvious that the crew were missing.

Letters of encouragement from the Squadron and Red Cross were received saying not to give up hope – they could have escaped or become POWs. Finally in September came the devastating news that the body of rear gunner Sgt Percival had been found “on the shore, but no location was given”. Later it was determined that it was on the Heligoland shore that the body was found.



And that was that – dad’s plane had gone down in the North Sea; no other bodies were found. Mother and I didn’t talk about this much – it was too painful for both of us, so we just put it to the back of our minds and locked it away.

The war came to an end, and Churchill, despite having said at the beginning “Fighters are our salvation, but the bombers alone will provide the means to victory,” decided (in a moment of political correctness, that in my opinion destroys his stature as a great leader) not to recognize Bomber Command.

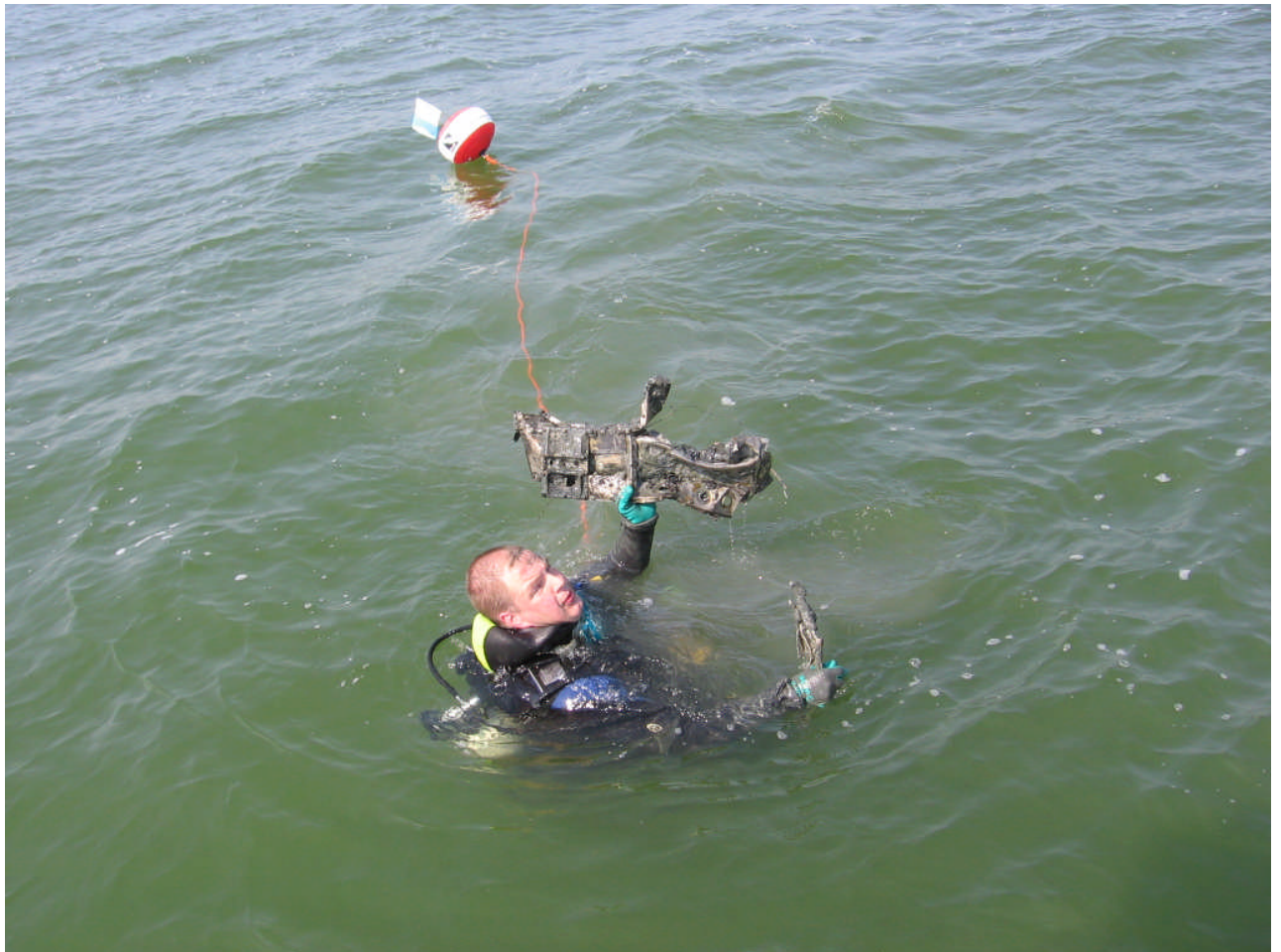
In his 1945 Victory broadcast he thanked all sections of the RAF except Bomber Command.

Time passed.

2008/09

In December 2008, in the IJsselmeer (formally the Zuider Zee) a small boat with engine trouble was attended by a rescue boat. Upon retrieving the anchor, they found a piece of metal attached. It was taken to Mr Johan Graas of Aircraft Recovery Groep (ARG) 1940-1945 who recognized it as a part of the landing gear of a Stirling Bomber. The serial number indicated it was made by Austin Motors.

In April 2009, volunteer divers recovered various artifacts, which included a panel with the aircraft identification number. Because the paint, long since disappeared, had etched into the aluminium panel, it was identified by Dutch Police forensics to be BK710.



Amongst other pieces recovered were 3 parachute buckles, which implies that at least three crew members did not exit the plane and their remains must be in the vicinity. The water depth is only 3-4 metres, but visibility is nil and the wreckage is buried in mud. Divers must therefore feel around in the mud until they come across any debris.

The ARG then visited London archives and obtained the names of the crew before making every effort to locate their descendants.

Eventually, in November 2009 I was contacted. I was the most difficult to locate in that I took myself from the British electoral roll when I went overseas to work, and subsequently emigrated to Australia. My mother also emigrated to Australia some years later, which made contact even more difficult.

Relatives of six of the missing crew have now been successfully contacted, and regular correspondence between us has been maintained since. In the meantime, volunteer divers had made many visits to the site, and recovered many pieces, all of which have been identified and catalogued. Most are in remarkably good condition since the water is fresh, and the mud prevents oxidation. Aircraft Recovery Groep decided to dedicate a room in their museum to BK710 to house the recovered pieces.

Unfortunately, both my mother and dad's sister died shortly before the wreckage was found, but I still had mum's ashes stored, not quite knowing where to scatter them. It became obvious that they should be scattered on the water above the wreckage.

2010/11

In June 2010, along with Gill my wife, two daughters Sara and Merran, and grandson Mussa, I traveled to Holland to scatter the ashes. At the same time, Sandra Uden, the nearest descendant of the pilot Sgt. Jack Uden, along with other members of the Uden family arranged that we should all go together to the site. Johan Graas of ARG arranged for the local rescue boat to take us to the site, along with the divers.



We must have anchored in exactly the right place (almost as though we were guided there, said Merran) because the divers brought up several pieces from the front of the aircraft where dad and Jack would have been seated. We then had a short service. I recited the Ode and scattered mum's ashes on the water.

In early 2011 I received the message that the room dedicated by the ARG to BK710 was to be officially opened on 26 May, the 68th anniversary of the plane going down. This opening was attended by local dignitaries and TV, radio and newspaper reporters, as well as many of the relatives of the crew. It was a moving ceremony, with the Union flag flown at half mast, a lone piper playing and the last post sounded.



The relatives were the first to enter the room. It had been carefully prepared, with display cases showing photographs of the crew members, equipment they would have used and larger parts of the aircraft.



The rear wall of the room was fully covered with a photo of the crew, enlarged to life size. Each image had a poppy and small cross placed in front of it by a member of their family.

Several more dives have since been made. Side scan sonar and magnetic surveys were performed and several larger parts have been located, but not yet retrieved.

Final Chapter

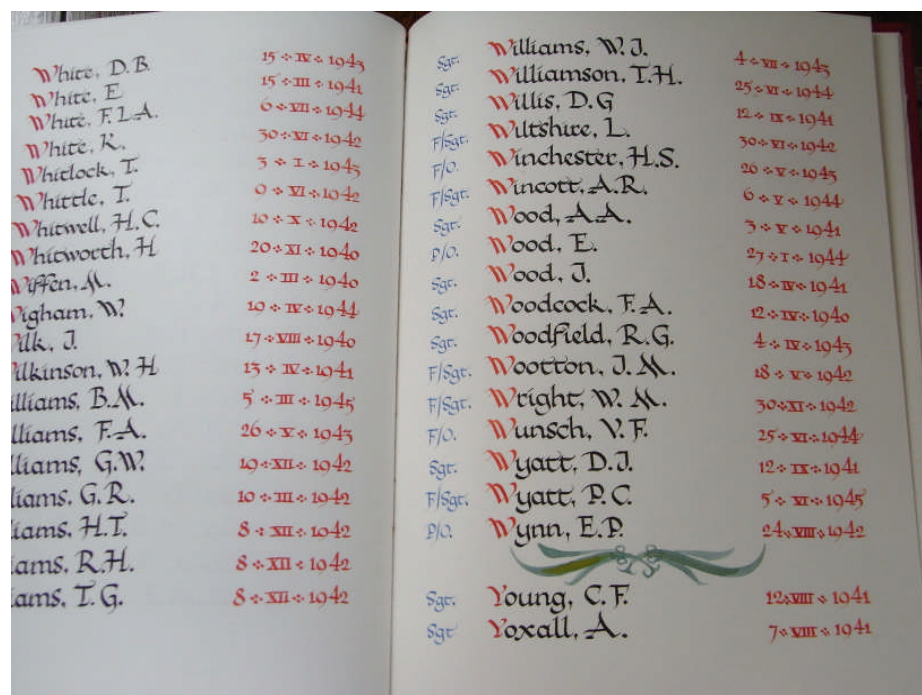
The descendants unanimously decided that every effort should be made to recover any human remains and give them a proper burial, recognizing that sensitively recovering any remains would be difficult and expensive.

Approaches were made to various British Government agencies who basically responded "it is a war grave, and must be left untouched". Whilst this may apply to a ship whose hull entombs crew members, we believe it does not apply to an aircraft which is in hundreds of pieces scattered over the lake bed in shallow water. Furthermore, the area is scheduled at some time in the future to be drained and developed, as has much of the IJsselmeer. It would be inappropriate to build a car park or develop a potato field on the site. It is my belief that had an Australian been aboard, Australia would have been instrumental in recovering any remains and the British would have been shamed into contributing, in much the same way as the recovery of remains at Fromelles.

It is the Dutch, in gratitude to the RAF's role in liberating them from the Nazi yoke and the associated atrocities, who are being the most cooperative. The local municipality has announced that a memorial will be erected at Marken near the waters edge to commemorate the men whose remains are somewhere below the surface. Maybe in the distant future when the area is drained and reclaimed, any human remains will be recovered and properly honored.

Postscript

During my searches on the internet and elsewhere, I came across the small church in Methwold where 149 Squadron was stationed towards the end of the war. Previously it was stationed at Mildenhall then Lakenheath. In this church there is a Roll of Honor to those of 149 Sqdn. who lost their lives.



The vicar there is Rev. Joan Horan who is Australian and who previously was a vicar in the country (NSW).

Pilot Officer R.H. Middleton VC, also a member of 149 Sqdn. was killed shortly before dad joined, and is buried in the Mildenhall Churchyard.

Another piece of information that has emerged during research was the photograph of the crew of the Me110 who shot down dad's plane. The pilot, Georg Kraft, was killed shortly after, the other survived the war.



One small mystery remains – we know the aircraft was attacked over the North Sea off the Friesian Island of Texel, and the rear gunner, Sgt Percival exited the aircraft. We also know that there was a strong headwind blowing. It would appear that the pilot, not wanting to crash land in the sea which can be pretty rough in those winds, chose to turn and try to land in Holland.

Website Note.

Further Film and Recovery Group information is available at <http://www.arg1940-1945.nl/engels/bk710%20pagina%201%20gb.htm>

So the story has been followed and the relatives have searched to find the truth, only to be told their loved ones will lie in a watery grave until we know not when. Maybe not everyone shares our gratitude for what these guys did and lost but...

We shall remember them.