

The tragic fate of the Lancaster ME685

April 5 1944.

Toulouse has not yet been really damaged by the allied bombing operations. But this evening, the sirens scream, a Royal Air Force bombardment begins. Dozens of four engined « Lancaster » aircraft arrive from England.

In a first step, a fast twin engine « Mosquito » from 617 squadron, flown by Léonard Cheshire « marks » the target, the Montaudran Latécoère factory, with great precision, a place where the German Air force , the Luftwaffe, performs the maintenance of its aircraft.

Léonard Cheshire has prepared this mission with great care: he even met the engineer who designed the Mosquito, Geoffrey de Havilland, to be sure that he can make the return trip England/Toulouse, flying low, without refueling.

After this first marking, and thanks to the Mosquito action, two Lancaster bombers again mark the target.

The stream of Lancasters arrive above Toulouse. The population seeks protection in shelters and the bombing begins

In the flow of the bombers, the Lancaster number ME685 registered « EM C », has taken off from Spilsby, in Lincolnshire. It has logged 39 flight hours since its entry into service, three weeks earlier, in March. It has already been part of two major operations: one against Stuttgart on 15 March 1944 and one against Berlin in the night between 24 and 25 March 1944. On board, a seven member crew, two of them are Australians : Frederick Bruce, the oldest member of the crew (at 32 years old) he is the upper gunner. John Waycott, from Perth, is one of the youngest, 21 year old. He joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1941 when he was 19, and he arrived in England, from Melbourne on 17 March 1943.

The pilot, John Senior, escaped death during his training when his aircraft, a Miles Magister, crashed in a lake and he was recovered in extremis. The navigator, Stanley Sayce, is a policeman from Cardiff. The bomber, John Read, is unlucky : he should not have been on board ME685 that night, he has almost finished his tour.

The Aircraft Suddenly Explodes

One after the other, the bombers drop their bombs on the target. The Montaudran factory is severely damaged but the FLAK goes wild. Suddenly, shortly after midnight, the Lancaster ME685 explodes. The bombs have probably been struck by a German direct hit before they were dropped. The aircraft is pulverized and fragments descend all around the South East of Toulouse.

One wing is lying vertically, leaning against a house at « route de Revel”.

The totality of the crew has been instantly killed, there are no survivors.

The day after, the area (named « le quartier de l’ormeau ») wakes up, knocked out by the bombing. There are casualties among the civilian population, and the local press, controlled by the Germans, highlights these casualties.

The English press explains that the Louis Breguet plant has been severely impacted (which is true) and that it was «working on experimental projects, particularly on jet aircraft» (which is false, but propaganda plays its role).

The bodies of the crew members are strewn all over in the area, between the Revel Road and the Ormeau roadblocks, some mutilated bodies even hang from trees.

The German guards prevent the local population from getting close to the bodies of the crew members, but a woman succeeds in taking the dog tag of one of them, John Read, sending it to the Red Cross, who will advise the family that their son has been killed; After the war, a strong friendly relation will develop between the two families.

The day after the bombing, the family of Stanley Sayce has heard on the radio that an RAF raid occurred the night before, but his mother is reassured when she learns that only one aircraft has been shot down, the chances that her son Stanley was on board this one are thin, though.... she will soon learn that Stan is “missing in action”, and she will get confirmation after the war that he has been killed.

The Lancaster « ME685 » is the only loss of the Royal Air Force that night

Remains of ME685

Several years after the crash, the memory of the Lancaster « ME685 » is still strong in the area of Toulouse.

Remains of the aircraft have been collected by the inhabitants, sometimes even marked by them with the date (as this bomb fragment). Some aircraft parts have been found in the gardens around areas which slowly get constructed nowadays.

Here is the cartridge of one of the machineguns of the Lancaster, caliber 0.303. The marking (K 1942 WI) indicates that it was manufactured in 1942 by the Kynoch company in Birmingham and that it was a bullet designed to pierce armor.

Airframe parts, torn, twisted show the strength of the explosion that pulverized the ME685.

A yellow paint on this aluminium fragment : it was the tip of a blade, they were always painted in yellow on RAF aircraft.

Several Everyday Life Artefacts

Other artefacts not connected at all with the aircraft are also found: a toy soldier made of lead, a 1986 / 20 cents coin, a tap handle.

Many everyday objects show the life of these lands that used to be fields but are now slowly urbanized and where now buildings emerge, one after the other, in this suburb of Toulouse: bottle caps , aluminum remains, a tube of aspirin, a wrench to tighten the bolts, a nut, a small medicine bottle made out of glass, a womans heel pad, a green copper tube, a blue « matchbox » car toy fragment and many other testimonies that emerge from the past;

Much bigger, one of the engines of the Lancaster was taken out of the soil by sheer chance in 2011, by the city hall teams while working on the sewer system, beneath the side walk. Left on site in 1944, it remained buried there for 67 years.

Finally, an astonishing discovery is made in the garden of the writer of this article a splendid pocket watch. An analysis performed by an expert watchmaker shows that (i) it was manufactured between the 1920' and 30's (ii) that this particular brand of watch «PRESTO » was sold in large numbers to the English army between WWI and WWII (iii) that this watch suffered from very intense heat: so, it is very likely that it belonged to one of the crew members.

Progressively, descendants of the crewmembers' families are found and contacted.

Some even come to the site, to pray or mourn on the very place where one of their loved ones was killed: for instance, the nephew of the bomber visits the grave of his uncle.

With the Australians families, a correspondence is engaged, by email;

Remembering ...

Soon, the engine restored by the French Laboratory, the CEMES (a lab of the French research CNRS) will be exhibited in the museum of Montaudran named «the take off of the pioneers », a space devoted to the famous French company "Aéropostale" and to the conquest of air by the men who built this legend.

So, a relic that fell from the sky more than 67 years ago will honor the memory of those forgotten Royal Air Force airmen.

THE LIFE OF STANLEY SAYCE DURING THE WAR

The family of Stanley Sayce has been kind enough to share with us and transcript the correspondence he engaged with his wife and family during the war. We can follow the life of this young Cardiff policeman until his death, on 5 April 1944. This is a very moving testimony of a WWII Royal Air Force airman.

1. 5th April 1942

Letter written from Moreton, New Brunswick, Canada where Stanley is in training. From Moreton he expects to go on for pilot training to Michigan and then Pensacola, Florida. He comments on how, in Canada, you would not know that there was a war on. The food was "really good" and the streets of the town were "all lit up" at night unlike the night-time blackout in Britain. In the camp were 10,000 airmen with some going out and others coming in all the time.

2. 14th October 1942

Letter written from a Royal Canadian Airforce base in Manitoba passing on news of the death their father in August 1942. Stanley explains that he had been eliminated from pilot training in Pensacola after 20 hours solo flying. He was "not as disappointed as (he) might have been." He was then re-mustered as an air navigator. He mentions that he is now aware that his brother is in India.

3. 24th June 1943

Letter written from Newport (home on leave). He has been at an Advanced Flying School near Gloucester. He and his wife have held a discussion and decided that they will not have any children until the war is over. He talks of going next to an "operational" training unit in Oxfordshire. He will be there for 10 weeks and will then go on "ops" in heavy bombers "so wish me luck." He talks about the heavy RAF raids on the Ruhr.

4. 5th September 1943

Letter written from Newport (home on leave). Stanley expects to go on operations shortly. He mentions that there are 4 Australians in his crew. He does not name them but says that the pilot and bomb aimer are from Brisbane, the wireless operator from Perth (probably W.J. Waycott) and the rear gunner from Sydney (probably F.T.R Bruce).

5. 13th September 1943

Talks of his former colleagues in the City of Cardiff Police. One of them has been killed on his first operational sortie to Turin.

6. 19th December 1943

Letter written from Newport. He has been on 4 operations. The first was laying mines, the next 3 were to Berlin. He comments that "there were certainly a hell of a lot of fires" in Berlin. The "skipper" (pilot and captain) of his crew has been injured. Whilst sleepwalking he had a fall and broke his ankle. He has had news that the second of his former colleagues in the police has been killed.

7. 17th January 1944

Letter written from Newport. Stanley is now based in Suffolk 20 miles from Cambridge. The crew has a new captain (probably John Senior). He mentions that on their second of their earlier "trips" to Berlin they were attacked by a Junkers 88 but managed to shake him off.

Before they got a new captain, members of his crew were being used as "spares". Their bomb aimer had been a spare with another crew and was now "missing" in action so they had been allocated a new bomb aimer (probably John Read). He comments that, "This game makes us hard because you get so used to chaps being lost over the other side." He also mentions the number of Americans now in Britain. He has learned that navigators with operational experience of 10 missions are being commissioned (as officers) so when he has done 10 he will try for a commission.

[You may know that RAF Bomber Command suffered the highest casualty rate in the British armed forces in WW2. Of 120,000 who served 55,000 were killed.]

8. 2nd March 1944

Letter written from Newport. Stanley is now based in Lincolnshire. He has not been on any operations since November but expects to start again soon.

9. 28th March 1944

Newport. Since his last leave Stanley has flown 4 more missions - to Frankfurt, Berlin and Essen. Whilst on leave: "I called at the Law Courts again....They told me Tom (remember the blonde one at my wedding) is missing that means only Harry and myself are left. It all seems wrong that these fine chaps have gone, let us hope that they have not sacrificed their lives for nothing."

10. 5th April 1944

The Lancaster "ME685" explodes over Toulouse, there are no survivors.

Note : 8 members of the Cardiff police, including Stanley, had volunteered to join the RAF together. Of this group of 8 just one survived the war.

FREDERICK BRUCE

Fred Bruce (picture 29) is Australian. He is 32 year old and got married (picture 30 Fred wedding) in 1934 with Adelaide Dorothy Elliott (picture 31 Adelaide) and he is the father of a 5 year old boy, Dennis.

In a letter to his sister, on 10 January 1944, he writes :

"Dear Ella,

I received your cable OK and thanks very much for your thoughts. I hope that you both are well and also baby Colin, he must growing quite a big boy by now and I will sure see the difference in him when I get back.

I hope to goodness it is not too much longer before I see you all again. I am well and truly fed up as I have at the moment a hell of a cold and feel notten.

I had quite a good Christmas under the circumstances but not as good as I would have had at home. Our crew has been a bit mucked up lately as our Skipper broke his leg and then our bomb aimer went for a burden there were both Aussies so here is only Johny the WOP (Wireless Operator Personnel) now and the rest are Englishman.

We got a new skipper today, and he looks OK (it is probably John Senior) but I don't know how he can fly yet.

Well Pal, this looks like goodbye for the present and I wish you all the best of everything. Lots of Love.

Your loving brother.

Fred"

In the night between 5 and 6 April 1944, Fred Bruce is killed on Toulouse.

Frederick Bruce was going to be best man for a mate the day after the aircraft was shot down.

When Fred Bruce wife is informed that her husband has been killed, she destroys by sheer despair all the pictures and documents she has from him (which explains why there are not many pictures of him left).

In 2021, his son, Dennis is aged 83and still lives in Australia.

