

The Lost Lancaster – Two Came Home

Laurie Tillen

A strong personal note was embedded in this tale RAF's Avro Lancaster Mk 1, serial L7547, conducting its final mission on February 14/15th, 1943. The aircraft was the 21st aircraft off the Avro production line, and having been built as a twin-engine Manchester it was returned to the factory and converted to a Lancaster before entering full service. By February 1943 the aircraft was with 207 Squadron, and based at Langar in Nottinghamshire.

The speaker detailed the aircraft's history, including some engine unreliability in the days before its fateful mission. He also outlined the seven-man crew arrangement, showing internal arrangements of crew positions, the parachute stowage positions and escape routes with a memorably accurate and precise description of the apparently spacious fuselage as being "like a Tardis in reverse." He provided also much more information relevant to the background of Bomber Command's operational demand on crews, particularly stressing the high mortality rate and the young age of the people involved on typical operations.

His pre-mission briefing to the audience brought everyone as close as possible to feeling that they knew the crew. We learned their names, backgrounds: nationalities and flying experience – with log-book extracts – and particularly the pilot, New Zealander John Whyte, and British flight engineer Stanley Eyre. Slides illustrating the commencement of the mission were accompanied by a reconstruction of engine start-up, and as the cacophony was extinguished his commentary was "that is what they had to expect for the next 10 hours."

The aircraft was part of a bombing raid on Milan, which necessitated a 1,860 mile return journey, carrying a substantial bomb load. The aircraft routed over eastern France, dog-legging to Milan south of Switzerland, cruising at 200mph at 16,500ft altitude. The aircraft's recalcitrant outer starboard engine made the crew cautious to descend to 8,000ft to drop their bombs, so they conducted a high-level drop before turning for home. Near Dijon in France, and unexpectedly, it was the port outer engine that started to fail and emit flames, and the events that led to the aircraft being evacuated by the whole crew was explained in detail. Eventually the aircraft crashed on woodland near a farm, 'Les Merlins,' with the pilot and flight engineer having been the last people to escape. The aircraft had circled beforehand and all previous crew members had landed close by, but these were the unfortunate five, and the pilot and engineer became the 'two came home' crew members.

Laurie's account was very detailed, and profusely illustrated (an estimate of 100 or so slides used overall in 90 minutes – but this was not overkill: he attained a remarkable level of completeness in his descriptions). We learned that the bodies of the five crewmen who perished were all recovered by local people, and despite German-occupying forces demanding they were buried without any ceremony, they were allocated a grave, and honours as fit to purpose as the village of St Brisson could muster – this included finding Union Jacks for each coffin. Thankfully the German forces did not send an attendee to this ceremony. At this point we learned that one of the five men, the navigator Frank Tillen, was the speaker's cousin, and that he had visited the five-plot grave in 2006, and so began his research into the two survivors.



The commemorative plinth at the crash site with the family of the pilot, one of two survivors, in attendance

F/Sgt John WHYTE, RNZAF - Pilot
F/Sgt Stanley EYRE, RAF - Flight Engineer

The grave in St Brisson commemorating
Sgt Frank TILLEN, RAF - Navigator
F/Sgt Thomas STRONG, RAF - Obs/Bomb Aimer
F/Sgt Athol GRAINGER RAAF - Wireless Op/AG
Sgt Henry BONE, RAF - Air Gunner (MU)
Sgt Kenneth WHITE, RAF - Air Gunner (R)



source: 207 Squadron web-site

This narrative has to be much more terse than the presentation. Remarkably, the two airmen met in the forest and hid in a cabin. They were found after only a few hours by an 18-year old logger, Andre Bouquin, who had followed their tracks. Within the day – as exciting in detail as any thriller – Bouquin accompanied the men through the forest, then on bikes to a monastery where they were secreted while a priest forged false paper for them. Placed in the hands of the Marquis (the French ‘resistance’ movement) they were transported by rail to Paris: deliberately a journey that took them away from the escape routes they might have been expected to use. They were hidden there for some time before travelling to Berne, again by rail, and under the eyes of German-occupying forces. On one railway journey, a German officer even sat next to pilot John Whyte for three hours.

They were in a safe haven, but Switzerland was accumulating UK crews, and had to despatch as many as possible, so after some six months in Berne they were to be put at risk of capture again when they took a train to Perpignan in SW France, then climbed through the Pyrenees mountains to enter Spain, where they faced a long journey, principally via Madrid, to reach Gibraltar. The two crew men were separated, with John Whyte leaving first, but he was injured as he crossed the mountains. Near Barcelona he gave himself up to Spanish authorities (under a new false ID), received hospital treatment, then absconded and travelled unattended to Gibraltar. Stanley Eyre had a less eventful journey – if one can adopt nonchalance in a description of what was a heart-stopping series of events. They both flew out of Gibraltar to the UK on RAF transport aircraft and arrived in the UK in February 1944: one year after the crash. Both men were awarded a DFC, and both returned to active service in Bomber Command. They survived the war and lived full and active lives. Whyte returned to New Zealand, and Eyre spent more time in the RAF before entering civilian life.

Question and answers time was slow to start, but discussion followed in abundance, and the vote of thanks was from ‘Mac’ Maccabee. This was a unique lecture for the branch, and almost unanimously amongst some 130 attendees the immediate response was that it was amongst the finest of presentations. This was a lecture in which an aircraft was implicit and the most fascinating content was humanitarian.

Mike Hirst