

College Boys at War



In the Summer term of 1926, Arnold Thornton the headmaster of Leamington College made a surprise announcement following a morning assembly in the Great Hall. He had received a request from the Air Ministry to grant the boys a half-holiday in celebration of the award of a cadetship at RAF College Cranwell to a former pupil of the College, Frank Whittle. Needless to say, the news was warmly received by the College pupils many of whom were contemporaries of Whittle and like him aspired to a career in flying.

RAF Volunteer Reserve



Sgt Derek Brown RAFVR

Following the Great War there had been a huge increase of interest in careers in flying which presented the ultimate challenge for young men with guts and a spirit of adventure. A decade later, many of the erstwhile College lads were not slow to sign up with a new volunteer force the RAF Volunteer Reserve formed in 1936. When war broke out in 1939, the Air Ministry employed the RAFVR as the principal means of aircrew entry into the Royal Air Force. For many of the College old boys, their unbridled enthusiasm for flying would ensure their names would for ever be remembered on the school's Memorial Board commemorating former pupils killed in action during the Second World War. The town War Memorial bears the names of fifty members of the Royal Air Force who died on active service in the Second World War and half of them were former Leamington College boys serving with the RAFVR. The accompanying article tells the stories of some of those Binswood Avenue 'bomber boys' who gave their lives.

Bombing theory & practice

The Area Bombing Directive of 14 February 1942 ordered RAF Bomber Command to target German industrial areas and the residential districts of German cities, a policy which continued until the end of the war. A prolonged offensive against the Rhine - Ruhr area had laid waste to huge areas but for the Halifax and Lancaster crews engaged in these night operations there was a serious downside. By 1943 an increasing number of RAF bombers began to fall victim to German night-fighters guided onto their targets by ground controllers who could see raids developing in real time on their radar screens. Bomber losses at the time were in the order of 3% but sometimes exceeded 15% of the total number of aircraft deployed. Given this situation, it was evident that half of all Lancaster crews would not complete 15 operations.



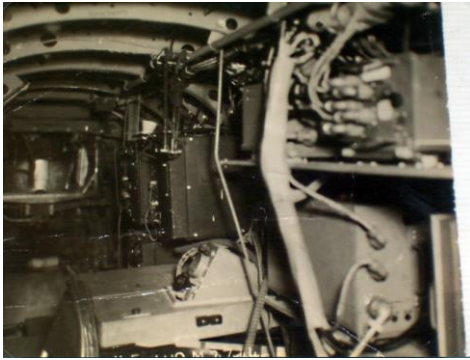
This 101 squadron Lancaster was lost over Berlin in February 1944. Three of the crew were killed; five became POWs

The RAF's first attempt to resolve the night-fighter predations was by the use of 'Window', thin strips of metal foil which could be jettisoned by the attacking bombers in large quantities with the object of confusing the Luftwaffe radar receivers. I remember as a school boy collecting large quantities of this at the end of the war. The RAF had to re-assess their use of 'window' which in many respects became counterproductive since it was easily recognisable to the ground station's radar and could in fact help to identify the position of the bomber stream.

Airborne Cigar (ABC)

It was the 'back -room boys' at the Telecommunications Research Establishment at Malvern who came up with a device designed for use on bombing raids over enemy territory to interrupt communications by jamming particular frequencies on which radio messages were being transmitted to night-fighters from ground control stations. Technically known as T3 160 it was christened Airborne Cigar but was more commonly referred to as ABC. It employed a panoramic receiver and three - 50 watt transmitters which could be tuned in to the voice band frequencies used by the night-fighter squadrons. An operator flying with a Lancaster crew could then, with the aid of a three -inch diameter cathode ray tube, identify and listen in to the German radio transmissions and deploy the powerful transmitters to effectively blot

out the underlying voice messages.



The top secret ABC equipment on a Mudford Lancaster

Trials of the new equipment started in September 1943 over the North Sea. The various components were large and weighed over 600 pounds and required a large aircraft to accommodate them, the Lancaster proved to be the obvious choice and Lancasters of 101 squadron based at Ludford Magna, Lincolnshire were adapted for the trials. Weight and size apart, the equipment also required a specially trained operator to use it and an eighth crew member then joined the usual seven on board the Lancaster. The ABC equipment was designated Top

Secret and a cost of £30,000 per aircraft ensured that Ludford aircraft were guarded day and night while on the ground.

Ludford Lancasters

101 squadron was originally founded at Farnborough in 1917 as part of the Royal Flying Corps. By 15 June 1943 it was based at Ludford Magna between Louth and Market Rasen in Lincolnshire as part of No 1 Group, Bomber Command. The squadron was at that date equipped with Avro Lancaster heavy bombers and had already taken part in several of the thousand bomber raids on Germany and on operations against Italian targets and raids on the V1 rocket sites at Peenemunde. Ludford was a temporary station with few of the facilities provided on more permanent airfields and was universally known as Mudford Stagna and variations thereon, due to the all-pervading mud. The station's first Commanding Officer, Group Captain Bobby Blucke described it as "a joke in very bad taste played by the Air Ministry at our expense".



'Rusty' Waughman's Lancaster photographed secretly by Rusty in contravention of the strict regulations prohibiting the use of cameras on the station

Notwithstanding the difficult conditions that prevailed for all those based at Ludford, the squadron was assigned to 'Special Duties' and as it turned out these were of a very dangerous nature. What this meant in practice was that all of the squadrons thirty or so Lancasters were to be adapted to carry the ABC equipment and some of those aircraft would be required to fly on every major bombing operation to protect the bomber stream. The 101 Lancasters would fly with their normal crew



Ludford Lancaster showing the two distinctive aerials for the ABC equipment. Courtesy of 'Rusty' Waughman

of seven plus the Special Duty Operator to operate the ABC. They would also carry a normal bomb load wherever possible. Externally the only thing to distinguish the ABC equipped Lancasters from the rest of the squadron Lancs were the two 7-foot loop aerials on top of the fuselage, another below the bomb-aimer's window and a shorter receiver at the top-rear of the fuselage.

For the next two years all main-force attacks on German targets were accompanied by Lancasters of 101 Squadron, sometimes up to twenty-seven in one raid. The ABC aircraft were stationed in pairs at regular intervals in the bomber stream so that if one were shot down, other parts of the stream would still be covered.

The role of Special Duty Operator (SDO)

The Special Duties Operators on 101's Lancasters were selected as volunteers from existing Bomber Command aircrew and ground crews. He was required to have a



A last brew prior to take off for this 101 squadron crew with flasks being filled from the tea urn

reasonable command of the German language but didn't need to be a fluent speaker since he did not have to speak to the Luftwaffe pilots ever. On board the aircraft he sat at a curtained off desk on the port side of the aircraft with a cathode ray tube and his three transmitters. He was completely cut off from the rest of the crew except for the intercom and was in complete darkness. His nearest human contact were the boots of the mid upper-gunner a few feet from his head. Only the forward section of the Lancaster was

heated and like the gunners, the SDO had to wear a bulky electrically-heated flying suit and gloves. With outside temperatures at 20,000 feet often falling to minus 50 degrees, the thick gloves must have made operating switches particularly difficult. This then was the dark, cramped space in which the SDO's of 101 squadron fought out their war. The squadron flew 2,477 sorties from Ludford Magna and flew more bombing raids than any other Lancaster Squadron in Group 1 losing 1094 crew killed and 178 taken Prisoner of War - the highest casualty rate of any squadron in the

Royal Air Force. We remember three of them here, all former Leamington College pupils.

Sergeant Charles Derek Brown RAFVR



Known by his family as Derek, he was born on August 23rd 1922 and as a boy attended Shrubland Street Primary School, after passing a scholarship, he went on to Leamington College where he learned German. He was a member of the choir at the parish church and a keen member of the Church Lad's Brigade. On leaving school he got a job working in the drawing office at the Lockheed company later transferring to their Test/Inspection department. In the early part of the war he was a member of the Lockheed unit of the Home Guard and was promoted to Sergeant but became very frustrated at not being able to play a more active role in the war since he was in a reserved occupation and wasn't called up. In November 1941 he decided to sign on with the RAF Volunteer Reserve and trained as a Wireless Operator/Gunner. It was about this time that Derek met a girl named Doris Walsby at a dance in the Palais de Danse in Spencer Street. Doris was a Londoner and had been

seconded to work at the British Iron & Steel Co at Ashorne Hill and all their female staff were billeted at the Bath Hotel in Bath Street, Leamington, just round the corner from the dance hall. The couple got married on October 17th 1942. In July the following year Derek passed out as a WOP/Air Gunner and while posted to an Operational Training Unit he saw there a notice pinned to the information board simply asking for volunteers with a knowledge of the German language. The notice didn't say anything more than that, it was intriguing in its content and rather vague in detail. Derek put his name down and was subsequently interviewed for and accepted one of the posts and on November 3rd 1943 Derek was posted to 101 Special Duties Squadron at Ludford Magna as SDO for a Lancaster crew.



Derek's headstone in the British War Cemetery in Berlin

Barely eight weeks after joining the squadron, on the night of January 2/3 1944, he was one of the crew of Lancaster DV269M on operations against Berlin in what became known as the Battle of Berlin. After bombing the

target, the aircraft was attacked and hit twice by a German night-fighter or by flak and came down at Michendorff with four of the crew still on board. Derek and the other four crew men were reported to have bailed out of the aircraft and to



have been taken prisoner but news soon came that Derek had not survived and had been buried in a local cemetery. Enquiries through the Red Cross never established the circumstances of Derek's death. The Air Bomber on board the Lancaster that fateful night was a Canadian, Flying Officer McClure who was sent to the POW camp at Stalag Luft III along with the other three crew and he later recalled that "Lazenby the pilot gave the order to abandon the damaged aircraft. It was then flying straight and level but was filled with smoke." The Flight Engineer, Sergeant Craig who was the third man to bail out of the stricken Lanc later recalled "*Lazenby was alive and he stated over the intercom that he was wounded in the leg. Nothing was heard from Sergeants Brown, Beckett or Stephens*".

The 101 Station Operations Book summed up the fate of DV269M in just six words 'Aircraft missing, no communications since take off'. After the war Derek's remains were reinterred in the British War Cemetery in Berlin

Sergeant Charles Septimus Aliband Graves RAFVR

I first became aware of Sgt Graves' death when researching for a book on Southam men who had died in the Great War. I came across his distinctive War Graves Commission headstone in Southam churchyard and thought it rather strange that a man killed on a bombing operation should be buried back in his home town. My subsequent research in the National Archive revealed that he too was a Lancaster



Lancaster Wireless Operator. Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum

Special Duty Operator with 101 squadron at Ludford and his name was also on the Leamington College Second World War Memorial tablet. Sergeant Graves was the son of Charles Graves who ran an auctioneering business in Southam. At the date of his death his parents were living in Willes Terrace in Leamington. He was a married man but his own place of residence has yet to be established. As yet I have little idea about his early life or of what he did before volunteering for Bomber Command.

The circumstances of his death have taken some unravelling and involved an exchange of correspondence with the Air Historical Branch of the Ministry of

Defence. So far as can be established these are the facts surrounding his death. He was the SDO on Lancaster LL772 which took off from Ludford at 15.44hrs on 24 June 1944 on an operational sortie to bomb Flying Bomb sites near Les Hayons in northern France. While en route to the target, the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and Sgt Graves was mortally wounded. No other members of the crew were injured. The aircraft went on to bomb its objective and then returned to England. It is assumed that the skipper of the aircraft learning of Graves' condition decided to land at the first airfield they came to in England in the hope of getting some urgent medical attention for him. The Lancaster landed at Selsey Bill, Sussex at 18.32 hrs where the body of Sgt Graves was removed from the aircraft which then returned to base at Ludford. The Squadron Operations Log makes no mention of the diversion to Selsey Bill and the de-briefing report contains no mention of Sgt Graves' death or of the landing at Selsey Bill which is inexplicable. Graves' wife was initially informed that her husband had been killed when LL772 crashed on take-off at Ludford Magna but we know this is not so since LL772 survived the remainder of the war and was struck off only in January 1947.



Sgt Graves' headstone in Southam churchyard

Sergeant John Gregory Hayden RAFVR

John Hayden's name is also on the Old Leamingtonian War memorial plaque and he too was killed in action while serving with 101 squadron At Ludford Magna. Little is known about his early life. He was born in 1922, the same year as Derek Brown, and the two would have been contemporaries at Leamington College in the nineteen thirties. His entry into the Royal Air Force was typically by way of the Volunteer Reserve. Within a few weeks of signing on, John Hayden found himself involved in the process known as 'crewing up' that is of becoming a member of a Lancaster crew which he would remain with, barring accidents, for the foreseeable future. Sean Feast describes



Air Force section of Harrogate (Stonefall) cemetery

the business of 'Crewing up' in his book *Carried on the Wind ... 'How these airmen came to 'crew up' varied enormously from unit to unit: some would be marched into a large hangar and simply told to get on with it sometimes the process was achieved in more*

convivial surroundings at the local hostelry. It was definitely unscientific, and would most certainly not be allowed today. How, for example, could a 19 year old assess the true worth of someone on whom his life may depend? Regardless of the rights or wrongs of the system, it worked.'

Having completed the 'crewing up' and meeting his fellow crew members for the first time, John Hayden took possession of his seat in Ludford Lancaster LM389 designated Wireless Operator/Air Gunner. On December 16th 1943 his newly mustered crew skippered by 20 year old Pilot Officer Norman Maylin Cooper, a former Letchworth Grammar School boy, took off from Ludford in the winter half-light of a December afternoon. Their target for the night was Berlin, It was to be their first and unfortunately their last mission. To their very great misfortune the aircraft crashed on landing back at Ludford with the loss of all the crew save the Rear Gunner, Sergeant Ross who was himself killed in action within a matter of a few weeks. His remains now lie in the Harrogate (Stonefall) cemetery along with the graves of almost a thousand RAF airmen from wartime bomber airfields in Yorkshire and the north-eastern counties.



Leamington College Arms

Pleas Note. I am planning to further research the local men who gave their lives in the Second World War and would welcome contact with anyone who has information of any sort.

Alan Griffin, December 2016

Sources & Acknowledgements

David Brown (Derek's brother)

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