

EN

LANCASTER

DS 690



R.A.G. BAIRD

• KIA •



R. WALKER

• KIA •



E. SMITH

• KIA •



W.J. MOORCROFT

• KIA •



H. MATTHEWS

• KIA •



N.A.B. ROBINSON

• KIA •



J. ODENDAAL

• POW •

1943 - 2013

70th Anniversary

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DS 690




Pour Nous deux

À Phil,
à Pierre, Michel, René et tous les Passeurs de Mémoire.



*Nos remerciements vont également
aux autorités communales
de Bouillon et Paliseul
et plus particulièrement à
Monsieur Patrick Adam, Député et Président
du Conseil Provincial pour le soutien apporté
dans l'édition de ce livret.*

Conception graphique : dbcreation 

It's Thursday 15 July 1943. The rays of the midday sun flood the valley of La Cornette.

There's an engine noise in the sky and the whole village of Auby look up to the few clouds. A plane. There are black crosses under its wings. A small plane starts to fly in wide circles around the farm of La Billarde, around the blackened debris of the other, the British aircraft.

There is no school today and smartly dressed children are playing in the streets. At the sight of the slowly descending Fiesler Storch all of them rush to the ridge that overlooks the valley. There it is, its engine running, swaying on its wheels as it approaches the edge of the pine forest. The echo of the engine noise suddenly disappears. The side windows are raised and two men get out. One a German officer, recognizable by his cap, and the other dressed in flight overalls. The small crowd surrounds the newcomers at a respectful distance. Suddenly, the officer takes off his belt and opening the case, raises his gun over his head. Arm raised, he shows it to all and in broken french says that he will leave it in the plane and he would not advise anyone to take it. Children are petrified.

The two men then follow the slope down the hill through the pine forest, the man in overalls carrying a small package. Curiosity gets the better of the children and some approach the plane whilst others follow the two airmen to the creek below. A few minutes later and everybody can see them among the blackened rocks, amid the debris and the remains of burned vegetation. For a long time the officer seems to collect himself and he then lays a wreath of flowers along the small road. He is inspecting the scene, observing. Time feels like it is suspended. Suddenly, however, the two German airmen walk up the slope. Children scatter in the forest and run back towards the ridge



Meanwhile, Nelly GENARD who lives in La Billarde joins the children. She has a camera and shows it to the airmen. The officer looks affable and he manages to make it clear that he is happy for her to take a picture of his plane but only if the children are in the foreground. He does not know that she has already taken a picture of the aircraft registered 'L+ CD' and which does not bear the crest of the NachtJagd on the engine cover.

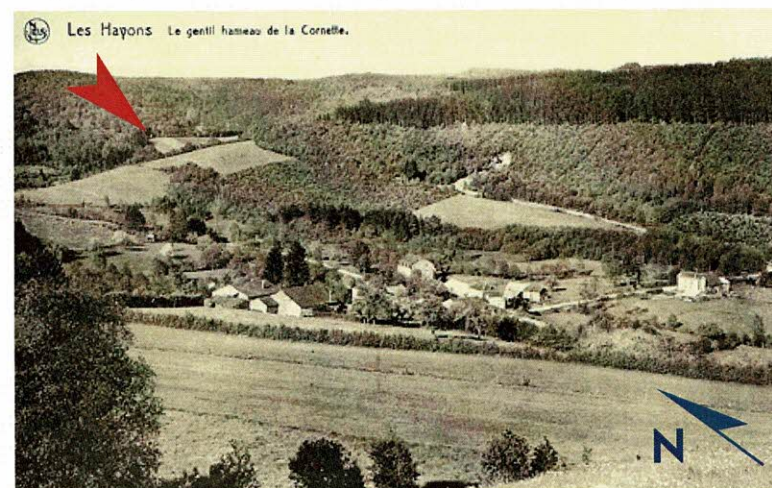
While all the children are being placed in a row, and without the knowledge of Hptm. GEIGER and Fw. KOCH, the first and the bravest of them climbs on the port wheel and gives a military salute. The salute of the Allies, not the salute of the Germans. The crowd runs away from the plane when the engine is re-started. Limping briefly on its landing gear, it pulls off the ground before quickly climbing into the sky.

The day before, on the night of 13/14 July, a British bomber has crashed near the hamlet of La Cornette. Awakened by the huge explosion, some residents of nearby villages defy the curfew, some to give help, others out of curiosity, and walk to the crash site.

In the middle of the night and helped by all the villagers, the Priests of Les Hayons and Auby collect all the human remains of the unfortunate British airmen in a large bowl, before the German soldiers arrive. They then proceed with the Christian burial of the remains of the crew and bury them in the early morning in the churchyard of Les Hayons. The events of the day are recorded in the liber memorialis of which Pierre Bourgeois found some extracts.

Numerous accounts have been recorded by René Martelange and René Thomas.

Louis PICART lives in Auby. He is 20 and tells anyone who will listen that he saw a fireball coming down slowly. Then shortly after, there was a loud noise and a huge explosion with a great light near the farm of La Billarde, in the bottom of the valley. At sunset, we left with other people of Auby to see what had happened overnight. At the farm we were told that a crashed plane had lost a wing that had fallen into a pasture. We walked in the fields up to the river of Les Alleines in the direction where we could still see black smoke rising into the sky. The wing of the plane had dropped a few hundred metres from the wreckage of the plane.



Evence ROZET, who is 13 years old at the time, lives in the hamlet of La Cornette. He says that *in the middle of the night we heard an explosion followed by popping sounds in the night. Shortly after we were told it was a plane that had crashed. My brother Leon and I ... we went there at night, to approach the wreck. The aircraft had struck some rocks. Of course people wanted us to go away - it was not the place for children. We circled around a huge fire ... We were looking for wounded men ... At sunrise, I remember scattered human remains ... The priest of Aubry managed, with all the other adults to recover the human remains, which were all placed in a large galvanized basin carried on a wheelbarrow. Some Germans, arriving later, let him do so.*

Maria MARY is 32 years old; she lives in Fays-Les-Veneurs. Like many others, she walks to the crash site on 14 July early in the morning. She remembers that *there were already other people there when I arrived on the site. It was a sad sight: there were pieces of metal everywhere. I saw many burned human remains, either on the ground or clinging to the wreckage. I also saw a shoe in a tree, pieces of white parachute, with the strings hanging down, burned in the rubble. It was sad to see ... At the scene, there was a deathly silence among the curious ... There were also boxes on the ground with tablet of pills ... By late morning, I cannot remember the time, the Germans arrived and sent away the curious.*

A little later, another witness walks down the road from Fays-Les-Veneurs, approaching the crash site down the creek. Halted by German soldiers he has time to see some kind of blackened metal cupola, with four burned metal extruding bars. The rear gunner's turret and its Brownings. He adds you can see inside it, it's empty.

In the middle of the night, in Fays-Les-Veneurs, some saw the low pass of the bomber just before it crashed.

Maria MARY says *she heard an engine noise and saw a long trail of fire coming from the direction of Bertrix that disappeared be-*

hind the hill, towards Paliseul ... Then there was an explosion in the sky ... Soon after, I heard a lot of engine noise. I went to the bedroom window and saw, coming back from Paliseul this time, a huge airplane that had a large fireball all around it ... Everything was on fire, except the front part ... It disappeared more or less between the woods and the 'Ban of La Cornette'. A few moments later I heard a terrific explosion that brought down the bedroom curtain rail and the curtains and dust covered the floor. The roof of the house was made of clay as were many houses at the time.

On 12th July, 115 Squadron is due to take part in the raid against Turin but their participation in the raid is cancelled at the last moment. The Lancasters are kept bombed-up overnight. These Lancasters are MkII, fitted with Bristol Hercules engines.

The next day on 13th July, Bomber Command orders a raid against Aachen, code name Elver (young eel). The heavy bombers have been involved in the Battle of the Ruhr since April 1943, - an almost uninterrupted series of 43 raids on industrial centres. The raid against Aachen is the last of this campaign. With 355 other RAF aircraft, 115 Squadron provides 17 Lancasters and for the first time, DS690 is taking part. The bomber is brand new. The crew took delivery of DS690 after some leave during which their usual aircraft was shot down with another crew at the controls.

After the weather briefing, the crews are trying to eat their meal. A few more hours and the powerful Hercules engines will be started. The waiting is the worst part.

Barely touched the meal. Not hungry. We are always scared at the thought of what might happen. It's always the same. Flying is like playing cards and it's too bad for those who get the ace of spades. Experience counts, but it is often a matter of luck. There is only a one in six chance of surviving a complete first 'tour' of 30 missions. It's already near sunset.

90 minutes before take-off the crew put on their equipment. The summer of 1943 is hot this year, but it will be -15 °C up there. They are all wearing their oval identification discs around the neck which give their name and service number. Before getting into the little truck that takes them to DS690, they take with them a kit comprising escape maps printed on silk, a compass, and some banknotes.

They are seven gathered near the tail of Lancaster, probably something of a ritual, to relieve themselves on the rear wheel: two officers and five sergeants. Each crew member has his own view of his importance on board. So the Navigator thinks with reason that without him, no one will get home. The Radio Operator knows that he remains the voice and ears of the bomber and that he will follow orders received and detect intruders who might attack. The Flight Engineer is convinced that no one else on board is able to maintain the aircraft in flying condition. The Bomb Aimer sees his task as the essential element, the reason for all the risk taking: his task is to drop the contents of this huge flying bomb bay on the target. As for the Gunners, they are the only ones able to defend the lives of all others, the only ones actually fighting, the rest of the crew do not even have a pistol. The Pilot feels that he alone is ultimately responsible for the crew and the aircraft and that, in the end, he is expected to sacrifice himself to allow others to have the time to bail out. Everyone, however, knows that the bomber is a huge and complex machine that requires the constant attention of everyone: it's a team effort with everybody dependent on everybody else for their survival.

As usually, W/C RAINSFORD is going around the crews before they take off. He remembers that *'Jock' BAIRD asked me if I would like to fly with him that night. We are old and good friends and I was very tempted to do so. But since the rules were pretty strict that senior officers no longer take to the air together unless absolutely necessary, I decline and say I look forward to seeing him in the morning.*

The Pilot, R.A.G. BAIRD. Is nearly 34 years old, married, and has two children. For his wife he is the love of her life. She awaits their third child. 'Jock', the mischievous and irrepressible Scot with an illustrious ancestry. A Squadron Leader, with unique Army experience, yet not entirely respectful of authority. He has substantial experience of bombers and a special sense of humor which risks going over the top on occasion. He is known as 'Jock' to his crew and his friends.

Perhaps the time for a last cigarette.

Robert 'Bobby' WALKER teases BAIRD on his promise to give up all his titles of nobility at the end of the war. 'Bobby': a jolly 21-year old, irreverent, a great sportsman and formidable poker player. A gifted scholarship student who was later employed in a law office in the Isle of Man. He wanted so much to become a pilot, he is the Bomb Aimer. This is his 30th mission after which he will be leaving 115 Sqn to become an instructor.

Or one last joke?

The Flight Engineer J.E.C. ODENDAAL and Pilot R.A.G. BAIRD swap nationalist jokes. Johannes, the Rhodesian, is just 20 years old. His grandfather was a famous taxidermist to the Court. He joined up at the outset of the war and flew as a crew member during the Battle of Britain and survived a crash in his previous bomber unit.

It's time to board.

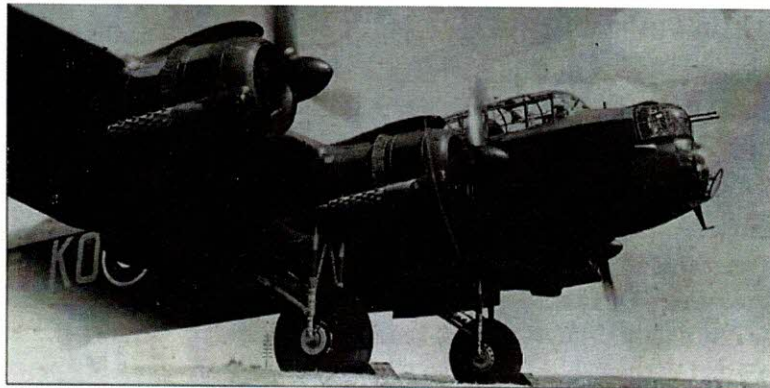
As usual, the Rear Gunner Harold Matthews is the first to climb aboard. He's barely 19 years old: still a teenager, but not yet a man. He comes from the southern suburbs of London, where he was an apprentice. He walks to the end of the bomber with the help of the other gunner.

The other Gunner: the Australian N.A.B. 'Ben' ROBINSON, the older of the two by more than 10 years. This one wanted to change his life. He was a bank clerk in Perth, before ... 'Ben' waits for the others to move to the cockpit and takes his place in the dorsal turret.

Following the four others, the Radio Operator Edwin SMITH, nearly 21 years old and from Sheffield, sits at his table and has already selected the circuit radio frequency. He faces the back of W.J. MOORCROFT who is reading his navigation notes.

W.J. 'Billy' MOORCROFT is the other officer, commissioned at the end of his training. 'Billy', 22 years old and previously an Office Manager for Zettlers Pools in Liverpool. He got engaged a few days ago during leave home in Maghull. Laura is waiting for him...

BAIRD takes his seat and turns the main power connector to flight, he checks the fuel gauges, the landing gear light and positions the flaps to neutral. A switch on the main connector is set to ground. The ground crew is ready, close to the 24V generator under the open hatch of the landing gear of the right inboard engine, the no. 3. Throttle open a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, mixture on normal, propeller pitch set on up and switch to auto. A look at the indicator on the compressor in M position, no indicator lights. Air indicator on open. ODENDAAL has already selected the electric pump of the fuel tank between no. 3 and no. 4 engines. Main fuel pump selector on, engine throttle slide on ignition position. BAIRD presses the ignition knob. No more than 10 seconds ... In a fusillade of detonations and with the fumes of unburned gases, the cylinders of no. 3 are firing up. Then throttle at 1,000 rpm. DR compass switch on, switch to setting position.



One by one, the generators start hissing and then the propellers start rotating and soon disappear from sight as their speed increases. The night air vibrates with the howl of more than 70 Bristol Hercules engines.

A final check of the main connector now switched to flight. While BAIRD checks flight controls, ODENDAAL manages engine temperatures and oil pressure levels and gradually pushes the throttles of the 4 Hercules to 1,500 rpm, propeller pitch to auto. He then checks the slight decrease in oil pressure whilst ensuring the proper operation of each engine compressor, selector on S, warning light. Switching back to M position. Then a check of maximum takeoff power at 2,800 rpm and a check of the magnetos. BAIRD switches on the DR compass, switch to normal. He then checks the spherical pitch and roll indicator, then he releases the brake pressure.

The Taxi starts with a slow procession of navigation lights, then the fix point, waiting for the green light from the Aldis lamp. A last wave to the ground staff, lined up along the runway.

Elevators in a slightly lower position to facilitate the lifting of the tail. Rudders and ailerons to neutral. Flaps lowered to 20°. A check on the pitch propeller switch. Main fuel pump is on, fuel selector on centre, left and right. Compressor switches on M. A final check of the controls.

At last the green light. Standing on the brakes, throttles at 2,000 rpm, then 2,800 rpm when the brakes are released.

Thirty tons, and as many metres wide, rush on the grass runway of East Wretham ...

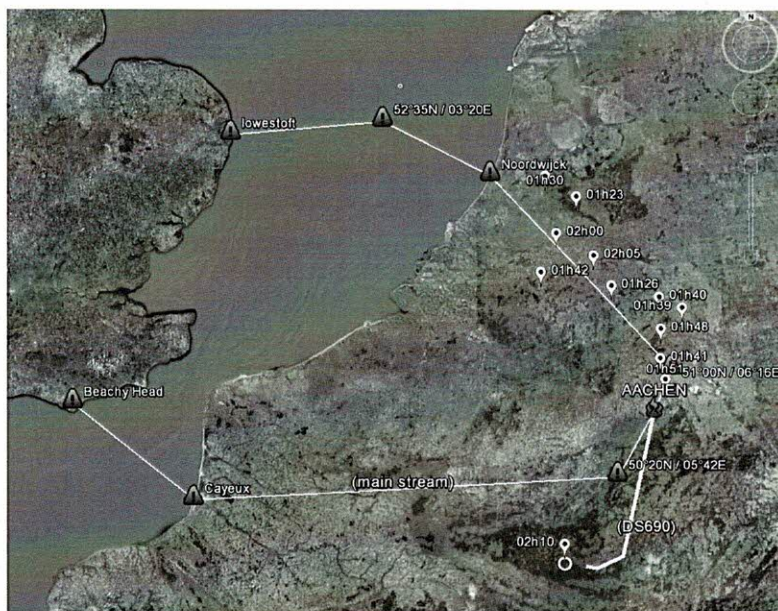
30 tons of metal, fuel, bombs, fear, hope and courage.

On 13th July at 23:55 hours, DS690 leaves the ground heavily, as if reluctant...

A short trip over Europe, just 4 hours and we're back shows the diary of a crew member. It is true that the target is relatively close. The procedure is known. Rally off Lowestoft, line up in

the stream, then 52° 35'N / 03° 20'E, then Noordwijck, then 51° 00'N / 06° 16'E, then a timed passage to the objective followed by the return going south and flying over the Ardennes, then 50° 20'N / 05° 42'E, next the French border, the Artois, Cayeux, the Channel and finally Beachy Head.

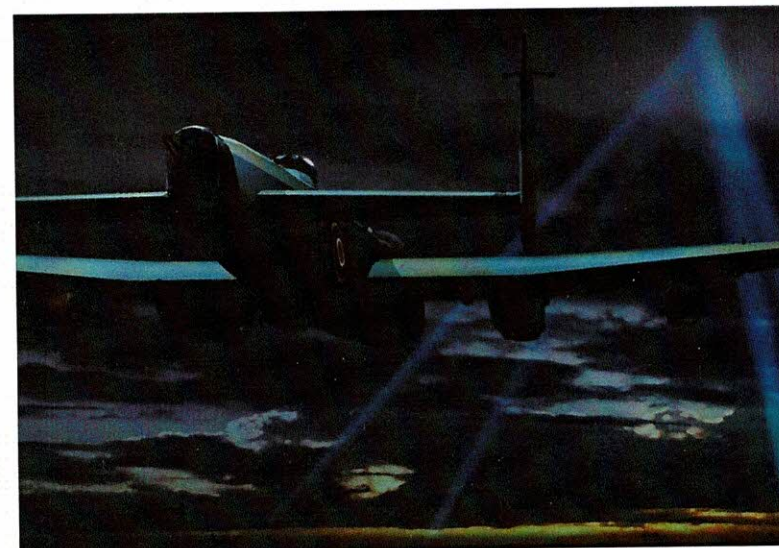
It is a beautiful hot and still night. It's nearly full moon. There are few clouds at 15,000 feet. The Pathfinders lead the way. We just have to follow them. The northwest wind is favourable. Between 90 and 120 kph, the Met Officer had not forecasted so much. *Bah, we'll find that the wind will surely slow us down on the return flight.*



Things become more complicated over the Netherlands. Despite the diversionary raid by 6 Mosquitoes over Berlin (code name 'Whitebait'), the massive stream has already been detected. The various night fighter squadrons of NJG1 watch over the area. The Pathfinders of 35 Squadron, equipped with the four engine Halifax, suffer the first losses. The leader of the other pathfinder force, the Canadian 405 Squadron, is also

shot down. Planes fall, the first before 01.30 hours and 6 more others before reaching the target. This is the struggle at the front of the bomber stream which is now at 18,000 feet. Heading to Cologne, the bombers then turn sharply to starboard on a course of 230, in the direction of Aachen. The bomber stream continues to climb, 20,000 feet. But where are the target indicators? There are not many TIs. Yet given the size of the target, the procedure for mass target indicating 'Parramatta' has been ordered.

DS 690 is already on its bomb run and MOORCROFT, the navigator, has taken his place in the astrodome to ensure that no other bomber is flying above the Lancaster.



The target. Already? Too early ...much too early.

A few flares, the bomb aimer has to be certain. A mission report indicates 8/10 cloud at 10,000 to 12,000 ft. over target. City defences are light.

WALKER gives his instructions to the skipper, the bomb bay is opened. A hurricane of noise.

Left, left ... ok. Right, right ... a bit, skipper. Steady ... steady. The fingers are clenched on the bomb release switches. ... Steady ... bombs away!... and here goes the Cookie.

A strong jolt when the bombs are released. The bomb bay is closed. Calm - despite the roar of the engines.

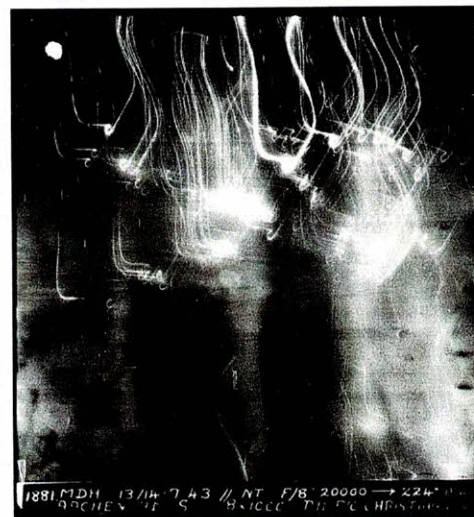
The city, behind, below, burns. *Quick let's get out of this hell.*

Suddenly, a shout, the voice of MATTHEWS, the rear gunner: *fighter! Starboard, go, go!*

Instinctively, BAIRD launches the heavy bomber in a starboard dive.

A series of shocks, explosions. The sound of torn metal, the staccato of machine gun fire. DS690 is diving, diving steeply to the ground ... After seconds that last an eternity, the climb to port ... then the levelling off, quickly stabilized by BAIRD, but the Lancaster tends to fly nose down, the controls are heavier. The elevators are probably damaged but she still flies. *The smell of cordite. We are hit.* Quick, a check of the intercom. It works, but no answer from astern. ROBINSON is screaming that it was a night fighter, that it's over now, but the tail gunner has been hit. ODENDAAL checks his gauges, everything is ok, nothing is burning and we are not losing fuel. On the order of the skipper, he slips back, over the beam, and ensures that everything is OK with ROBINSON. He continues to the end of the fuselage, the doors of the rear turret are broken. MATTHEWS is lying, sprawled on the spent .303 cartridge cases. The perspex sides of the turret are jagged, icy air rushes inside. The engineer takes the wounded gunner to the berth located at the wing root, on the port side. The gunner regains consciousness and is given first aid. But the turret mechanism is now wrecked, it is useless ... *Come on, let's go home.*

According to the only combat report registered by 115 Sqn, which is the only Squadron flying Lancasters that night, one minute after bombing on a course of 230, F/O CHRISTIANSEN is flying beside 'Jock's bomber at 01.49 hours. His gunner sights a Ju88 attacking the Lancaster of the Squadron Leader, which is returning fire and diving to starboard taking evasive measures...



In the following days, Bomber Command produces the results of the raid: an unusual number of aircraft dropped their bombs in the first moments after zulu hour. 2,927 homes are destroyed and also the offices of the Central Post Office, the prison, two infantry barracks, a military depot and eight manufacturing plants.

According to an account registered by Jean-Pierre Mertens, Raymond KLEINERMANS is a Belgian prisoner, jailed at that time in Aachen. He has not forgotten that *after I was designated as a forced labourer I hid to escape. Given away, I got caught ... Sent to Chemnitz, my only concern was to escape ... Taken down after work, it was thanks to the help of a co-worker that I escaped. We were picked up and I was taken to the prison at the Red Barracks in Aachen. On the night of 13 to 14 July 1943, the sirens announced an impending air attack and our guards took us to the cellar. As nothing happened, the sirens signaled the end of the alert. No sooner had we returned to our cells when the sirens screamed again and the first explosions were heard. Head buried in my arms, my body formed a ball that I wanted the small-*

est possible. The air was full of noise, the smell of explosives, and was saturated with dust. Shock waves lifted me, quaked me in every way, and I cannot remember who shook the most, me or the floor. It wouldn't stop... It was the most terrifying night of my life.

On the German side, propaganda speaks of terroristangriff. There are 294 dead and 745 injured - *the war of statistics.*

Anyway, the city is deserted for several days, as attested by the municipal registers of food stamps.

Heinrich HERWEGH lives in Aachen at the time. He remembers that *on the night of 13/14 July 1943, we were bombed twice. We lived in Büchel, No. 51. It was a major attack, between 01.45 hours and 02.42 hours, there were 200 planes which dropped more than 100,000 incendiary bombs and phosphorus. There were 300 dead and 750 wounded, besides 3,000 people who suffered temporary eye injuries. A portion of the population has left the city to be accommodated elsewhere with family. Those of us who did not know where to go had to move to areas imposed by the authorities in Saxony and Lower Silesia. Following this we were evacuated to Primkenau in Lower Silesia.*



Within the stream of bombers, crews in the first wave stated that *the target was identified only by the flares and that the bombing took place from an altitude of between 16,000 and 21,000 feet by lining up on the few green and red TT's. Fires are very concentrated and a loud explosion is visible at 01.46 hours. The smoke obscured the target, but the glow of fires is clearly visible. The flak is active.*

The crew of DS690 is already too far away to see it. More than 30 miles away, in the mid-upper turret, ROBINSON can only distinguish the glow of the explosions.

BAIRD usually always flies back his heavy bomber very low over enemy territory. He told his wife, who is expecting their third child: *flying homeward at zero feet is the only way to counter the odds.* Like some other pilots, he shares the idea that *on the run to the target, we fly for the RAF, on the way home, we fly for ourselves...*

But this time it's another story. The Lancaster is crippled with shrapnel, the elevator controls are damaged, and the bomber has a tendency to lose altitude. One cannot afford to fly low. After discussing the situation with MOORCROFT, the navigator, the choice is made: a safe course is to fly high, far to the south, parallel to the stream.

Everything is quiet now. We cannot see anything around us. MOORCROFT, the navigator gives instructions to the pilot: Skipper, course 240. One crew member notes we are changing course, again, more to the south-west now. What the crew does not know is that the stream of bombers has already been detected by the two long-range FREYA radars of the 301st. Regiment of Aircraft Night Search, especially the one situated near Bouillon.

Soon we will be over France and at risk of other attacks from night fighters based in Belgium and France. And that damn wind is from the front and is slowing us down. On board Lancaster DS690 SMITH, the wireless operator, focuses all his efforts on the radar rear warning device.

In the far east of the intervention square 'M' that has been assigned that night, GEIGER for his part is finding it hard to stay focused. *Over an hour circling around Marteleng beacon he thinks, and still no information ... and if the British had turned back home on a northern course?* Suddenly, the voice of KOCH in the Intercom Stellung 'Bulle' has ordered M2, course 015, 3H viermots (heavies), 5000.

A violent push on the engine controls. The twin Mercedes 605D engines power the night fighter to its waiting orbit. Yet the voice of the bordfunker: *course 360*. The Messerschmitt Bf110 rushes through the air, racing to intercept the bombers. *The ground radar guys have done a good job thinks GEIGER. According to their instructions we should be soon in the flow of hundreds of bombers.*

There are more than 300, well to the north, flying level between 15,000 and 20,000 feet. A flood more than 40 km long by 10 km wide. A huge whirring cloud.

Skipper, course 260 announces MOORCROFT through the Intercom. Aboard the bomber nobody is aware of the fact that for several minutes the surface of the Lancaster has been hammered by billions of electronic pulses from the WURTZBURG interception radars situated in Belgium, in Mogimont. There, a technician of Stellung Bulle/301 RegLuftNachRichten has randomly selected a point on his screen. A radar echo, much to the south of the stream.



This point is DS690. This point is also the lives of seven young people.

The Bomber Command report on this mission will record 41 attacks carried out by German night fighters, which, added to the 18 losses, brings the number of dogfights to over 60. Probably more. About 1 bomber in 5 is attacked.

The weakness of the Lancaster is its blind spot underneath the belly of the bomber. In the summer of 1943, there is no machine gun defending the belly of a Mk. II and no crew member can be positioned to keep watch. Only the rear gunner, and secondarily the mid-upper gunner, can keep a look out for a night fighter on a climbing approach from below. But MATTHEWS is no longer at his post and the rear turret is no longer usable. He is wounded lying on the bench in the middle of the fuselage.

Apart from the frequent banking conducted by BAIRD, the crew now relies on the Radio Operator SMITH and Monica, the passive watching device which uses a flying antenna. In England, few technicians are aware of the Flensburg detection system and it is still advisable for crews to make heavy use of these Doppler measurements.

The bordfunker KOCH calls his pilot. He has acknowledged receipt of messages from the radar control station. *Viermot, straight ahead. Turn port course 300.*

GEIGER is surprised: *already?... so close, it must be an isolated one...*

The second weakness, which is true for any aircraft, is the positioning of fuel tanks in the wings. The Lancaster is a huge flying bomb bay. At full load, there is no room in the fuselage for additional tanks.

The heavy bomber adds a third, namely trimming of the aircraft which is made according to the flight configuration. On the way to the target, and with a bomb load, to relieve the load on the fuselage the fuel is held in the wing tanks. On the return

flight the weight is re-centred on the fuselage. So, the inner tanks permanently contain fuel.

Another minute and guided by technicians of the Bulle radar station, KOCH finally sends the code *Emil, Emil*.



His eyes glued on the three circular radar FuG 202 dials, he reported 2,000 contact, port, course 260. The night attacker aims at the wing root, between the fuselage and the first engine. The fuselage of the bomber is then very near

to the centre of the collimator of the night fighter.

Suddenly, the bordfunker KOCH shouts to his pilot: *Achtung, dive to port! Flensburg detection...*

Aboard DS690, they actually detect a fleeting echo at the rear. *Another bomber, an anomaly or something else? Impossible to determine for SMITH and BAIRD. We have to expect another contact.*

Still a long minute, time feels like it is suspended. Skilfully guided, the threatening Bf110 is slowly gaining distance, climbing up under the belly of the bomber. KOCH announces *contact 200, ahead 400. Ich Behurhe. To you.*

Fourth weakness, the poor defences of the bomber in terms of both calibre and reserves of ammunition. Bomber Command has given priority to payload and range. Any superfluous pounds means less bombs carried ...

There is the bomber. Have to line up in the airflow. Low speed... and rise slowly, thinks GEIGER. What improvements we have made since we were taught in fighting school to use only the rudder to aim the entire length of the wing, from the wing root to the tip. Less dangerous, but not effective enough, no guarantee.

Fifth uncertainty, nobody aboard can see anything more than 400 metres distant. At this distance, obscured by the camouflage of his speckled grey fighter, an experienced German pilot is already under the belly of the bomber.

GEIGER focusses on the last step. *Approach so close that you can nearly touch it. Not too close. That's it. Like that. Under the left wing. One can distinguish the huge engine nacelles which stand out against the milky background of the sky. Definitely, when firing, I prefer to use stick and rudders. Slipping to the side when going up. More dangerous, but better results. I fire on the wing, the engine, and the fuselage. I have barely eight seconds firing with my 20mm.*

The sixth uncertainty aboard the bomber is the use of machine guns at night. .303 rounds are fired in a sequence of armour piercing and tracer rounds. It is taught in gunnery school that there is a risk that preventive firing can alert the night fighter. *Don't shoot unless you are sure that the attacker has targeted you and that you are sure to hit him. Only the darkness protects the bomber ...* There are not many reports of a gunner managing to shoot down a night fighter. In reality, everything depends on the pre-flight instructions given by the skipper, the pilot. He is the one who imposes firing, or evasive measure, or evasive measure and firing.

Fully concentrating, GEIGER thinks. *And then there's this new technique of NJG4 in Florennes. This is incredibly dangerous, only the stick, aiming at the wing root. A long shot with a sharp vertical climb. One must surely be pretty close to the tail ... But what a result. Immediate killing. Like in Dinant last week.*

Now! Geiger screams. The fighter violently climbs upwards while he is pulling the trigger.

Seventh uncertainty, if the presence of the night fighter is detected by the crew to port and astern, the recommended evasive measure is to corkscrew. Left turn with rudder, diving to the left hand, right turn, rise to the right, left turn, diving left, and so on until the attacker has been shaken off.

The beginning of the manoeuvre is made according to the axis of attack. To the right if it comes from starboard and to the left if it comes from port. The pilot relies entirely on the gunners who give the order to port or to starboard. If the order is late, there is an unfavourable conjunction between the early stage of banking, the beginning of the turn and the firing burst of the fighter. The bomber rolls on its side when the fighter is firing. In addition to the wing and engine, the side of the fuselage is then very exposed to the 20mm shells fired by the heavy guns of the night fighter.

Perhaps ROBINSON thinks about it when he asks BAIRD to roll the bomber from one wing to the other. *Skipper, ok to bank on port...*

Suddenly he sees the fighter, there, just under the port wing. At 02.05 hours, it's the attack. *Port! Go, go, go ...* he screams into the intercom. Instantly, BAIRD turns the bomber hard left ...

Too late. The explosive shells pass through the wing, piercing the tanks and wrecking the engine. Shock, the sound of torn metal, flames, and fire. In general, this is what all survivors remember of a night fighter attack.



KOCH is shouting, *target is hit ... It's done ... It burns.*

The long burst has also shredded the left side of Lancaster, all along the wing root. Aboard DS690 all men to port are dead or dying. The wireless operator SMITH and the navigator MOORCROFT are slumped over their tables. The wounded MATTHEWS is now lying down on the berth. No answer from the gunner ROBINSON. Pilot BAIRD lies unconscious, his head leaning against the perspex. DS690 is slowly stabilizing and then she dives. The engine noise is deafening. There is no intercom, you must shout to be understood.

WALKER, the bomb aimer, lying in the bubble before the time of the attack, drops his sextant, and clings to the pilot's seat. *First of all, take control...*

ODENDAAL, the flight engineer, can't help, too busy trying to extinguish the port engine fire by hitting the red knob of the methyl bromide fire extinguisher for that engine. *Quick, he thinks, feather the propeller. Checking gauges, reducing engine power.*

WALKER manages to push the pilot's body down the seat. He takes his place, he is at the controls. He is the most qualified among the survivors. Just think about it: 99% on the pilot examination, and yet he was not chosen, short one percentage point they said. *First levelling the wings. We're diving fast ... but it's OK. We're pretty high ... and then rudder to starboard to follow the course ...* The Lancaster plunges toward the ground, 10,000, 7,000, 5,000 feet.

The fire in the port engine seems to be out, the propeller is feathered. The plane pulls a little to port, but very much downward. Nothing serious, Walker thinks, *it can be controlled with the trim set to starboard.* But the vertical trim is not enough to climb, *pull, pull...I have to pull so much on the controls. They say that a Lancaster can fly on two engines to England...*

But the fire flares again inside the engine cover, the flames rush through the holes left by the 20mm shells. The plane constantly goes down. WALKER must make a tremendous effort to pull the stick. The fire. We must extinguish the fire in the wing thinks ODENDAAL. The intercom is now inoperative. A glance backward to see that there is nothing to do either for the second gunner ROBINSON, still strapped to his post, arms hanging down from his body.

Already the smoke creeps into the cabin through the heating nozzle on the port side, near the wireless operator's table. *We're down to 2,500 feet. WALKER manages to stabilize the bomber. We fly level. But the fire, the fire.* Fire resumed in the engine nacelle. The flames are creeping into the fuselage through the heating duct. One cannot see a yard.

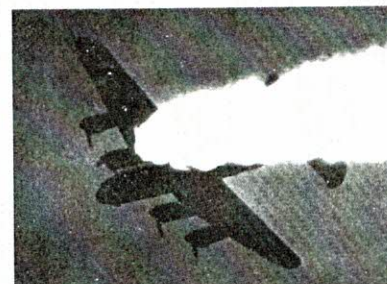
The Flight Engineer pulls his flight helmet off and grabs a single canister of oxygen. Fortunately they are still operational. ODENDAAL then empties the portable fire extinguisher, and burns his hands and his face, without success. Groping, he returns to the cockpit. He thinks *WALKER still has control of the aircraft at roughly 2,000 feet, but he cannot see anything, he must rely on instruments, we are on course 300.*

Suddenly a hand grabs him. WALKER... He indicates the floor at the front. *You have to jump. You have to jump now.* Instantly the flight engineer grabs his parachute. He harnesses the loop, jumps up to the front, raises up the bomb aimer's seat, pulls the handle, releases the hatch and pushes it into the dark. The wind pushes. 70 cm by 50 cm, it is not easy for someone wrapped up in his flight gear with a parachute on his back. He's stuck. His boots are torn off by the blast of air. He is free. He falls into the black. Then silence, as the aircraft flies away.

An impact on his back and a white canopy above his head. The silence of the night. Tossed in his deployed parachute ODENDAAL is thinking about WALKER. *Bale out! ... bale out now!*

For DS690 C for Charlie, it's too late. In the pale light of the full moon, flames on her side are burning fiercely along the entire bomber. Yet she is stable. She flies level.

Just one minute left. At Bertrix, witnesses are watching the low pass of the two aircraft. Marthe DURUISSEAU, then 50, says that *the aircraft passed over the house. They were noisy and we heard they were firing.* As for Madeleine DOM, 33 years old then, she says *it's above my house that the aircraft passed, at very low altitude, firing. The window of my bedroom was half open and I stood in front looking at the direction taken by the two aircraft. I could see them for perhaps 10 seconds.*



Again, the thud of shells bursting. DS690 is still flying but the bomber rapidly loses altitude. A few more seconds and beyond the village of Bertrix, a last burst, shrapnel tearing the port tank. A large explosion in the night. Pieces of torn sheets of metal. Fire.

The fire is everywhere now. The wing profile is destroyed. The air no longer supports the port wing. The Lancaster sinks on to its left wing and begins to turn in a hopeless spiral dive.

Before diving to the ground which is so close now, the majestic bomber slowly raises its right wing vertically, in a gesture of supreme elegance to the sky that saw her birth and brought her one night only

... Like a last wave to Heaven.

Pierre Michels
Juillet 2013