

THE STOKE ROCHFORD LANCASTER

By

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Ammunition in the Garden

The first indication that an aeroplane crash had occurred at Stoke Rochford came after being contacted by the Head Gardener, Clive Robinson. Clive informed me of a find of live ammunition in the garden – this in itself was interesting and concerning, but perhaps not unexpected as the area had been used as a training ground by 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment prior to their fateful expedition to Arnhem, in Holland. However, on inspection, it was found that some of the ammunition had exploded, it indicated that it had been destroyed in a fire. On further investigation, it transpired that large pieces of aluminium were also present in the area giving the indication that an aeroplane was involved. The .303 calibre bullets (dated 1940/2), only gave a fragment of information – the fact that it was a British or Commonwealth aircraft involved. It was not known at this time whether it was a fighter or a bomber – however as wartime Lincolnshire was home to many bomber squadrons it was a fair bet that the aircraft was a heavy bomber. An extensive search of local archives did not immediately give any further information. The Police wartime crash records were destroyed in 1955 and the local papers did not report aircraft crashes as it was considered that it would affect civilian morale. The search was widened to include the internet and nationwide newspapers. After trying every combination of key words on the internet the following came to light from Canada, which only served to deepen the mystery…..

A Remaining Mystery and a Scare

On December 6th 2002, the 8th Canadian Wing Headquarters at Trenton, Ontario were closed when they received what they thought was a suspicious parcel. The bulky letter which had UK stamps on it but no postmark or return address was declared suspicious. The explosive Ordnance Disposal Team from London, Ontario was flown in to survey the package. After a robot recovered it and placed it into a portable x-ray machine it was revealed that the contents were not harmful. It was then opened to find that the package consisted of a bracelet, placed in a box inside a paper envelope. The bracelet similar in shape and size to a present day medical alert bracelet, was engraved with the words “V. E. Cline” and the Service number “R279050”. Below in script were the words “Love Marge”. The Royal Canadian Air Force crest is on the front. A very short, anonymous note was also enclosed:

> “This article was discovered at Stoke Rochford (near Grantham) on an RCAF crash site dating from the 45 era. I believe that you are best placed to know appropriateactions for such an object”.

The mystery still remains - Who was the anonymous sender of the bracelet to Canada?

Follow-Up

A preliminary search of the Commonwealth War Graves website using the name and service number confirmed that Sergeant Verle Edmond Cline, aged 21, is buried at Brookwood Military Cemetery, in Surrey. Armed with Clines personal details and his date of death enabled the RAF Air Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence and Hendon RAF Museum to identify which aircraft, Squadron and more importantly the names of his other crew members involved in the incident. Piecing together the final moments of LM719 was painstaking work having to sift and sort all the information with one or two “red herrings” thrown in for good measure – for example the published records of aircrew losses lists LM 719 as having crashed near Reading in Berkshire, nowhere near Lincolnshire! Finally after two and a half years investigation, the circumstances of the incident can now be told in full.

The Stoke Rochford Lancaster

On the night of 27th April 1945, a Lancaster Bomber of 1653 Heavy Conversion Unit took off from RAF North Luffenham. The mission was to be a six and a half hour cross-country training exercise. At 03.14 hours on the morning of 28th April, it crashed into the grounds of Stoke Rochford Hall. There were seven airmen on board, six from the Royal Canadian Air Force and one Royal Air Force. All seven aircrew perished in the crash.

The Crew

Flight Lieutenant Norman William Guy, Royal Canadian Air Force
Pilot (24), son of Albert Joseph and Elizabeth Hearder Guy,
of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Flying Officer Richard Knut Ourom, Royal Canadian Air Force
Navigator (20), son of Ivan and Ida Ourom,
of Battrum, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Flying Officer John Donald Travis, Royal Canadian Air Force
Wireless Operator (20), son of Frederick Joseph and Mary Josephine Travis,
of Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada.

Flight Sergeant Donald Roger Wilson, Royal Canadian Air Force
Bomb Aimer (20), son of Lloyd Rogerson Wilson and Marjorie Anna Wilson,
of Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada.

Sergeant Henry William Jones, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
Flight Engineer (21), son of Henry and Ciselia Bessie Jones
of Romford, Essex.

Sergeant Verle Edmund Cline, Royal Canadian Air Force
Air Gunner (21), son of James Edmond and Audrea Loraine Cline,
of Willows, California, U.S.A.

Sergeant James Roy Williams, Royal Canadian Air Force
Air Gunner (20), son of Roy James Williams and Dorothy Belle Williams,
of Enid, Saskatchewan, Canada.

The six Canadians are buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey;
Sergeant Jones is buried in Romford Cemetery, Essex.

BROOKWOOD MILITARY CEMETERY



Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

ROMFORD CEMETERY



The Circumstances of the Crash & Board of Enquiry

The following information is taken from the RAF Operations Log of North Luffenham aerodrome and subsequently used in the Board of Inquiry. The archive at RAF Hendon were able to provide a copy of the Board of Enquiry, even giving the servicing records of the aircraft engines and confirming the name of the aircraft captain at the time.

> "Aircraft out of control due to icing in cumulonimbus cloud or instrument failure. Pilot had been advised against flying in cloud and showed poor airmanship in his flying when was over base in bad weather.
>
> Failed to locate aerodrome in spite of fact rockets were fired. Should not have descended so low in these circumstances.
>
> Radio Telegraphy communications lost and aircraft failed to acknowledge Wireless Telegraphy communications regarding diversions. Crew not properly briefed as to procedure if weather over base poor on return.
>
> Poor and late appreciation regarding diversions by Officer Commanding Flying, Flying Control Officer and poor liaison with base were causal factors. Aircraft pitot-head* probably iced up in cumulonimbus cloud in which pilot lost control. Accident due to freakish nature of weather, which was unpredictable. Officer Commanding night flying should have arranged diversion earlier".
>
> * The pitot-head is the device which measures air speed).

The findings of the RAF Board of Enquiry are harsh – the 24 year old pilot had only 60 flying hours experience when the accident occurred. The dreadful weather was probably more to blame than poor airmanship. The flying conditions were impossible with severe icing and thunderclouds. *Two* eye-witnesses state that the aircraft was on fire prior to impact with the ground. This fact was not revealed to the accident investigation board at the time as the witnesses, owing to their age, were never interviewed. The first witness states she was awoken by the thunderstorm and remembers the aircraft passing over Colsterworth village *"with an engine on fire"*. She was living with her grand-parents at the time as both her parents were at war. The adults said "God Bless Them" as the aircraft went over at low altitude, searching for RAF North Luffenham. The second witness says that he was caring for new-born lambs at the time of the accident and had an excellent view of the aircraft immediately before the crash as it was flying towards Stoke Rochford Mansion, *"losing height with a fire in the wing"*. As the aircraft track was from the direction of Colsterworth towards Stoke Rochford, the fire had spread from the engine to the wing in this short distance. Investigation has shown that aircraft are frequently struck by lightning. An interview with a Lancaster veteran of over 30 Operations reveals *"We called it "St Elmo's fire"* and it *"danced around the whirling propeller blades and between the gun barrels".* It is unusual for a lightning strike to cause a fire, as aircraft are specially designed to dissipate the electrical charge, but in this instance, it must be a possibility. The RAF reports states that *"Radio Telegraphy communications lost and aircraft failed to acknowledge Wireless Telegraphy communications"* - if struck by lightning it is very likely the radio equipment and intercom were damaged and unusable. Thus, this very young, inexperienced crew, flying in appalling weather, iced up, with unknown airspeed and then faced with an onboard fire, met their tragic end.

Verle Edmund Cline – The Bracelet

Cline grew up in the small town of Willows, California. The son of James and Audrea Cline, Verle grew up pledging allegiance to the American flag, but was a Canadian by birth. In the 1920s, Canada was trying to settle the Prairies under the "Homesteading Plan" whereby settles were loaned a plot of land, and if they lived there for a certain period of time the land would be transferred to them. The plan appealed to James and Audrea and they moved to Elk Point, Alta. The harsh Prairie winters were proving too much for the couple and after the birth of Verle in Edmonton Hospital they decided to return to the United States. After the attack on Pearl Harbour by Japan in 1941, Verle enlisted in the United States Air Force. Before his unit was due to move to Europe, it was found that he was technically a Canadian. It was US policy not to send another country's citizens to war and Verle could not go to Europe with his unit. Undaunted, he moved to Canada, enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force as an air-gunner. While training in Montreal he met 19 year-old Marge Hill at a tobogganing club on Mount Royal. "I remember thinking he was a very handsome, blond young airman" she said. "He wasn't used to snow, I remember and it being a toboggan club, Hap was amazed by all of it around him". Marge still referred to Verle by his nickname "Hap" short for Happy. "He was just a happy person, everyone called him Hap". The couple fell in love and planned to marry on his return from war. On leave a year before his fatal crash he asked Marge to marry him. Shortly before travelling to Europe, Marge handed him the bracelet not knowing it would be 60 years before she ever heard of it again. His September 8th 1944 diary entry says "Engaged to Marge" and an entry covering the entire month of October says "Waiting to see Marge". One of his last letters to his mother stated "All I want to do is my job and get home with a whole body and in good working condition".

The Return & Presentation

The package containing the bracelet was forwarded by 8th Wing to the Director of the Royal Canadian Air Force Memorial Museum, who after some difficulty, traced Verle's sister, Vesper Merrit, living in Soquel, California. Vesper, (born 1926), was duly presented with the bracelet and said "I'm going to wear it", she said, "This is closure".



This RCAF bracelet, belonging to the late Sergeant Verle Cline, was mailed to 8 Wing Trenton after it was discovered at the Stoke Rochford Hall crash site.
Photo by Corporal Gayle Wilson, 8 Wing Imaging.

Another Needle in a Haystack

Despite returning the bracelet, one thing bothered the diligent Museum staff – the whereabouts of Marge. Vesper told him she was living in Corpus Christi, Texas and married to an American serviceman, with two children. Armed with just her first name and a town in Texas, this was a veritable needle in a haystack situation. Inquiries were made and contact information left with the local police and area newspapers. It then transpired that Marge Throop, nee Hill of Montreal saw the appeal and made contact with the Museum. Marge was then for the first time told the full story of how Verle "Hap" Cline lost his life. Marge was Verle's nominated next of kin and had been sent his property after the crash. Included with his personal effects was a high school ring. The ring manufactured in sterling silver with a maroon and silver crest from the class of 1942, inscribed with the phrase "Esse Quam Videri" – Latin for "To be, rather than to seem" - this was curious as Verle had never attended a school with this motto. Marge had kept the ring for 60 years but decided to pass it to Museum staff so that it could be researched.

A Permanent Memorial

While these events were unfolding in Canada, investigations into the circumstances of LM 719 had almost been concluded. David Frampton decided to make a permanent memorial to the aircrew and to bring their story to light.

On the 19th November 2006, a Dedication service took place at Stoke Rochford Hall to honour the aircrew who died. This was attended by Canadian relatives, the Canadian High Commission, senior Royal Air Force officers and 22 Standards of the Royal Air Forces Association, The Royal British Legion and Ex-Service Associations.

Standard Bearers on Parade

Over 200 members of the public witnessed the event. A Canadian Maple tree (*Acer Rubrum*) was donated by Stoke Rochford Management Limited. The tree was dedicated by a Royal Air Force Padre which was complimented by the unveiling of a plaque cast from salvaged aircraft metal. The site has been registered with the United Kingdom Inventory of War Memorials which is administered by the Imperial War Museum.



Corporal Ian Harrison RAF, of Royal Air Force Station Cottesmore who manufactured the plaque.



Mr Anders Ourom, Nephew of the Navigator, Flight Lieutenant Richard Ourom



This painting of LM 719 now hangs in Stoke Rochford Hall, along with a collection of memorabilia and artefacts salvaged from the aircraft. *(All removed when Immigrants were housed)*



Man on a Mission

Former Warrant Officer Class One David Frampton
who carried out the research on LM 719

The Ring

This story has a very powerful sequel. After eleven months, the Canadian authorities eventually traced the school from the motto on the ring to St Malachy's High School in St John, New Brunswick. Once this piece of jigsaw fell into place, it was a relatively easy matter to identify the true owner from the school records - Flying Officer John Douglas Travis, Wireless Operator on LM 719. It appears that immediately prior to the fateful flight, the ring had been placed Verle Cline's locker and then sent to the wrong family by the service police. To find out how this mistake may have occurred, the incident was discussed with WW2 RAF veterans.
It was apparent from their conversations that all personal items of deceased aircrew were treated with utmost respect and duly forwarded to the families. It may be speculated that the circumstances of the ring going to the wrong family may have occurred thus: The crew were getting ready to go on the flight. John possibly forgot to take it off in his billet and not being able to wear the ring under his flying gauntlets would have taken it off in the crew changing room. He may then have put it into crew locker - along with letters or other personal items belonging to Verle Cline. One can almost hear him say "I'll get that when we get back". We will never know what actually happened. After the accident, it was found and naturally, the service police would assume it belonged to Verle and bagged it up with his personal effects. While this is speculation, it is certainly plausible and the suggested chain of events compelling.

Simultaneously to the Museum's efforts to trace the Travis family, Mrs Alleyne Murphy, John's sister was also searching for information on her brother's death. Her internet research revealed that her brother's name was recorded on the Stoke Rochford remembrance plaque and gave a

link to the dedication service. She promptly contacted David Frampton for more information as Alleyne had never known the full story of her brothers loss.

What is heart-warming is the fact that without the link to Stoke Rochford's memorial, it may have taken years, if ever, for Canadian Veterans affairs and the Museum staff to trace Alleyne Murphy. Ultimately, her brother's high school ring was reunited with her during a very moving ceremony at RCAF Trenton on the 65th anniversary of his death.

In October 2010, Alleyne travelled from Nova Scotia, Canada over to England as a guest of Stoke Rochford Hall. While in UK she was able to visit her brother's grave and also the crash site. A small ceremony was organised for her by the Grantham Branch of the Royal Air Forces Association, who had their Standard Bearer honour the fallen aircrew. As Alleyne was very moved by the memorial and ceremony, she funded the planting of a shrub to be placed under the memorial plaque. The shrub, a dwarf quince was chosen by Clive Robinson, the Head Gardener as it flowers at the end of April, to coincide with the crash date. Thus this story starts and ends in Stoke Rochford's gardens…….

Aircraft Information & Sources

Avro Lancaster Mark III, serial number LM 719, coded H4-M (for “Mother”) was one of a batch of 350 Avro Lancaster Mark I’s and III’s delivered between November 1942 and October 1944 by the Avro works at Yeadon, Leeds. The aircraft originally went to 514 Squadron Royal Air Force, then to 1653 Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU). 1653 HCU moved to RAF North Luffenham on 16 November 1944, and then to RAF Lindholm, Yorkshire on 28 October 1946.

Specifications:	
Lancaster III	
Dimensions:	
Wing span:	102 ft 0 in (31.09 m)
Length:	69 ft 4 in (21.13 m)
Height:	19 ft 7 in (5.97 m)
Weights:	
Empty:	36,900 lb. (16,738 kg)
Normal:	53,000 lb (24,062 kg)
Performance:	
Maximum Speed:	287 mph (462 km/h)
Service Ceiling:	24,500 ft. (7,470 m)
Range:	1,660 miles (2,670 km)
Powerplant:	
Four 954.5 kW (1,280 hp) **Rolls-Royce Merlin 24s** 12 cylinder Vee engines.	
Armament:	
Eight 0.303 in machine-guns and 14,000 lb (6,350 kg) standard bomb load. Maximum bomb load of 22,000 lb (9,988 kg).	

Bomber Command Casualty Statistics in World War II

Killed in Action	47,268
Killed in Flying Accidents	8,195
Killed in Ground Action	37
Total Killed	55,500
Total Aircrew Casualties	73,741
Aircraft lost in Action	8,375

The crew were traced via the Ministry of Defence Air Historical Branch who hold details of all aircrew killed on operations or training. Family details and grave plots were supplied by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The crash record and Board of Enquiry information was obtained from Royal Air Force Records at Hendon. Information regarding the subsequent return of the bracelet courtesy of Robyn Moormeister, Sentinel Staff Writer & “Salon Focus” Telegraph Journal by Andrew McGilligan. Lancaster Information – “Lancaster at War” by Mike Garbett and Brian Goulding, publisher: Ian Allen 1982.