

Young Airmen in Fatal Trap

Missing Presumed Dead:

A bomber crashes in Laumersheim in April 1943. However, the bodies of the British airmen are still not identified. Aerial war historians are reconstructing the events. What happened that night when it was the full moon? What was the flying squadron's destination of the raid – a new crew on its first mission?

By Rudolf Boettcher

Full document file about the bomber

Lost without a trace or crashed in Laumersheim?:

The Edigheim amateur historian Peter Menges is certain that the wreckage of the British bomber ED427 is to be found in Laumersheim.

Menges experienced the air war as a teenager and was also there as a 14 year old when the crash site was cleared. Now in retirement, he is engaged with aerial war history. In retirement, the post office chief clerk meticulously and in detail documented the fate of 60 bombers which were shot down. Each crash with a complete document file in the second cellar: framed photos, documents, mementos, thank you letters from relatives and colleagues.

Menges helped to clear up the fate of the dead airmen. He brought in Uwe Benkel, the researcher into missing persons. Together they wanted to track down the bodies of the missing men in Laumersheim. But what happened that night during the war?

New Crew Leave for Pilsen

Fiskerton Airbase is in Central England, eight kilometres to the east of Lincoln – today it's twinned with Neustadt on the Wine Route.

It's Friday evening, April 16th 1943, a light moonlit night, four days before the full moon, in the fourth year before the war.

A Lancaster Mk3 with the serial number ED427 moved for take off, fully fuelled up to the brim. On board it's deadly cargo: an aerial mine almost, 3metres long, 76 centimetres wide, 1.8 tonnes in weight, and two high explosive bombs each of 450 kilos.

As the pilot Alex Bone pushed the throttles forward, four 12 cylinder Rolls-Royce Merlin engines with 5200 horse power roared into life. Then he released the brake and the heavily laden aircraft started its take off. It increased speed and took off at 21.14hrs.

The crew was young and it was only their second mission. The first was over Berlin on March 29th, 1943, a mission in which they were the only one of three new crews in their squadron to return.

Alex Bone, the pilot, is a Flying Officer and 31 years old. The other six are sergeants: Norman Foster, Flight Engineer, approx mid 20s: Cyril Yelland, Navigator, 23 years old: Raymond White, Radio Operator and Gunner, just 20: Raymond Rooney, Gunner, 19 years old: and two Gunners, Ronald Cope 23 years old and Bruce Watt, 22 years old. Watt was a Canadian Pilot Officer and was additionally qualified as a pilot.

In the pre-flight discussion at 17.00hrs they found out their destination for the first time. It was the Skoda armaments factory in the Bohemian beer town of Pilsen. Nine hours flying time lay before them. Over the Channel the bomber force was forming with 554 heavy aircraft all 4-engined Halifax, Lancaster, Stirling and Wellington bombers.

Wave on wave, 327 bombers flew over Mannheim, with no hope on the ground of being spared. It was a "combined raid": the following 227 aircraft dropped their deadly cargo on the sorely afflicted city. 128 dead and 269 wounded were counted. The west wing of the castle was burned out and the arsenal, already a museum at that time, was severely damaged.

Fatal Failure

As a deception, the bombers flew past Regensburg then climbed before Pilsen to their bombing height. Thus the first aircraft marked the wrong destination. The large buildings in the bomb sight were not the Skoda factory but the important regional buildings in the neighbourhood of Dobrany, a town in the Lambsheim area.

There was a military hospital in the buildings near the old dragoons' barracks. The British who evaluated the raid supposed that 200 German soldiers were killed.

However, on the ground things were seen differently: 100 patients were killed in the hospital, 35 civilians and 60 soldiers. Three quarters of all houses in the town were destroyed or damaged. In contrast it was the bomber raid with the highest losses up till then in WW2. Every eighth air craft – 19 Halifax and 20 Lancaster – of the Pilsen raid was lost, shot down by flak or crashed for some unknown reason. In addition, 13 aircraft, whose destination was Mannheim, did not return. In total that was three more than on the British raid on Bremen, when of a thousand bombers, 49 were taken from the skies.

Night Fighters in the Rhein-Neckar Region

The air defence and night fighters in the Rhein-Neckar region were particularly alarmed. Between the Rhein, Saar and Mosel 16 bombers were caught on the return flight. Depending on flying height, it was either the Mannheim flak or the large gun battery on the coastline which shot down the ED427.

The Lancaster burned, for the crew it became a deadly trap. The thick flying suits – because of the icy temperatures - the parachute, and the angular type of aircraft construction made it virtually impossible to get out.

The bomber crashed to the east of the town of Lamersheim and exploded. The crew presumably died immediately, their bodies torn apart and burned.

On the Search for the Dead.

A recovery squad came from the Mannheim-Sandhofen airfield on the same day. There was a cursory salvage of wreckage parts, important raw materials for new German planes. A letter found led to the conclusion that a headless torso was the remains of Sergeant White. He was put on an official list of the dead. The detachment leader and the doctor presumably made things easy. The badly burned body parts were divided into two coffins and labelled as the remains of seven English airmen. A more precise search was left undone. Thus on Easter Saturday, April 24th, they were buried in the military section of the cemetery in Mannheim.

In 1943 during the apple harvest, as she took hold of the bough of a tree, a woman from Lamersheim found another part, a skull with hair still attached.

Parachute Shreds but No Teeth.

On March 19th, 1947, a British detachment under Captain Martin exhumed the two coffins in Mannheim. One contained a decomposed corpse, clothing and parachute remains. In the second were the badly burned remains of corpses and clothing. Identification was not possible as skulls, teeth and identification marks were missing.

Further investigation revealed that the corpse parts were not more than two bodies. On October 16th 1947, these were buried as "Unknown" in the military cemetery in Dürenbach, to the north of Tegernsee. These are the graves 19 and 20 in Row F, Area 20.

An acknowledgement for all seven airmen was turned down by the Air Ministry. The file was closed in June 1949.

The crew of the Lancaster ED427 are still officially counted today as "missing". Only the relatives were informed of the crash site "near Dirmstein" since no-one was quite certain. Both German as well as English detachments had confused Lamersheim with Laubenheim in the documents.

However, in book and internet publications it is still referred to as "disappeared without trace" or "tragically missing, presumed dead, crashed over the North Sea".