

Wednesday 14th January 1942 - Hamburg Avro Manchester L7523 EM:M

523056 Flight Sergeant (Pilot) Basil Courtney Wescombe. RAF. Age:25

1111152 Flight Sergeant (Flight Engineer) Frederick Edward Thomas. RAF. Age:26

925454 Sergeant (Air Observer) Eric Ronald Harper. RAF(VR). Age: 19

902414 Flight Sergeant (Bomb Aimer) Leonard Sieve. RAF(VR). Age: 23

961733 Sergeant (Wireless Operator/Air Gunner) Claude Raymond Westbury. RAF(VR). Age: 21

1194389 Sergeant (Air Gunner) John Thomas (Jack) Howe. RAF(VR). Age: 20

641700 Sergeant (Air Gunner) Maurice Robert Walker. RAF. Age:19

Although 1942 had started quietly due to operational restrictions losses rose sharply during the raid on Wilhelmshaven on the 10th of January. Hamburg was chosen for two consecutive night raids in the middle of January. On Wednesday 14th January 1942 207 Squadron had been stood down for three days, and despite the first fall of snow, it was called upon to join an attack on Hamburg. L7523 EM:M was part of a force of 95 aircraft tasked to attack Hamburg. 48 aircraft claimed to have bombed the target and local reports state approximately 12 fires were started and the Altona railway station was hit with 6 people killed and 22 injured. 5 aircraft, 5.26 percent of the force were lost these being 1 Manchester, 2 Wellingtons and 2 Hampdens. L7523 took off from RAF Bottesford, Leicestershire fifteen minutes late after suffering an unknown technical problem. At briefing the crews were informed of a new tactic to be employed for the first time. Instead of taking off at irregular intervals and making their own way to the target by whatever route the captain and navigator favoured, the aircraft were to take off in a close-spaced procession and fly exactly the same route and speed, joining up with other units to form what came to be known as the bomber stream. The condensed take-off sequence went smoothly until the last aircraft in line. Wooldridge 17.07, Birch 17.08, Dawkins 17.09, Hathersich 17.10, Coles 17.11, Leland 17.12, Green 17.18 and Wescombe 17.35. They were destined for a raid on the dockyards and nearby Blohm and Voss aircraft factory near Hamburg. As it was, the North Sea was covered by a thick layer of cloud, and many aircraft were unable to locate the target. The aircraft took off at 17.35 and was airborne for 3 hours and 10 minutes, given the cruising speed of an Avro-Manchester was 185mph and that they returned with an

engine on fire it is not possible for the crew to have reached Hamburg and unlikely that they came under enemy fire. At 20.45 the elder of three Misses Walker was sitting in the kitchen of Cliff House Farm in the hamlet of Holmpton on the Yorkshire coast. She heard a loud popping sound of a throttled back aero engine at low altitude and rushed outside to see the plane pass low to the south, with flames apparently coming from the rear. Seconds later the plane hit the ground and there was a flash and explosion. The source of the fire is unknown, but possibly an uncontrollable fire in the port Vulture engine would have given the same appearance to a ground observer. The Home Guard were soon on the scene arriving from a nearby Observation Post on the cliff-top. It took the Withernsea Police and the Auxiliary Fire Service over an hour to reach the crash site. They found a deep crater filled with wreckage, and propaganda leaflets (nickels) printed in German were being blown about in the stiff breeze. Amongst the debris were also three bodies. The Fireman returned to their depot at 01.55 and by 02.46 it was established that the wreck was that of a British bomber. The Home Guard carried the remains of the crew to Cliff House Farm where they remained overnight in one of the farm buildings. The next morning farm workers found a sorry sight. Soldiers were already guarding the impact point and the tail unit had been thrown over a nearby hedge. Small fragments of airframe were spread over a wide area, with apparently the bomb load already been jettisoned. A freezing rain was falling from a leadened sky and within a short period the farm workers' clothes were frozen stiff. Later that morning the bodies were conveyed by RAF ambulances to RAF Catfoss (2 Coastal Operational Training Unit) near Hornsea. Another witness of the crash was a 14 year-old boy who was looking out of the window of his house in Holmpton. He saw the plane travelling North away from the River Humber parallel to the coast. The plane had flames pouring from it and ultimately crashed on the crest of Mill Hill approximately half a mile from the Rocket House in Holmpton. He places the time of the crash much later at about 23.00 and was at the scene within minutes, but could not approach the aircraft because of the intense fire and bullets firing in all directions as the stored ammunition exploded. Despite having crashed in Yorkshire, no Aircraft Accident Card summarising results of an investigation has been traced. The subsequent inquest held at the farm established that L7523 had jettisoned her warload out to sea, and concluded that the aircraft had probably been damaged by enemy action as there was a suggestion of battle damage on the aircraft, forcing an early return and culminating in

the crash. An equally likely explanation given the engine fire and the poor record of the Vulture engines on Manchesters was that failure of one of the Vultures, possibly due to severe icing, had forced Wescombe to turn back. A hypothetical account of the mystery surrounding the crash is given by Vince Holyoak 1992, author of 'On the Wings of the Morning' a book about RAF Bottesford. Could the crew, already behind schedule, have pressed onwards only to find at some point over the North Sea that there was a difficulty with the port engine, perhaps running rough or the temperature rising alarmingly? Now even further behind, and with a failing aircraft, possibly they had no alternative but to jettison their bombs and set a course for home. Perhaps the engine was feathered and switched off, but as they neared the coast, maybe their height had dropped so much that the engine had to be restarted. Could it be that this time it seized up, immediately bursting into flames? The Avro Manchester was an unsuccessful aircraft and many improvements were made in developing its successor, the Avro Lancaster. Manchester bombers flew on 1269 sorties of which 64 (5.04%) were lost and 12 (0.95%) are classified as operational crashes. The figure of 5.04% lost is the highest of any British bomber in World War Two. 207 Squadron carried out more raids, flew more sorties and suffered more losses than any other Manchester squadron. It suffered the fourth highest overall percentage losses in Bomber Command and the highest percentage losses in 5 Group. Eric is buried in Grave 305, Block 9, Streatham Cemetery, Tooting where his family were living after moving from Lowestoft earlier in the war.

Much of the information found in books about the Avro Manchester, 207 Squadron and Operation Record Books from the National Archives.

'Always Prepared' by John Hamlin, 'On the Wings of the Morning' by Vince Holyoak and 'Avro Manchester: The Legend behind the Lancaster' by Dr Robert Kirby.