

A Night Long Forgotten - 18th April 1944

At around 2300hrs on 18th April 1944 three members of the 384th took a shortcut – a shortcut that would lead to their deaths and ultimately the deaths of three Royal Air Force crew too.

S/Sgt David Ollre, Cpl James Moore and Cpl Teddy Potocki – all three members of the communications section of the 384th Bomb Group – were cycling back to base. The assumption is they were returning from Geddington, possibly even the Star or the White Hart after a pleasant evening relaxing, when they turned to take a shortcut across the airfield presumably back to their billets. We can't be sure of the exact route they took however what we do know is it took them across the 5000ft East / West runway.

At the same time an RAF Short Stirling of 1657 Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU) was completing a series of night time 'touch and goes' – also known as 'circuits and bumps' – as part of a student training syllabus for new RAF Bomber Crews. The Short Stirling was the first of the RAF's four engine bombers but by this stage of the war had been overtaken in performance and available numbers by both the Avro Lancaster and the Handley Page Halifax and generally retired from front line duties. Those aircraft retired now found themselves filling the essential role as the last part of the training programme for new crews to gain experience in operating large and complex aircraft similar to those they would be expected to fly over occupied Europe once fully fledged Bomber Command Aircrew.

S/Sgt Ollre and his colleagues must have been aware of the aircraft; the 384th History states the aircraft was on its fourth pass when the accident occurred so, with each circuit taking in the region of 4-5 minutes it could have been in the area for around 20 minutes. Assuming they were indeed returning from Geddington and that the previous circuits had all been on the same runway the Stirling would have passed over them numerous times as they approached the field.

No matter what we assume subsequent events are a certainty; on its fourth pass along the runway the Stirling struck and instantly killed S/Sgt Ollre, Cpl Moore and Cpl Potocki.

The Stirling concerned was EJ108 'W' of 1657 HCU from RAF Stradishall in Suffolk. The pilot was Flying Officer H C Wilkie DFC of the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) and was an experienced veteran with one tour already behind him on 15 Sqdn. F/O Wilkie managed to wrestle the aircraft back into the air. He and the mainly trainee crew realised the accident had caused some damage to the undercarriage and set off back to base. We can't be sure what the nature of the debate between the crew was and if they had any interaction with controllers on the ground but we do know the aircraft was making for the emergency landing strip at Woodbridge, Suffolk.

Woodbridge was one of three emergency runways set up shortly after the outbreak of war. The key asset is that each one was far longer than the standard runway of the time and much, much wider. RAF Woodbridge was 9,000ft in length (compared to the standard maximum of 6,000ft) and 750ft wide (compared to 150ft normally) with a further 1500ft each end of the runway for use as overrun if required. The other runways are located in Kent at RAF Manston and Yorkshire at RAF Carnaby. A study of the satellite imagery of any of these three sites still gives a great impression of the vast dimensions of these runways.

However F/O Wilkie's problems had not yet fully revealed themselves. In flight a fire broke out in one of the engines. History does not record how this may – or may not – have been influenced by the accident at Grafton Underwood but it did seal the demise of the Stirling. Wilkie ordered the crew to bail out. The first casualty was Sgt Atkins, a pupil flight engineer. His parachute failed to open and he was killed as a result. Sadly Sgt Atkins was not the last casualty amongst the Stirling crew, before they could successfully abandon the aircraft it crashed just outside the village of Little Glemham, Suffolk, which is around ten miles North of the sanctuary of Woodbridge's emergency runway. Still on-board when the aircraft struck the ground were F/O HC Wilkie and W/O H A Watson DFM, both dying in the crash.

I gave a talk about the 384th BG to the Haverhill Aviation Society (HAS) in September 2014. HAS meet in the training centre for Her Majesty's Prison Highpoint. However, long ago this building was the Officers Mess for RAF Stradishall – on the site of which the prison was built in the 1970's. In the audience was Jock Whitehouse, the RAF Stradishall historian, who approached me after the talk and we managed to fill in the blanks the other had. I did not know for sure the outcome of the Stirling flight after it had left Grafton although I believed it had crashed and some of the crew had perished; likewise Jock knew that there had been casualties at Grafton but who and the extent had alluded him, now each story is a little more complete.

384 BG Casualties	RAF Casualties
S/Sgt David Ollre	F/O H C Wilkie DFC
Cpl James Moore	W/O H A Watson DFM
Cpl Teddy Potocki	Sgt Atkins



F/O H C Wilkie (circled) with other 1657 HCU Pilots

Keep the Show on the Road – Matt Smith 10th October 2014