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LOST, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

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On the evening of March 29, 1943. During World War II, a young crew of seven boarded their Short Stirling bomber, with serial BK716, for their third mission. The target was Berlin, a feared destination, because of the heavy anti-air defence. That night, BK716 disappeared. For decades, nobody knew what happened to the aircraft and her crew, until last year.



The complete crew of BK716 at RAF Stradishall - Courtesy of 218 Sqn

Only three months before that fateful flight, in February 1943, Flying Officer Harris and his crew graduated from the 1657 Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU) at RAF (Royal Air Force) Stradishall in Suffolk, England. They were assigned to 218 'Gold Coast' Squadron, based at Downham Market in Norfolk. As with all men flying for Bomber Command, they were volunteers. They must have been brave men, as they knew the risks they faced when they stepped into a plane. During the Second World War, no less than 44 percent of Bomber Command aircrews (totalling 55,573 men) were killed in action over the skies of Europe - the highest rate of attrition of any allied unit.

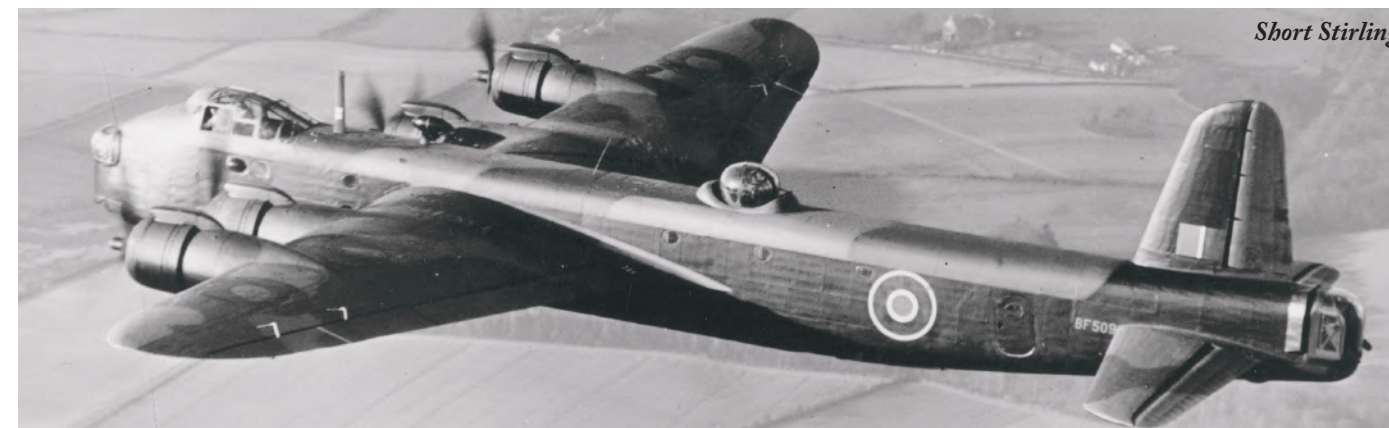
BK716's crew consisted of:

- Flying Officer John Frederick Harris (GB, pilot, 29)
- Sergeant Ronald Kennedy (GB, flight engineer, 22)
- Flying Officer Harry Gregory Farrington (Canada, observer, 24)
- Sergeant Charles Armstrong Bell (GB, wireless operator air gunner, 29)
- Flying Officer John Michael Campbell (GB, air bomber, 30)

- Sergeant Leonard Richard James Shrubsall (GB, air gunner, 30)
- Flying Sergeant John Francis James McCaw (Canada, air gunner, 20)

On March 29, around 21:30, 329 aircraft, including Stirling BK716 flown by Harris, took off from their respective bases for a night raid over Berlin. However, no less than 120 of them were forced to return early due to bad weather over the North Sea. The others met fierce resistance from German night fighters over the Netherlands, and nine aircraft were shot down. The rest made it to Berlin and managed to drop their bombs, making the mission a tactical success. However, the flak and more German fighters on the way back caused the loss of another twelve aircraft.

Luftwaffe Lieutenant Werner Rapp of the 7th Gruppe of Nachtjagergeschwader 1 (7./NJG 1) flew his Messerschmitt Bf-110G-4 from Twenthe Airbase in The Netherlands. While the bombers were flying home from Berlin, he intercepted them. First, he shot down Lancaster ED761, after which German radar station 'Hase' near Harderwijk directed him to



a lower flying bomber. The bomber, Stirling BK716, was unable to escape. Afterwards, back at his base, Lt. Rapp reported shooting down 'unknown Stirling, 2 to 4 km east-southeast of Marken Island'. BK716 was the last of the raid to be shot down, although at the time nobody knew what had happened to them.

In 2008, a private yacht encountered trouble while sailing on the Markermeer, a large lake in the Netherlands. While they were being rescued by the Royal Netherlands Sea Rescue Organisation, a part of the landing gear of an aircraft became entangled with their boat's anchor. This was identified as a piece of a Short Stirling bomber. Divers found another piece and a wooden mascot, both of which seemed to indicate the aircraft in question was a Sterling with the tail number BK710. No attempt to lift the wreckage was made at the time. Years later, further research and the recovery of some small artifacts which pointed in the direction of BK716. Amongst others, a cigarette case was found with initials JMC. BK710 had no crew member with those initials, but John Michael Campbell was onboard BK716. No definite proof was found though.

In 2018, the Dutch government funded 'National Programme Salvage Aircraft Wrecks'. The intention was to salvage some 30 to 50 wrecks all over the country, which possibly still had human remains inside, and which were classified as a potentially successful salvage. Major Bart Aalberts of the Royal Dutch Air Force was in charge of the programme: "We hope to find the remains of the missing crew members. That way, after all these years, their relatives get final certainty and can say goodbye. And justice is done to the ultimate sacrifice that these crews made for our freedom."

The first aircraft to be salvaged was a Stirling (W7630) near Echt-Susteren, followed by a Typhoon (MN582) near Lochem. The third salvage in the programme was Stirling BK716. While the first two were on land and could be dug up, this one was much more difficult. The lake was not too deep, some four metres, but the aircraft was another two meters below the lakebed, hidden in its clay.

During the salvage, Major Bart Aalberts was assisted by his now civilian predecessor Major Arie Kappert, who explained,



GPS-guided digger



Cleaning a propeller

“Before the actual salvage started, the whole area was searched using radar, sonar and iron detection. That way, an area of 75 by 75 metres was designated the main search area, with another smaller area of some 10 by 10 metres nearby. All interesting sections were mapped using GPS, ready for salvage.”

After a delay of a few months, due to safety concerns, the actual digging began at the end of August this year. For this effort, a digger was placed on a pontoon. The digger was equipped with GPS, so the exact position and depth could be determined with an accuracy of 5 cm. All the material that was brought to the surface was first sifted through a sieve of 30 cm. This was because of safety concerns, as it was not known whether the aircraft was able to drop its bomb load before the crash. Fortunately, no bombs were found, making it clear that flying officer Harris and his crew were able to fulfil their mission before being shot down.

All the material was then transferred to another nearby pontoon, where it was sifted through a sieve of only 8 mm. Everything was meticulously scanned by a team of four people, consisting of a radiation expert (aircraft instruments were painted with radioactive paint), an ammunition specialist (a large amount of ammunition for the guns was found), an archaeologist, as well as an expert on human remains.

In the first week of the salvage operation, an engine was found. Its serial number finally confirmed the identity of the Stirling as BK716, removing all doubt. In the end, all four engines were excavated, as well as the landing gear, cockpit instruments, fire extinguishers, oxygen bottles, a rare complete fuel tank and large parts of wings and fuselage. One panel still showed the

hand written serial number ‘BK716’. Also, human remains were found. Due to the impact of the crash on the water surface, these were quite small. As a result of the remains’ age, DNA research was not an option. Identification will therefore be done by examining the so-called MNI or Minimum Number of Individuals. If the experts are able to confirm the remains of seven different people have been found, all crew members will be accounted for. In that case, all crewmembers will probably get their own grave stones. If not, it is probable that all remains will be buried together and there will be a single stone for the complete crew.

This herculean task of identifying all the remains will be completed in Soesterberg by specialists from the Dutch Army, led by Captain Geert Jonker, and will take several months.

The team closely cooperated with the British Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, which in turn were in close contact with their Canadian counterparts, because two of the missing crew members were Canadian. Harry Farrington was one of them, and his 93-year-old sister Edith McLeod is very happy she will finally get some answers on the fate of her brother. “I think it is marvellous... We basically knew he was shot down. And that was all we knew.” The family had assumed he had been shot down over Germany, but now they have learned he actually completed his mission and was on his way back.

It is to be hoped the experts will indeed be able to determine an MNI of seven, so all families can lay their loved ones to rest after all this time. They, and all other dedicated people involved deserve it, that is for sure. ☘



Fuel tank



Fire extinguisher