

“And Then There Were Seven.”

LLA member Mike Warburton recalls the great efforts made to locate the surviving family members of a seven-man Lancaster crew lost in 1944.

Sometimes in your life, you have to actually make things happen. Such was the case with my ‘mission’, not planned, not a dream, but something that grew in intensity and passion from the merest flickering thought.

I was born in Manchester during September 1944. Seven months earlier, on January 27, 1944, I lost my uncle, Sgt William Warburton, who was the flight engineer on a Lancaster Bomber returning from a mission over Berlin. All seven in the crew were killed.

60 years later, in 2004, I converted our small bedroom into my den and, having been aircraft mad from being a boy, decided that a nice model of a Spitfire should grace my desk. That thought eventually encompassed a Lancaster Bomber too, as I remembered the loss of my uncle and I considered it to be a pertinent choice. I tracked down a model supplier and duly purchased my fine specimen. Recollections of its head tingling engine tone still echoed in my mind from an air show visited long ago as a boy. I sat gazing at the aircraft one evening and began to think more and more about the uncle I had never known. Next day I made enquiries with a cousin who still had the correspondence to and from the family regarding that dreadful loss. He furnished me with all the letters and documents and I slowly built up a file. It made fascinating reading, but carried with it an awesome sadness. The more I read, the more I absorbed the distraught and desperate feelings of the family at that time. A couple of letters were from fellow crew members’ families, desperately searching for any news of their loved ones. I began to feel as though I had stepped into the past and was reliving it all and I decided to join the seven families together again. This led me to posting a note on a World War Two RAF web site, enquiring as to whether there might be somebody out there with connections to the fated flight of Jan 27, 1944, and the seven crew of Lancaster Mk1. DV400, ‘QR-Y’ from 61 Squadron at Coningsby.

I had not realistically expected to hear from anybody after 60 years, but just a couple of weeks later I received an email from a David Clark, son of the Wireless Operator, Sgt Bernard Clark. Just by chance, David’s own son had stumbled across the web site and found my note. After countless years of searching, David was overwhelmed to suddenly find a contact for his father’s flight crew.

We were both absolutely delighted and lots of enthusiastic mails and phone calls followed as we were carried along on a wave of exuberance. Being 11 years of age in 1944, David could even remember details from that time. The first two families had been linked...

Although not holding out much hope, just as we were deliberating about what the chances of contacting the other families might be, bingo!

Another e-mail arrived, this time from the nephew of Air Gunner P/O Frank Langley. Yet again by sheer chance, nephew Peter Cogley had stumbled across the web site and my posted note. He was searching on behalf of his mother Elsie, who was Langley's Sister.

And then there were three!

We could not believe our luck. Three out of seven was a grand score indeed. More mails, more phone calls and a lot more thoughts. I wonder? If only? No, not a chance, one of the crew was from Canada and one from Australia. Surely we could not be that lucky...and yet, I had a strong gut feeling that something was possible.

David Clark sent me a fascinating document: an autograph book that he had kept as a boy. All the crew had written a fun verse inside for him. What an intriguing treasure it proved to be, especially as they had all included their home addresses on their entries.

Pilot, F/O Robert West, was from Bolton. That was a mere half hour drive from my home. What on earth ever inspired me I will never know, but I got it into my head that I had to go over to Bolton and see if the house still existed. Nothing more, no expectations, but a rather compulsive and succinct urge to make the 'sortie'.

I drove over and found the old house still there, albeit now owned by a foreign chap who could not understand what I was trying to convey to him. Ah well, nothing ventured... Knocks on several other doors proved fruitless, but, as I stood by my car, hand on the door ready to depart, I suddenly felt a strong feeling that I must not leave. I thought about it, but what more could I possibly do? I was out of ideas and just stood gazing at the sky. Within a couple of minutes, an elderly lady walked into the street heading towards me. She must have been in her nineties and I immediately knew that she was going to help me. Intuition? Goodness knows. A delicate conversation followed and that dear lady not only remembered Robert West and his family, but knew where his 82 year old Brother now lived, a mere five minutes from where we were standing! My heart raced and again I could not believe my luck. The odds against such a thing happening must be incredible.

I knocked on the door and there he stood, Dick West, 82 years young, the brother of our long-lost pilot, Robert.

And then there were four!

Words could not describe the way I felt. My head was spinning. I introduced myself as gently as I could and was invited inside. Dick West's head was spinning too as we both excitedly babbled away to each other about details and memories. Dick had also spent many years trying in vain to trace contacts. He had also been an RAF Pilot in 1944 and was passionate about his brother's last flight. I admit to having a lump in my throat all the time I was there.

I became the communications hub for our team and happily conveyed copies of each others information from one to another, so that we all had a complete and updated file. I desperately searched for a picture of our boys together, but to no avail.

An absolutely intriguing, indeed, moving piece furnished by David Clark, was his father's daily diaries, depicting the lads and their daily routines at their Lincolnshire bases at Skellingthorpe and Coningsby. What a moving insight and what a treasure! Trips into town, preparations for missions, what they had for breakfast, it was all there. In reading the diaries, I felt I was there with them, transported to a bygone age and at war. By now I was beginning to feel as though I knew the boys personally and was becoming rather emotionally involved with all the history. Once more I read through Bernard Clark's diary, such was the intensity with which I carried out my 'mission'.

Three to Go

Three crew to go and very little to go on for clues. We all agreed that there was little realistic chance of progressing very much further with the information we had to date, yet I could not shake off the deep seated compulsion I felt to keep going, no matter how futile the route, and in some way bring our boys back together again.

David Clark turned up an old e-mail address he had managed to track down previously, for a possible relative of the Australian air gunner, Flt Sgt Phillip Brander RAAF. We chased this for some time and suddenly, there he was, nephew, Ian Brander, living in New South Wales.

And then there were five!

This was all beyond our wildest dreams and we were ecstatic to a man. More information, letters and pictures were passed between our team. The two remaining families to be traced were those of air bomber P/O Lloyd Cuming, RCAF, and navigator F/O Alan Beetch, from the south of England.

The name Beetch seemed a rather unusual spelling and by a stroke of luck I managed to find an old electoral roll list covering the whole area. I only found one name spelt that way, Violet Beetch. I wrote a letter, a long shot, but once again I had a gut feeling about it.

I followed that with several attempts at making some sort of contact in Canada, a daunting task considering the size of that country. We knew that Lloyd Cuming had had a brother called Howard, who was also a pilot seconded from the RCAF. I managed to get a note posted on a RCAF web site and kept my fingers crossed. The weeks went by and nothing transpired from either the Beetch letter or the Canadian web site. Again we all agreed that this might well be the end of the road. Dare I say I still felt that gut feeling, it just would not subside.

Out of the blue I received another exciting e-mail. This time from a RCAF veteran who had seen my posting in Canada. He kindly gave me some information about 'our' flight of the January 27, 1944 and the crew. It was information we already had, but I wrote back and thanked him sincerely for taking the trouble. I also spoke in more detail about the man I was searching for in Canada. Shortly after, I received a second e-mail from him, simply saying, "Try this telephone number."

With the best will in the world I could not possibly believe that this would bear fruit. I sat on the idea for a few days and finally decided, what the hell, in for a penny, I would ring the number later that evening... That same morning the post arrived and I opened a letter from a name I didn't recognise. It turned out to be from a relative of 'our' navigator, F/O Alan Beetch!

My head went into full spin again and I found it hard to absorb the words, I just could not believe what I was reading. Violet Beetch, the name I had found on the electoral role, was the widow of our navigator. She was still alive and now living with relatives in the south of England. The dear lady was now frail and I was directed to communicate with her nephew Peter Peck. This was almost too much to take in.

And then there were six...!

Evening Call

Late that same evening I tentatively rang the telephone number sent by my contact in Canada. The call was diverted to Florida and I wondered what on earth I was doing following this through. A gentleman quietly answered the call... it was... Howard Cuming.

And then there were seven!

Joy beyond our wildest dreams! We now had our full crew compliment. Howard seemed to be in total disbelief of what had transpired and I could tell by his voice that he was extremely shocked. Well, who could blame him?

The search took about twelve months from start to finish, but oh my, what a finish.

Everybody involved felt the same, somewhat dazed with disbelief at what we had achieved.

I managed to obtain a photograph of each crew member, quite a feat in itself and with the help of a friend; created a beautiful picture of all our boys surrounding a Lancaster Bomber.

A copy of the picture was subsequently sent to the families in Canada and Australia, plus copies of all the files. We then organised a get together for the UK folk at Peter Cogley's home in Solihull. It was a wonderful day for all of us, with special people, culminating in the moment I had been dreaming about for so long. With a tremble of emotion, I proudly presented a picture of our boys to each of the team. This was a perfect climax for me and an extremely proud and satisfying moment in my life. Our boys were back together...

On reflection, I wonder if for some strange reason it was all meant to be. It certainly felt that way. If that is the case, then I really can't imagine why, but somehow I just knew from deep within me it had to be done. Mission accomplished!

Mike Warburton