

John "Jack" Richard Davies

JACK - SOME THOUGHTS SO FAR (in the form of a draft account)

1). Jack died on active service with 166 Squadron of the royal air force on 3 August 1944. The enquiry is prompted by the long enduring family rumour that Jack survived the destruction of his aircraft, but was killed by a French person or persons for motives unknown.

2) Jack was a bomb aimer/front gunner in a Mk 1 Lancaster ME839, squadron recognition number AS-N. The reminding crew comprised..

Flying Officer Hubert Athelstane Lancelot Wagner (pilot)

Flying Officer William Samuel Richards (navigator, a Canadian)

Sergeant Sydney Witham(flight engineer)

Sergeant John Richard Davies (Jack) 1580941

Sergeant Henry Charles Joseph Buckler (wireless operator) 1600800

Sergeant Francis James Graham(mid-gunner) 1585636

Sergeant Lewis John Arthur(rear-gunner) 1584922

3) The pilot and flight engineer survived the loss of the aircraft, the remaining crew members losing their lives.

4) The remains of Jack, Flying Officer Richards, and Sergeants Buckler and Graham were interred in the communal Cemetery at Creil in Northern France, and those of Sergeant Arthur at Marissel French National Cemetery.

5) The crew took off from RAF Kirmington in North Lincolnshire during the afternoon of 3 August 1944 on a daylight raid on a V1 flying bomb site at Trossy St Maximin. St Maximine, as it now appears to be known, is about a mile to the south south west of Creil, which is itself some 30 miles to the north north east of Paris. The German forces had begun their flying bomb attack on southern England in June 1944.

6) The attack force comprised no less than 372 Lancasters, and 11 Mosquitoes, from a number of squadrons.

7) In the book "Bombing Hitler : One man's war with Bomber Command" by T.I.Steel, it is stated that the anti-aircraft fire was "moderate but very accurate"..... and Lancaster ME838 of 166 Squadron Was fatally hit at a position to the north of the target where it crashed". This account of the demise of the aircraft is almost certainly in error, and is probably a case of aircraft mistaken identity.

8) Wagner, who after the war pursued a career as a doctor ,described events thus..

"my bomb aimer (Jack of course) was instructing to "hold her steady skip" -it was a perfect lineup, a Lancaster on my starboard broke formation to avoid the accurate German Ack Ack (and) gained about 200 feet and eventually drifted right over us.... I told my engineer Sid to fix his parachute before going to the nose to throw out the radar jamming silver strips..... We were loaded with seven pairs of 1000lb bombs. As we released our bombs I managed to glance up and counted four pairs of these sleek armour piercing bombs in front of our plane, one of the fifth set landed on our wing root tearing off the wing and both engines, another bomb hit us amidships and tore a hole through the fuselage from top to bottom.(We) went into a very fast spin and most of us were jammed in one way or another. I saw Sid in the nose but could not get myself free.... I saw the ground, trees etc and had given up all hope of getting out. Sid managed to free the hatch door and a tremendous blast of air seemed to steady the spin enough for my leg to break free, and I slithered down the stair way, bumping into Sid and shoot out of the gaping hatch."

9) Wagner goes on to describe his descent to earth, injured and on a badly damaged parachute, and his subsequent capture. He also makes reference to his engineer evading capture.

10) Witham said in later years...

"there were 7 to a crew and mine consisted of me, Hugh Wagg (Wagner) there were two gunners Lou and Buzz (Arthur and Graham presumably) and our navigator was a Canadian airman. I also forget the name of our bomb aimer but he was a little snooty to the rest of us. Lastly our wireless operator was Joe Butler (obviously Buckler) . We were due to leave at 1:45 in the afternoon. This was unusual in itself as the Lancasters were night bombers. The raid should have been carried out by the Americans 5 group. When we got to France we manoeuvred our planes into a line to start bombing. I said to Hugh Wagg who was the pilot with me "look at this lot up here". There where some of our aircraft positioned above us and they should not have been there. Our bomb doors were open and the order was given to drop our bombs. The bomber above us dropped his bombs, one knocked our wing and engine off (and one hit a Lancaster flying alongside).....Wagg was in trouble, The control column had jammed and we couldn't move. Wagg was fast in and couldn't get out so I went down to the bomb aimers compartment to open the escape hatch. A terrific wind came in and he shouted "I am free "and came running down the steps, he bailed out and I followed him to the ground..... The other five crew members unfortunately did not make it."

KEY POINTS AND CONCLUSIONS SO FAR

- * Jack was lying prone in his bomb aimer's position in the belly of the nose of the aircraft when it was hit by the falling bombs, they hit just as he was releasing his own bomb load
- * In his prone position he was lying across the forward emergency parachute exit hatch
- * The bomb aimer's parachute stowage is immediately to the left of the escape hatch
- * No reference is made to any incidental damage being sustained to the front of the aircraft during the bomb strike or at all.
- * Both witnesses make reference to the blast of air when the escape hatch was opened. This provides support for the theory that at this time the bomb aimers compartment was undamaged. There is, therefore, a probability that at this time Jack was still alive.
- * On the face of it Jack had the best chance of all the crew members to bail out of the doomed Lancaster.
- * Neither witness makes any reference to him, and yet he could only have extracted himself from the forward position in the aircraft by bailing out, or by climbing the short steps up to the main cockpit area where the pilot and engineer were themselves located. There was no cogent reason why Jack should have gone back to the cockpit, but had he done so he would inevitably have been seen by the pilot and the engineer.
- * Could he still have been in the forward position when Wagner and Witham bailed out and gone unnoticed by his two escaping crew-members? No, The space is tiny and this would be akin to not noticing someone occupying the same telephone box. Indeed his presence there would have been a major impediment to the pilot and the engineer getting out.

*Could Jack have bailed out before the pilot and engineer and closed the hatch behind him? Had he opened the hatch there would have been a blast of air through it, but neither pilot nor engineer make reference to a blast of air until Witham himself had himself open the hatch. In any event Lancaster pilot Tim Dunlop of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight advises that upon the hatch being opened it comes away, thus Jack could not have bailed out and closed the door behind him, as it were.

*The only logical conclusion is that Jack bailed out of the aircraft after he or Witham opened the hatch, and before Witham and Wagner themselves exited the aircraft. If Wagner was still extricating himself from his pilot's seat he would not have seen this happen, there being no line of sight between the pilot seat and the escape hatch.

*However Witham would have seen him leave the aircraft, yet makes no mention of him save in so far as he states that the other five crew members, one of whom was Jack of course, "did not make it".

BEYOND WHAT HE SAYS AS TO EVENTS IN THE AIRCRAFT ARE THERE REASONS TO QUESTION THE RELIABILITY OF WITHAM'S ACCOUNT ?

11) There are two very different versions of what befell Witham after he hit the ground. The first is to be found in an extract from the book "On the wings of war - A history of 166 Squadron" by Jim King. This account has Witham, on the end of his parachute, landing in a quarry. First he hid in a forest then began walking north east. He met a French girl, who brought her brother, and Witham was hidden overnight in a slit trench near their house. From there he was moved to a house in Chantilly where he stayed until 7 September when he contacted the Allies. He was airlifted back to the UK on the following day.

This account makes perfect sense. The Allied ground forces were advancing fast (Paris was liberated on 25 August 1944). He laid low until the front line safely rolled over him, as it were, and then he revealed himself to the Americans, and was duly repatriated. Jim Wright's source is unknown, but is corroborated by Wagner (who presumably only learned of this following his own repatriation) who describes Witham as "being picked up by the advancing Americans." Most of the information can only have come, ultimately, from Witham himself. I refer to it his first account.

12) The second account is summarised thus. Witham comes to earth in a large forest to the north of Paris. He walks for four days without food, and on coming out of the forest sees a teenage girl mowing a field. He tries to make himself understood to the girl. She goes away and comes back with two men and two women, and he is taken to a house where he is given a change of clothing. The following day he has taken to Chantilly, first to one house, and then to another nearby. This is the home of Yvonne Fournier and he speaks of her fondly - "a lovely lady".... "Yvonne looked after me very well". He then tells how the French Resistance visited him, but does not say when, and told him he was being moved to Switzerland. However later the same day "another bloke who spoke perfect English" came to see him. Witham asks "what tribe are you from?", to which he is told that a guide was going to take him across the Pyrenees to Spain, where he would meet a representative. He then makes what he describes as the long and arduous journey to Spain, and says that when he reached Salou (a Spanish coastal town to the south-west of Barcelona) "we got word that the war was over".

Thereafter he returns to Chantilly where he is picked up by "a yank "in a jeep. He asks the yank to take him to his Paris HQ. The yank telephones the airport and tells with him that he could not fly home that day because someone had sabotaged the landing lights at the airport. The yank then proceeds to take him to the Limoges and he is flown home from there.

There is some additional whimsical detail , which might be thought to add to the plausibility of the account.

13) There are problems with Witham's second account of his adventures, beyond the fact that it is completely at variance with the first.

* He says he is taken to Yvonne Fournier's house on 8th August. There she "looks after him very well", suggesting a stay of more than one night. Rejecting that suggestion for the moment, the earliest date of the visit by the French Resistance was 9th August. The battle for Paris began on 19th August, and Paris was liberated on 25th. Beauvais to the north of Paris was liberated on 30th August. Chartres to the south-west of Paris was liberated on 18th August. What conceivable reason could the Resistance have on 9th August, (or later) for telling Witham that he was being moved to Switzerland, yet alone Spain, when liberation was imminent?

* Let us for the moment give him the benefit of the doubt, and accept at face value that he set off on the long and arduous journey to Spain. Perpignan, just north of the Spanish /French Mediterranean border was itself liberated on 19th August. Toulouse, to the north east of Perpignan, was liberated on 19/29th August. Between the two , Carcassonne was freed of German presence on 19th August. So the area of Southern France through which Witham would have to travel to get to Salou , where he learned the war was over (VE-Day was 8th May 1945) had been liberated only 11 days after Witham ARRIVED at Mme Fournier's house in Chantilly. Indeed pretty well the whole of France was liberated by the end of the Summer of 1944, and yet all this goes unnoticed by Sid Witham as he tramps through France and across the Pyrenees, arriving in Salou some time after 8th May 1945.

Unnoticed also by the mysterious representative he was to link up with when he had crossed into Spain?

* What does Witham do when he learns the war is over? Does he contact the local consulate and arrange to be repatriated to England? No, he makes his way back to Chantilly, presumably on account of his fondness for Mme Fournier rather than a belief that she could help him get home. Does he stay with Mme Fournier ? No, because along comes the yank in his Jeep and takes him to Paris. But he can't fly home from Paris because someone has sabotaged the landing lights, so the yank drives him several hundred miles to the south west to Limoges and he flies home from there.

* Witham's account of his escape is pure romance. This does not help us one iota as to what happened in the aircraft, but it does mean that we have to treat with significant caution what he says occurred in the air. We do need to ask why he should make up this tale. There appear to be three possibilities . First that these are the ramblings of a man whose memory had failed him. Second that he was a man retaining his mental capabilities, but who lied to aggrandise his role in the war - he would not be the first or last to do so (but was the omission of Jack from his account a deliberate omission, and if so why?).Third he had been required by higher authority to paint a false picture of events as part of a cover up of facts that were inconvenient or embarrassing to that higher authority (although had a higher authority played any part in devising the story one would have expected a story rather less susceptible to question).

* But Witham's second account is corroborated by that of his wife Kathleen, at least as to the time when he returned home to Derbyshire. That corroboration cannot turn nonsense into

sense, but what it can and does do is provide us with a fourth explanation as to why Witham should have concocted his second account. Attached to the second account is a photograph of Witham with Yvonne Fournier and a gentleman who may or may not be Mme Fournier's husband. The photograph is said to have been taken in July 1944 but that is plainly wrong. Witham's aircraft was not shot down until August 3, 1944. Was the photograph taken four days after he had tramped through a forest? The state of his uniform suggests not, but then Mme Fournier might have cleaned it for him. But he is wearing shoes, not flying boots. And would a French civilian in occupied France have been able to purchase film for a camera? And would that person then have run the risk of having to that photograph, complete with its English airman developed? And how chirpy, and well dressed, Mme Fournier and the gentleman look after four years living under the yoke of German occupation. This photograph may have been taken in July, but surely it was July 1945 .

* Recall how, in the second account, Witham describes learning in northern Spain that the war was over. He then makes the long journey back from whence he came, namely Chantilly. Then he is picked up by our yank in the jeep, and after a night in Paris, and because the landing lights in Paris are sabotaged, the yank drives him to Limoges. We know this is nonsense, but a moment's thought reveals the real reason why he should make up this story. The first account, the plausible account, has the newly-wed Witham (he and Kathleen had not so much as a single night together as husband and wife) staying in the home of Mme Fournier for a month, where the lovely lady looked after him very well. The only way to make sense of this yarn and its invention, is that the young airman had his head turned by Mme Fournier. He is repatriated to England on 8 September 1944 and no doubt returned to his home base at Kirmington to be debriefed. Lovesick for Mme he could not bring himself to return home to Derbyshire, but nor could he bring himself to contact his recent bride to tell her the marriage was over. So he stayed in Kirmington doing his duty, for the remainder of the war. After the war was over he went back to Chantilly to see if his passion for Mme Fournier might be rekindled. For whatever reason things did not work out, and he decided he had little option but to return to England, and to his wife in Derbyshire. But he needed a cover story to explain his absence for the previous 12 months, and hence the yarn of the long journey to Spain. The inclusion of the lightning visit to Chantilly in the yarn was to explain away the photograph, which is plainly he wished to keep, and did keep for there it is attached to his account of his adventures.

* So the second account was a cover story, but not a cover up in relation to what might have happened on the aeroplane, but a cover up as to his activities following his real repatriation in September 1944. There is no reason why a single word of Kathleen Witham's story should be doubted. She believed her husband's quite enormous deception, and was obviously still believing it when she gave her an account of events in 2004.

* So what conclusions can be drawn from all this? It seems likely that Jack bailed out first, and that Witham saw him go. In the absence of any evidence of foul play on the ground, it seems likely that Jack lost his life in the air, either by striking the aircraft, or as a consequence of the gunfire that Wagner describes, or possibly as a consequence of bombs exploding beneath him as he descended on his parachute. Witham would have been debriefed upon his repatriation in September 1944. In the course of that debrief he would surely have been asked about the fate of the bomb aimer. We need to see Sgt Witham's evasion report.

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