

"HOLTEN IN OORLOGSTJD (1984)

HOLTEN IN WARTIME

LANCASTER CRASHED IN HOLTENBROEK.

In the evening of Saturday September 23rd 1944 244 Lancasters, nine Mosquitos and one Lightning of a number of squadrons of No. 5 Group of the British Royal Air Force took off from their basis in central England. In the surroundings of the town of Lincoln. Only a short time before their take off the flyers had come to know which for that night would be the objects to attack and details about the routes to fly and aims were given. Like with other attackflights, also this time not all planes should be able to execute their missions successfully and return safely to their bases. At the end of the attack it appeared that fifteen planes of No. 5 Group were missing. One of those Lancasters crashed that night near Holten. We'll trace the flight of this machine.

After they had occupied themselves with things like briefing, distribution of the flyers' outfits, the filling up the planes with some 5900 litres of fuel, the loading with bombs and ammunition and finally the tests and checks of the engines, at last the signal 'take off' was given that evening. One after another twelve Lancasters of No. 9 Squadron R.A.F. which were employed that night, flashed along the runway on Bardney base. At 19-02hrs exactly (British time) the Lancaster LL901 WS-V for Vic' took off. Snorting the engine went up with it's heavy load of bombs and joined the planes, which in the eveninglight formed a formation. For the crew of seven members it was to be the 26th operational flight they flew together. They flew for the seventeenth time in this old but reliable and safe 'box', which had already 368 flying hours. A very large number, which were flown during about 50 operational and many testflights. Among the members of the crew who knew each other already since the training, a great friendship had grown the course of months. In June 1944 they had been placed in this squadron and almost immediately used in the bomb attacks on the continent of Europe. In the night of 12 to 13 June 1944 they executed their first operational flight at the French town of Portierd. The following attacks were for the greater part also aimed at French territory to support of the marching allied forces and further at some German towns, while one time the Dutch airfield Gilse-Rijen was bombed. Their last flight was a remarkable one. They had taken part in the operation 'Paravane' at which the famous German man-of-war Tirpitz was attacked. The ship was lying heavily defended in the Norwegian Altenfjord, just beyond the radius of action of the Lancasters. A cute plan, however, was executed. In the evening of September 11th 1944 they had taken off from their base and after a stop in Scotland, where the fuel tanks were refilled, they flew non-stop to an airbase in north Russia near the town of Archangelsk. From that place the Lancasters of No. 9 and 617 Squadron R.A.F. with full tanks performed attacks on the 45,000 ton war-ship. Though at these attacks the Tirpitz was heavily damaged, they did not succeed in sinking the ship and the aircraft flew back to their bases in England.

For this night the attack was aimed at Dortmund-Bns canal, near the town of Münster. The intention was to destroy hereby the enemy supply lines between the German industrial areas upon the Ruhr and the front near Arnhem where some days before large allied airborne units were dropped. The aircraft were equipped with 12 ton bomb with time ignition, a so-called 'fall boy', which had to be dropped on the marked target. In the beginning the flight went quietly. Flying eastward in fact they flew up to the darkness and when they passed the Belgian coast at a height of about five kilometers it had already grown completely dark. From this height the heavy battle near Arnhem was clearly to observe. Glowing bullets and grenades drew bowlines though the sky and there were fiercely burning fires. When they reached the German frontier shellfire on the formation was opened. The aircraft, however could manage to reach the target area undamaged. They flew in onto the target from about 7500 metres and the bomb was aimed at the place, which was indicated with red burning markers. After that they immediately left the area. Because of the time ignition of 30 minutes it was not visible for the crew of the WS-V whether their bomb had hit the target or not.

F/Lt Charles Scott from Glasgow flew the Lancaster back home. The German flak was still very bad, but as soon as they had reached Holland, it soon diminished. Though it was quiet now, they kept on the alert. The gunners were behind their machine guns and peered into the dark night. Suddenly there was a loud crack. It was clear that the plane was hit, but nobody had seen or heard anything. Because they did not see any flak, the crew was convinced that it had been a German night-fighter, which had attacked them. The right inside engine proved to be hit and soon licking flames came out of it. Very quick the man came to action and tried to put out the flames, unfortunately without any result. Shortly after the second engine caught fire too at the starboard side. F/Lt Scott realised that now nothing could be done about it anymore. The plane could hardly be controlled and a quick decision had to be taken. He suggested to try to make a forced landing in the liberated area, south of Arnhem. Suddenly the Lancaster lost much height and was not under control anymore, where upon Scott ordered the crew via the intercom to bail out. Probably at that moment the right wing burned through, whereafter the bomber swung round and tumbled down. The crew found their way to the escaping hatches. Only F/Sgt Leslie Langley succeeded in opening the hatch, leaving the plane and reaching the ground safely, he, however, sprained his ankle. "It was as if it took me two hours before I managed to open the hatch, which was underneath me, after which I jumped immediately", Mr. Langley told, when we visited him summer 1979 at his home in one of the suburbs of London. He went on: "That I opened it at the very last moment, is clear from the fact that I came down in the meadow next to where the plane crashed. The parachute must have opened very shortly before I touched the ground. Of the jump I don't recall anything. Immediately I put off my parachute, hid it in a small trench and on my knees I drank some draughts of water from a ditch, to come to myself again. For a short time I looked around if I saw anyone of my comrades. Because of the extreme heat of the burning plane, I could not approach to it very close. I was aware of it that the Germans would appear and that I had to take my heels very soon. Limping I ran off, on course of my compass, in a southern direction.

As a matter of fact all this had not gone totally unnoticed by the Holten population. The heavy sound of the formation flying over had enticed a few people to go outside even though time during which people had to stay in had already begun at 8-00p.m. It always was fascinating view. The eastern sky was lighted red, caused by fires in the Ruhrgebiet; searchlights scanned the sky for planes, while very lights and flares, flakshells and tracer bullets flickered up against the nightly darkness. Not seldom planes crashed and this night too several of them were seen coming down in the surroundings. In the meantime it was around 23-30 hrs. When from the east a plane became visible which burned heavily and approached the village dangerously. The sound of the roaring engines pierced everybody to the very marrow, as if it were the last cry of a dying animal. Some people went into a panic. Sleeping children were waken up. A few people ran up to the falling plane, according to the advices of the Civil Defence. Fortunately the plane flew over the village, but crashed at the Populierendijk in Holterbroek. Far in the neighbourhood the shock could be felt and the surroundings were lighted up by the glow of the fire, so that see the cows in the pastures, while the trees cast their shadows on the sinister lighted land, that was frightened up so sudden in this autumn night.

Immediately after the group commander of the constabulary, Hallink, charged a number of his men with the guarding of the plane. Mr. H.J. Holterman, deputy commander of the CD came to the spot personally and stated that a more engined English plane had crashed and was fully splintered and that several flyers were killed in the crash. An airman was lying at the way in to a meadow. (This was top-turret gunner F.A. Saunders.) Both apparently had bailed out too late and snacked the earth before their parachutes could open. Later one more dead airman was mentioned, found at the Evertjesweg. In the afternoon the latter was transported to the mortuary at the old cemetery by the nearest farmer, Anstoot 'De Griene', with his cart.

On Tuesday morning September 26th the dead bodies in the burned out plane were collected and coffined by municipal workers. Then it became clear that in and under the wreckage were the mortal remains of four young men who were badly mutilated by the fire. So six victims were recovered in total. The very morning at 11-20hrs they were buried on the cemetery.

Bomb aimer P/Sgt Leslie Langley had walked on in a wearisome way, in spite of his sprained ankle. When he arrived at the Schipbeek, he followed it in a western direction. Only when it was nearly morning he knocked at a house and presented himself with the words: "Ik bin English", one of the phrases which were on an information leaflet all allied flyers had, to make surviving and escaping in occupied area more easily. The people, however, didn't dare to let him come in and Langley continued on his way. Near Deventer, where the Schipbeek flows together with the IJssel, he followed the IJssel in a southern direction, in the supposition that somewhere in the neighbourhood of Zutphen he would meet the British army which would march on from Arnhem. He didn't know that the situation in Arnhem was very bad for the English at that moment. Leslie had walked on for three nights, sleeping in the daytime, when one early morning he knocked at the door of the family Gradus Visser in Gerssel. Only a few words were needed to make clear what had happened and what his plans were. They let him in and explained to him the bad situation of the English at Arnhem. There was no use going on. He however, could not stay at the Visser family. Two many Germans were around Father Visser nevertheless arranged contacts with the underground movement and a safe shelter was found for Langley at the Koeslag family in Laren, a family extremely active in helping allied flyers. From Koeslag, Langley was conveyed by 'Kees' of the Holten underground group to the farm 'Buisweerd', from where he was taken by some persons in hiding there to Reterink in Zuidloo. This was about three weeks after the crash. Langley stayed here for nearly seven months, together with John Miller who, the same night, was shot down in the environment of Zelhem. The latter still wore his uniform and had his pistol with him. He wanted to defend himself and refer to the convention of Geneva in case he would be taken prisoner. After New Year they were joined by the Norwegian flyer Kare Herfjord of No. 332 Squadron R.A.F., who had made a forced landing on January 4th, 1945, in the Rijssenseveen behind the farm of the family Lindenberg. In an ingenious way shelters were made for the persons in hiding in a strawstack. In the daytime they mostly were in the farmhouse. Sometimes there were very dangerous situation when two German friendly policemen from Batmen came to the farm's kitchen for coffee, while the flyers were playing Monopoly in another room. A game in which Langley clearly gave proof of his past as a bankemployee when it came to counting money. That Monopoly game helped them through the long months they had to await the liberation.

When on April 6th 1945 an armoured car of the Canadian 8th Reconnaissance Regiment came near the farm, the three airmen jumped in and were brought -without having time to say good-bye- behind the lines. For interrogation they went on to Breda. After their identity had been checked, they were flown to England and on April 10th Langley arrived already at his parents and fiancée in London. You can easily guess what a joy it was for everybody. The Langleys in London had lived in anxious suspense during all those months. Via the Red Cross organization they knew there was only one survivor. Who he was could not be determined, because not all victims could be identified. After the war Leslie Langley, now working at an insurance firm in London more than once visited the Reterink family and also the spot where his plane crashed.

In 1947 he was back for the first time and visited the family J. van Schooten, living about 200 metres from the place of crash. Just at that moment a housepainter worked there. Painter and ex-airman stood together and recognized each other without knowing at first who exactly the other was. Soon it became clear. Leslie Langley stood face to face with Arend Schipper, during the war commander of the resistance movement in Holten and it was him who had conveyed Langley from Koeslag in Laren to Buisweerd. Later on Langley was taken to the farm of H. Reterink in Zuidloo, where he was liberated at last.

A flyer is missing.

A short time after the liberation there were some problems with regard to the identification of the fallen airmen. There has been some talk on the missing of the British F/O C.E.M. Graham, navigator of the Lancaster NF 923 of No. 617 Squadron R.A.F. (known as the Dambuster squadron which had the 'destroying of the German barrages to their credit'). The plane had also taken part in the attack on the Dortmund-Ems canal near Münster, was, however, attacked by a German nightfighter and lost its course and had flown high over Holten. It appeared that this airman was severely wounded in an airfight over Twente and had got a shock. Because the plane was heavily damaged and could not effect a normal landing anymore, Graham probably was thrown out of the plane on his parachute by his comrades to save his life. The other members of the crew could manage to leave the plane with the exception of the pilot F/Lt G.S. ('Geoff') Stout. He lost his life when the plane crashed at the Vordensebinnenweg in the municipality of Lochem.

An inquiry after the location of the F/O Graham's grave had no result. In Holten nobody knew about a flyer with this name and an extensive investigation by the municipality of Holten in which many places in the neighbourhood were summoned, didn't help to make this case clear. It was suspected that the flyer in question should be among those airmen buried in Holten of whom some had not yet been identified. It was most evident that it concerned the victim found at the Evertjesweg. The mortal remains were disinterred on November 6th 1945 and interred on the military cemetery at Oosterbeek in square IV, row C, grave 15; later a tombstone was placed with the indication C.E.M. Graham, Flying Officer, 159937.

In the opinion of a member of the Holten CD at that time, there was still no proof that it really concerned the flyer mentioned above. It really concerned the flyer mentioned above. It seemed as if they had passed off the matter to satisfy the victim's father, Major - General Sir M.W.A.P. Graham, KBE, CB, MC, - a high officer in the staff of Field - Marshal Montgomery - to appoint the exact place of his son's grave. It was the more peculiar, because now in Holten in fact they missed a dead man from the plane which had crashed the same night in Holterbroek. After it was accepted that the mortal remains of two different, severely mutilated flyers should be buried in one grave. They then thought that it concerned the flyers Hayward and Harding, resting in a joint grave, as to be seen to this day at the cemetery regarding the little space between the two tombstones.

Yet it is to accept that the identification was correct and that it really concerned the flyer who came down at the Evertjesweg. After inquiries in the surroundings we had a talk with Mr. H.J. Boaschers. He remembered having seen that night a plane approaching from eastern direction. Over Holten the plane, however, had turned to the south. Mr. Boaschers also remembered that at some distance behind his house 'something' came down with a thud. Only the next morning he learned that it should have been an R.A.F. man who had fallen down at the Evertjesweg. It appeared to be dark, slightly built person with small hands.

Mr. G.J. Huismann, inhabitant of Holten, at that time hidden for the Germans at the family Jansen 'Menum', also living in this area, also remembered the dead flyer who was found in the morning:

"Evidently he had come down hard, because we could see an imprint of the body in the soil. On his collar he had a badge in yellow and red with sickle and hammer, while there was a ring on one of his hands with a picture of a red Indian's head. Blood ran from his mouth. I could see that it was not the first person on the spot, for the parachute had been cut off and was hidden under some bushes by the road side. I took it home with me. Later I saw that the parachutecloth had been shot through in different places. In my opinion that was the cause of the flyers's death."

At attempts to trace how it all came to pass why F/O Graham had come down in Holten and was found dead, we succeeded in contacting the, at that time F/O R.H. ('Reg') Petch, who belonged to the same crew and took part in the flight as tailgunner. In spite of that his information gave no useful clues. Because of his position in the tailpart, Mr. Petch said not to be wellinformed of what was going on in the cockpit. Probably F/O Petch bailed out first, when his gun-turret had been eliminated and the plane burned. He came down in the municipality of Hellendoorn and kept covered for two days, observing sharply the bustle around a farm. When nothing suspicious happened he went up to the farm. The farmer warned the resistance movement; they helped him with addresses where he could hide for the coming period.

F/O Petch was liberated on April 10th 1945 in Nijverdal. Flight-engineer F/O A.W. Benting landed severely wounded in the municipality of Markelo, a few metres behind the farmhouse of the family Tempelman of the Borkeldweg, near the municipal frontier with Holten. With the firing of pistol-shots he drew the attention of the family. He, however, had a shot wound through his head and through his calf of a leg; they could not help him in the right way. They took him a short time afterwards to a hospital in Enschede, but there he died a few days later.

F/O Graham had also taken part in the attack on the Tirpitz and probably had gotten this badge in Russia.

The other members of the crew were more fortunate. F/Sgt P.L. ('Peter') Whittaker, top turret gunner, came down not far from F/O Benting behind the farmhouse of J.W. Ebbekink 'Peurtje' - very active in the resistance movement where he was helped further.

Bomb aimer F/O W.A. ('Bill') Rupert, a Canadian, landed safely on the Markeloeseberg, hurried away from there and also came in touch with the underground. Together with his fellow crewmember Peter Whittaker he too was an enthusiastic co-worker at the droppings of arms, etc. For the resistance. In chapter 9 about the resistance movement more will be told about.

About the wireless operator F/O R.J. Allen nothing is known, except that he survived the war. Just like Petch, Rupert and Whittaker he probably was liberated at last at a hiding address in Eastern Holland.

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