

Re-visiting a memory – Final Closure – Mixed feelings

In 2016, after having visited Project Propeller, which is an annual reunion for 150+ WW2 aircrew, to which they are flown from all over the UK in light aircraft by current volunteer pilots, in Leeds East/Chuch Fenton, we got to know Rusty Waughman DFC AFC Ld'H. Later that evening we learned more about the experiences of Rusty, told by Graham Cowie, who is not only the organiser of Project Propellor, but who is also a very dear friend of Rusty Waughman. Having told about his many operations and exploits over the years there was this one memory in 1944 of which Rusty thought more often than others. On his 20th operation they were flying towards the railway marshalling yards in Hasselt/Belgium. At ten minutes to midnight and in approach of the target, the flight engineer Curly shouted "Bloody Hellfire!", followed by a instant collision.

That evening in 2016 in Leeds East the suggestion was made that it would be an idea to get Rusty to Hasselt again, and so it was sheduled for the last weekend of August 2017. John Zarno, who is also a volunteer pilot for Project Propeller, agreed at once that he would fly Rusty and Graham to Antwerp airfield. That weekend was also going to be an open day at Aero Kiewit in Hasselt. John was however unable to land at Kiewit being a grass runway, but what better way is there to invite a former 94 year old Lancaster pilot, then to fly him over Hasselt once more. So we arranged a Harvard aircraft, piloted by Danny Cabooter, the co-founder of the Stampe en Vertongen Museum, and Rusty was flown over Hasselt towards Kiewit as a guest of honour. Having landed there they were greated by The Merlins, a historical WW2 RAF re-enactment group. It was a pleasant arrival and much appreciated, but Rusty who has a great sence of humor, already was wondering how one of the chaps could cope on such a very warm day in an Irvin Jacket.

Being the guest of honour, Rusty was not only greated by a member of the town council, local newspaper and tv journalists, but also two F-16's of the Belgian Air Force payed their tribute with a fly by.

That afternoon Rusty gave a talk for a large audience, not only about his time with the RAF but in particular about the operation on Hasselt. A large part of Lancaster NN775 that was recovered last year was used as a background scene. The presentation was guided by Graham Cowie and Cynrik De Decker who also stood in for the translation. Afterwards some time was spend with the audience who wanted a photo or an autograph, but Rusty being a familieman was drawn to the childern, happy that they could wear his original flying helmet.

Later that evening in a more quiet enverinmont it was an absolute privilege and honour to talk to Rusty and who gave an in depth interview on subjects which are no so obvious to talk about, but he is such a great personality with an amazing spirit, and any question was answered.

During the night that Rusty flew towards Hasselt on 11th May 1944, two other Belgium targets were also being bombed. Several aircraft were lost that night and there was night fighter activity which in later publications caused some confusion as some details were recorded wrongly. Over the many years of research it could be established that two Lancasters of 103 Squadron came into question, one of them was ND700, flown by Wing Commander Goodman, but is thought to have been shot down by a German night

fighter. Although a third Lancaster of 460 Sqn also came down in the same region. But this could be ruled out as the entire crew survived and in the correspondence that we had it was established without any doubt that they were shot down by a German night fighter.

Based on Rusty's memories and the eyewitness reports it is nearly certain that the other aircraft involved in the collision, was JB733 of 103 Squadron, captained by 22 year old Flying Officer Richard Whitley. The entire crew was sadly killed and buried at Fort 3 in Borsbeek.

While we visited the crashsite of JB733 and memorial in de Verkenstraat in Hallaar the following day, together with Benny Ceulaers and Steven Volckaerts, two fellow researchers, we were accompanied by Gaston, who as a young boy had witnessed the crash. Rusty explained in his own words: "The Lancaster came from the starboard side and slid underneath us damaging both our inner engines nacelles and her propellers cut through the bomb aimers compartment, just passing behind my bomb aimers feet. The mid upper gun turret damaged the underside of our fuselage cutting through the two main longerons, and also took a part of the tail of. We sat on top of him, it seemed like a long long time, but it was only seconds before he fell away. I didn't get a good description from the lads of what happened or of what they saw, only said that they had seen the aircraft broken up falling away. Then it disappeared through the clouds, but they could see an explosion on the ground. They didn't see any parachutes."

Gaston picked up the story and told Rusty what had followed on the ground. When he explained on how the crew was found Rusty replied: "We didn't experience anything like that at all, we never saw death bodies, only empty beds. It is a sad thing, and why?" ended Rusty while shaking his head.

Despite all the damage sustained the crew bravely pressed on to the target. They couldn't have taken evasive action if needed as the tail would have been broken off, but both gunners refused to leave their turrets for the remaining flight. Back at base in Ludford Magna Rusty needed to land the Lancaster on the port wheel, the other was found inoperative. The Lancaster however veered next to the runway and collapsed, it was a write off.

As a closure of the day, after also having visited the memorial for the Goodman-crew in Oostmalle, we went to see the Schoonselhof cemetery in Antwerp where the crews are resting today. In a very poignant moment Rusty paid his respects to his fallen comrades, laid flowers at the memorial cross and remembered on that sunny afternoon: "You can not imagine this on a day like this, they must have died a horrible death: poor buggers! It makes you realise how lucky you are."

Article : Wim Govaerts