

The Halifax

Ellen Keith, St. Albert, Alberta, Canada

The plane was a Halifax Mk III heavy bomber, serial number LV880 – squadron identifier MH”C”. It belonged to 51 Squadron of the Royal Air Force, and

was stationed in Snaith, England. Its crew consisted of seven members:

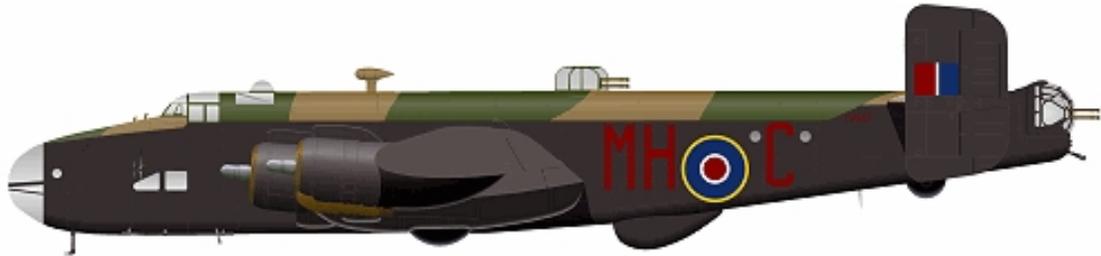
four Aussies, two Brits and a Canuck. The crew had made numerous night raids against the Third Reich, striking Berlin, Essen, Nuremberg, and Frankfurt, as well as strategic targets in France. The Allies viewed these raids as an opportunity to weaken the Jerries, to crush their industrial production and their morale.

On April 10, 1944, 51 Squadron received orders for a new target -- the railway yards at Tergnier, in the north of France. The crew of Halifax LV880 got dressed. They stood around joking with the ground crew while the aircraft was loaded.

“We went out to fly like children off to a picnic,” recalled Flying Officer Fred Kirkwood, the Aussie navigator.

At 21:20 hours, fifteen planes took off from the base. The sky was clear and the Halifax made quick progress. The full moon pointed a spotlight at the railway yards. The Canuck, Flying Officer Charles Hartley,

released the bombs. Right on target. The plane turned and headed back towards the coast. An aircraft approached the Halifax from below, a BF110



night fighter, painted black. On its tail was a swastika. The Jerries had equipped this fighter with *Schräge Musik* (“jazz music”), new upward-firing guns. At thirteen minutes after midnight, just ten minutes after downing an RAF Lancaster, *Hauptmann* Gerhard Friedrich steadied his fighter below the Halifax and fired.

Nobody in the Halifax saw the night fighter or heard the clatter of the machine guns. The mid-upper gunner, Bill Hegarty, called a warning over the intercom as flames began to lick the port wing of the aircraft. Merv Hall, the pilot, shut down the engine and activated the fire extinguishers. He pulled the plane into a nosedive in an attempt to douse the flames. Neither worked.

A noise crackled over the intercom.

“Put on your chutes – looks like this is it, boys.” Merv’s voice was calm and clear.

The men fastened their parachutes and the intercom went dead. The nose of the

Halifax dropped and the plane fell into a vertical spiral. The men were tossed against the fuselage. Fred fell on top of the escape hatch and yanked at the

handle. It was stuck.

An explosion shook the plane. The blast ejected Fred and the two gunners from the Halifax, and they began free-falling in separate directions. Fred tugged at the release lever of his parachute, and it mushroomed open above his head. As he floated further away, he watched flames envelop the plane. The fire was a glowing orb, suspended in the air. For a moment, it was impossible to discern heaven from earth and earth from hell. Fred’s leg crumpled beneath him in a pretzel-like twist as he hit a farmer’s field. His eyes darted around in frantic circles, studying the shadows of the surrounding woods for any sign of movement. He sighed; he was safe for now. As he moved toward the woods, he took one last look at the sky. The plane had vanished from sight and a plume of smoke had risen to cover the moon with a thick, black shroud.

June 5, 2000

Our burgundy Volkswagen Westfalia camper drove down the main street of the French village of Davenescourt. The rain was coming down so hard that all we could see beyond the arms of the windshield wipers was a pastel blur. The van inched forward with uncertainty.

An old woman hurried by in the opposite direction. My father tapped on the brakes and unrolled the window. He called to her in broken French. She came to the window and pulled back her navy rain kerchief to reveal her face. My mother, a French teacher, leaned forward to offer her translation skills.

“We’re looking for the cemetery,” she explained.

My brother and I sat in the back of the van, wiggling our legs and clutching a bouquet of crocuses which we had just picked up at the supermarket in Amiens. We hoped to rediscover the grave of our great-uncle, Flying Officer Charles Hartley.

The woman began gesturing as she spouted out instructions in rapid French. We thanked her and followed her directions to the iron gate of the cemetery.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. We put on our raincoats and got out of the vehicle. A brick wall bordered the cemetery and the grave plots were covered in gravel rather than grass. Most of the headstones were black marble, with elaborate crosses and angels competing for space. Tucked in the corner stood two neat rows of identical, white granite tombstones, each of



which bore a cross and the emblem of the British, Canadian, or Australian air force.

My father paused between the two rows. The first contained four stones, while the second had seven. Two separate plane crashes, exactly one week apart. He scanned the names, resting his eyes on the third grave of the first row.

**Flying Officer C.T. Hartley
Air Bomber
Royal Canadian Air Force
Died 11 April, 1944, Age 24
— He is gone
But memory lingers
In the hearts
That knew his smile —**



My brother knelt down to place a Canadian flag next to the headstone. It was the kind of

flag that you find at the dollar store, a waxy piece of paper stapled to a white stick.

I followed suit with the flowers. I stuck them in a blue disposable water bottle, but I peeled off the label

to make the vase more tasteful. Four members of the seven man crew died in that crash. Three escaped. The two gunners, Merv Fairclough and Bill Hegarty, spent several days on the run before an informant turned them over to the Germans. Sent first to Buchenwald concentration camp, they were later moved to *Stalag Luft 3*, a camp for air force prisoners where they remained as POWs until the camp’s liberation.

Only Fred made it to safety. For months, he journeyed through the French countryside, relying on the help of civilians and the French Resistance for protection. He made it back to England at the end of August and returned to the airbase in Snaith.

My father had explained all of this to us. He drew each sliver of information from hours of research through military service reports, genealogical records and yellowed letters sent home from overseas. He had visited Davenescourt once before, in 1967, but he’d only been able to stay fifteen minutes, just long enough to take a snapshot of the grave. In 1967, there still would have been people around who might’ve recalled the crash. By 2000, 56 years had passed.

Anyone who would've remembered it was likely buried near the men, beneath one of the newer marble tombstones.

We filed back into the van and prepared to leave Davenescourt. My brother had to go to the bathroom. My father grumbled and pointed the van towards the centre of the village. He parked in front of the town hall. A battered Renault van pulled to a stop beside us and a man got out. He wore a navy turtleneck and a pair of green coveralls that hung open in the front because of a broken zipper. He went to unlock the front door of the hall. My father followed him and asked if we could use the facilities.

The man scratched his head, but proceeded to open up the bathrooms. He introduced himself as Pierre, the village maintenance man. When my mother came over to explain our reason for visiting Davenescourt, a wide grin spread across Pierre's face and he excused himself to make a phone call.

He phoned the mayor, who had been in the middle of taking a shower on his day off. The mayor, in turn, called up an elderly couple, Monsieur and Madame Fernand.

"You must meet these people," Pierre insisted, before escorting us to their house.

The Fernands were in their late 60s. Mme. Fernand wore a sleeveless floral dress over a different floral blouse and M. Fernand had on a sweater vest and a pair of slacks. They were the same height and almost

identical pairs of glasses framed their eyes. M. Fernand listened in silence to Pierre's long-winded version of our story.



"Ah... yes, I remember that first plane crash," M. Fernand said, drawing out his words with a faraway look in his eyes. "I was just twelve at the time and my wife was ten. The plane exploded high in the air with a flash. A brilliant flash." "It was one in the morning, but the sky shone so bright that I could count the bricks in the wall," added his wife.

"The next day I went outside and found one of the gunners hanging in the trees, caught in his parachute. He fell sick, you know, after hanging there all night. Very sick," said M. Fernand. "I helped him down and then later he went on his way."

"You just missed him! He came back to visit us," said Mme Fernand.

"Oh, when was that?" asked my mother.

"I don't know, maybe five years ago?"

The couple smiled and answered a few more questions. Then, Pierre turned to us and inquired if there was anything we wanted to see.

"I'll take you wherever you want, just tell me."

My father asked to see the crash site.

Pierre took us to a wheat field. "This is where they found the bodies. Your uncle," he said.

"I had always hoped to find a piece of the aircraft," my father said to us as he stared out over the wheat. It was pouring rain again, and the ground had turned to muck, so we stayed at the edge of the field.

Pierre wiggled his finger in a beckoning motion as he stepped into his Renault. He led us back to the cemetery. Right before the gates, the road forked and turned into a farmer's driveway. We drove up the driveway for a few hundred metres and stopped next to a small meadow. In the middle huddled a cluster of small birch trees, gangly and pockmarked like a pubescent boy.

"I was planting these trees a few years ago when I hit metal," Pierre told us. "One of the plane's engines is buried right here. The trees don't grow very well, because of all the metal in the soil."

He scuffed his shoes against the grass and unearthed a few shards of corroded metal, which he held up to show us. We imitated him and came up with pieces of weathered rubber and a handful of scrap metal.

The farmer came to the edge of the meadow and studied us with curiosity. My father asked him about the engine. The farmer assured us that it was from my great-uncle's plane; his brother had watched the engine plummet from the Halifax and had then seen another engine fall somewhere over a distant hill.

After a few minutes, we returned to the vans and drove back to the town hall. Pierre asked us to wait for a moment and he went to fetch a small box. He handed it to my father. Inside, lay several larger chunks of metal. Some pieces had handles, and others had bolts or screws, but a ghostly layer of rust and calcium deposits coated all of them. I felt like Robert Ballard, discovering the corroded hull of the *Titanic*.

One piece in particular caught my father's attention – an aluminum number plate that was still spotted with crimson paint. The plate was rectangular and had eight holes along the edges where it had been attached. A crown, a patent number and the phrase "AM 27N/18" were inscribed on the surface.

"AM," my father said, "British Air Ministry."

He stood in silence. His knuckles turned white as he clasped the number plate in his hand.

Pierre pulled a ring of keys out of his pocket.

"Here," he said, holding out the keys, "The mayor asked me to give you these – the keys for our town hall. There are mattresses that we can put on the floor if you'd like. Please, stay as long as you want."

My mother thanked him, but shook her head. The next day was June 6, and we wanted to be in Normandy in time for the D-Day remembrance ceremonies.

We said goodbye to Pierre and climbed back into the Westfalia. I balanced the box on my lap, careful not to disturb the skeletal remains of Halifax LV880.



❖ REMEMBER ❖



Flight Sergeant Merv Hall
RAAF
pilot
killed



Sergeant Gordon Peck
RAFVR
flight engineer
killed



Flying Officer Chuck Hartley
RCAF
bomb aimer
killed



Warrant Officer Bruce Osborn
RAAF
wireless operator/gunner
killed



Flight Sergeant Merv Flairclough
RAAF
tail gunner
POW

[no photo]

Sergeant Bill Hegarty
RAFVR
mid-upper gunner
POW



Flying Officer Fred Kirkwood
RAAF
navigator
escaped