

Short after Midnight

by Roland Geiger

edited by Heather Tyreman

The Mission

On the night of September 2, 1941, Bomber Command dispatched one hundred and thirty-seven aircraft to bomb targets in Berlin and Frankfurt with additional aircraft to carry out "gardening operations" in the sea off Copenhagen. The Hampden units were to play an important role during this night, deploying a total of fifty-one aircraft from Nos. 44, 49, 50 and 83 Squadrons.

The weather was fair on the evening of September 2nd, with low stratus cloud at 600-800 feet, and a visibility of two to seven miles. A gentle breeze was blowing from WSW 'round to NW at 5-10 mph. This wind, however, slowly died out as darkness fell, and by midnight the air was still, ideal for fog to form over the lower regions of the country. At 1930 hours, the first aircraft of No. 49 Squadron left the runway at Scampton, followed by thirteen others over the next fifty-five minutes. At dispersals on the other side of the airfield, No. 83 Squadron allowed ten aircraft to join the climbing Hampdens of No. 49 Squadron as they manoeuvred into a formation in the late summer sky. At nearby Swinderby and Waddington, home of Nos. 50 and 44 Squadrons, the roar of Pegasus engines would have been heard all over the stations, as another twenty-seven aircraft took turns to climb into the sky. At Swinderby the last Hampden took off at 2025 hours, leaving the airfield suddenly quiet, except perhaps the mechanical tinkering noises of the "'erks" working late. One of No.44's Hampdens, AE260, "O" for Orange, was piloted by Squadron Leader Nettleton, later to receive the Victoria Cross while attacking Augsburg in April 1942. His aeroplane was to attack Berlin. While on the long flight to the target, one aircraft, AD982, "Z" for Zebra, was attacked by a Messerschmitt Bf.110 night fighter. Fortunately, the bomber was not seriously damaged, and the pilot executed a successful, albeit early, return from the night's operations.

Although the bombing and "gardening" were reasonably successful, Nos. 44 and 83 Squadron suffered losses over the target areas. No.44 Squadron lost AE152/E, AE 254/W over Berlin, and AE313/C over Frankfurt, while No. 83 Squadron lost X3144 and AE315 over Berlin. In a few hours, No.44 Squadron had lost almost a quarter of its bombing force with twelve airmen missing.

Nos. 48 and 50 Squadrons were more fortunate. The entire complement of raiders reached the English coast by the early hours, tired but unscathed. By 0400 hrs the first of the forty-five aircraft were arriving over the English coast, only to find that the flat land of Norfolk and Lincolnshire was clothed in thick fog. Hampden AE116 of No. 50 Squadron was the first to force-land, slightly damaging the airframe as she slid to a halt in a field near Waddington. By 0650 hours the last Hampden was on the ground, not on her base at Scampton, but wrecked in a field at Stadtbroke in Suffolk. The crew was uninjured. The thick fog had taken its toll, forcing down twelve of the fifty-one aircraft that set off for Germany, their crews being disoriented and low on fuel. Fortunately, a total of only three crew were injured out of the forced landings, but No. 44 Squadron, after faring badly over the target zone, lost one more airplane when it crashed near Dorking, killing one of the crew.

The casualties were:

04.00 hrs	AE116	50 Sqn	Cat. R(b)
04.50 hrs	AD978	83 Sqn	Cat. W
05.00 hrs	AE305	50 Sqn	Cat. W
05.10 hrs	X2919	50 Sqn	Cat. W
05.15 hrs	AE250	50 Sqn	Cat. W
05.45 hrs	AE156	83 Sqn	Cat. R(b)
05.50 hrs	X3136	49 Sqn	Cat. W
06.00 hrs	AE194	49 Sqn	Cat. R(b)
06.00 hrs	AE314	83 Sqn	Cat. R(b)
	AE192	44 Sqn	Cat. R

One night's operations for four units resulted in five Hampdens being shot down over enemy territory, seven written off and five seriously damaged in crashes. Of the total of two hundred and four airmen flying in Hampdens, twenty were missing, one had been killed and three were injured. This was considered to have been a good night for Bomber Command.



A Hampden is hit by a German night fighter. This drawing by Bernhard Markowsky comes from a newspaper clip I found at a flea market.

The raid as mentioned in the Operations Record Book of No. 44 Squadron, stationed at Waddington air field near Lincoln:

Waddington 2.9.41

Weather: Cloudy for most of day, becoming fine by midnight. Low stratus 600-800 ft between 0700-1000 BST. Visibility 2-7 miles. Surface winds WSW'ly veering to NW'ly 5-10 mph.

Operations. Two objectives were selected, the first being to attack Berlin and the second to attack Frankfurt. Nine Hampdens from this Squadron were detailed to attack Berlin together with 128 aircraft from other Groups and Stations.

Of this number, five of this Squadron's aircraft reached the target. P/O Anekstein reported that his bombs dropped in the Templehof area, S/Ldr Nettleton's in vicinity of the railway station, S/Ldr Burton-Gyles DFC, P/O's Bell and Tew attacked the town.

On the return journey the flight experienced heavy fog and S/Ldr Burton-Gyles and P/O Bell were diverted to Wittering, P/O Tew to Linton-on-Ouse, while P/O Aneckstein crashed at Colsby. None of Aneckstein's crew was injured.

Of the remaining four aircraft detailed to attack Berlin, Sgt. Dobbs encountered a Me.110 about 20 miles East of Norderney and his aircraft was badly shot up and Sergeant Shipton (W.Op/AG) and Sergeant Durnan (REAR Gunner) were injured. Fire was exchanged between these two aircraft and both Sergeants Shipton and Durnan report the ME.110 as damaged.

F/Lt Ridpath DFC was unable to reach the main objective owing to 10/10 cloud and bombed Hamburg instead.

The following two crews failed to return and are posted missing

Hampden AE152

P/O	Thompson		Pilot
P/O	Cook RCAF		Observer
Sgt	Dyer	1160282	W.Op/AG
Sgt	McBeth	1304399	REAR Gunner

Hampden AE254

Sgt	Robertson	951818	Pilot
Sgt	Unwin	956821	Observer
Sgt	Turner	747850	W.Op/AG
Sgt	Ridell	755658	REAR Gunner

Four aircraft were detailed to undertake the second operation which was to bomb the island port of Frankfurt, and three (Sgt's Durehill, Musgrave and Knight) reached this objective. Sgt Durehill returned safely to 'base'. Sgt Musgrave was diverted to North Leffenham where he crashed on landing (Hampden AD.767). Sgt Knight's port engine out cut while over the target (due to H.E.) and he returned on one engine which failed while over Dorking. The aircraft - Hampden AD.913 - was abandoned and all the crew reached the ground safely except No. 751652 Sergeant Stevens who was killed.

The fourth aircraft failed to return and the following crew have been posted as missing.

Hampden AE313

Sgt	D.N. DeBrath	778294 (Rhodesian)	Pilot
Sgt	R.L. Cole	1163918	Observer
Sgt	A. Goldstone	1051488	W.Op/A.G.
Sgt	J. Rawson	971985	Rear Gunner

W.Op. = Wireless Operator

A.G. = Air Gunner

Bomber Command Intelligence Narrative of Operations No. 193¹, records the results of these two operations as follows: *"Owing to a last minute deterioration in the weather a large portion of the force detailed for Berlin was switched to Frankfurt. As a result only forty nin aircraft set out for "The Big City" and one hundred and twenty five aircraft were detailed for targets at Frankfurt. Weather on the other side was moderately good with cloud varying from 2/10 to 8/10 over both the primary targets, but wide spread fog made the return journey unpleasant and many aircraft were forced to land at a variety of places from their bases.*

Berlin. Four Stirlings of 5 Group, three Halifax of 4 Group, fourteen Hampdens and three Manchesters of 5 Group reached the City and many clearly identified their respective aiming points. Several burst followed by fires were seen to the East and at various points within one mile radius of Alexander Platz. One very large fire followed by explosions was also observed in the center of the City.

Frankfurt. Thirteen Wellingtons of 1. Group, thirty-eight of 3 Group, thirty-three Whitleys and six Hampdens of 5 Group attacked targets in the City with excellent results. Very many bursts were seen on and around the aiming points. Large fires were started one of which was visible for 50 miles and one particularly large one reported to the South of the marshalling yard. Several crews report terrific explosions in various parts of the City and two large fires were developing in the Dock area."

¹ Public Record Office, AIR 27/448

The Airplane

As the last and fastest of bombers developed before the war (first flight June 1936), the Hampden did not fulfill its designers expectations.



The aircraft was at a distinct disadvantage because of its extremely slim fuselage (about three feet in diameter) which prevented the crew members from exchanging positions during the flight. The plane was put into service at the end of 1938 and a total of 1,430 crafts were built. Because of the high losses during day raids, the planes were used as night bombers - with hardly more success. Bomber Command sent Hampdens on raids until September 1942; after that, it was taken out of the active service as a bomber.

Technical data of the Handley PAGE Hampden	
purpose	moderately severe bomber
manufacturer	Handley PAGE
engines	two 965 HP Bristol Pegasus XVIII radial engines
span:	21.10 m
length:	16.33 m
height:	4.34 m
unloaded weight:	5,350 kg
flying weight:	8,525 kg
crew:	4 men
maximum speed	426 km/h in a height of 4.740 m
service ceiling:	6,920 m
normal range:	3,190 km
armament:	six 7,7-Browning-MG's bomb
additional load	up to 1,835 kg

Shortly after midnight

Between midnight and two o'clock in the morning during the night from the second to the third September, 1941, Charlotte Bohn (nee Heger), who lived on Schulstrasse in Alsfassen, a suburb of St. Wendel, woke up to an unusual sound. It was something she had never heard before in her life. It was as if something very large had fallen from the sky. A couple of minutes later she heard another sound outside her house, and a man dangling from a parachute landed right in the garden behind her neighbor's barn (Stabler family). His uniform was strange, not dark like the German soldiers she was used to seeing. The man snatched up his parachute and left the yard through the small gate leading to the street. He seemed confused and was constantly shouting "hurl, hurl" - that's what she understood and remembered fifty years later. He went down the Martinsgaesschen and rang the bell of the Greif house where the Ballofs had rented an apartment. The door got opened and he entered the house.



the former barn of the Stabler house. Behind it the flyer landed.

Gisela Krämer (nee Ballof) lives in downtown St. Wendel today:

"About twelve o'clock the door bell rang. Our mother looked out of the first floor window to see what was going on. My older sister Irmgard - we called her "Emsi" - went down the stairs and opened the door. As my mother realized the man at the door was no German - she recognized the uniform as not-German - she shouted to my sister to keep away from the door but Emsi didn't obey. I followed her down the stairs. The young man standing there wore a light uniform. He was not older than 25 and carried his parachute folded under his arm. Without saying a word, he surrendered. I could speak English - I had learned it in commercial school until 1939 - so I talked to him. Our next-door neighbor, Mr. Klomen, stormed to our door, grasped the Englishman by his arm and shook him hard. "He will get it now" he shouted. Surely he would have hit him, but my sister and I stepped between them and protected the soldier. "He belongs to us," we cried. Mr. Klomen was very angry but finally turned and left for home. Someone had called the police and we waited for their arrival. They took the man and walked him downtown - we followed them to the police station. There we sat with him half the night and talked to him. Then he was taken away and we never heard anything more about him. The next morning after the capture everyone went out to the Hemmer corral to see the crashed plane. We were applauded like heroes for capturing one of the pilots. After the war, a man from the St. Wendel government named Backes who worked as a translator came to visit us and interrogate us about what had happened. We told him and he wrote it down. That was all.

Maria Scherer (nee Greif) resides at Lanzenberg hill in Alsfassen:

"The airplane came down right over our house. We feared it would collide with the house. The engines didn't burn but there was only one engine running. The moon was full and it was a clear night so you could see the shadow of the plane falling above the house.

"One of the pilots who bailed out landed in Stabler's backyard. Our father, Peter Greif, had just come home from work and he told us he had met Emsi Ballof and her sister Gisela together with two policeman and a foreign soldier on their way downtown. He also had met Mr. Klomen who talked to him about trying to kill the soldier. A second soldier was said to have landed in the Todbach river near Urweiler. He had something to eat in his escape kit and when they wanted to take it away he defended it, so they beat him hard."



The second flyer landed near this house in Urweiler.

Karl Steinmetz resides in the first house of Urweiler:

"The English man had hidden his parachute down near the Todbach and took cover right in our garden beneath the beans. Someone found him there and he was taken to our living room. He wore a uniform with lots of pockets sewn on the uniform. From them he took chocolate bars and gave them to the children. When our neighbor, Klaus Müller, arrived wearing his SA-uniform, the soldier spit at him. Klaus gave him a big smack right in the face. Later he was taken downtown to the police station."

Hedwig Feidt (nee Hemmer) resided in the Hemmer house at Alsfassener Strasse. Today she lives at Rassiersmühle near Bliesen.

"Our cattle were out in the meadows for the night and early in the morning we had to go there to milk them. When we reached the entry to the meadow the cows were already there waiting for us as they were familiar with the daily procedure. We kids also realized there were a bunch of people running through the meadows, but we had no time to care about it as the milk car would arrive within a short time and there was still a lot of work to do. We led the cattle home and started milking them. Suddenly, two men came running and told our father, Heinrich Hemmer, to take his car and two horses and follow them to the meadow. A plane had crashed and one of the pilots was still in the cockpit. They tried to remove the cockpit top to get to him. My father dropped what he was doing and we jumped on the car and rode with him to the

crash site. The wreck was there with its nose stuck in the soil. We could barely see the front of the plane. The men tied some ropes to the plane, the horse pulled and part of the armor was pulled away. Then, we saw what I will not forget for the rest of my life. The body inside looked terrible. His head was smashed, parts of his brain could be seen. We were told the body of another crewmember had been found nearby who couldn't leave the plane in time. They also told us of the two flyers who had parachuted. Soon after that we left the site and went home."

The bodies were taken to a nearby inn called "Gastwirtschaft Schmidt ("Sibbmichels") at Alsfassen. Elisabeth Schmitt grew up in the house and remembers them. She got tears in her eyes when the bodies were examined and they found a pocketbook with papers and photos from relatives. A short time later the bodies were interred in St. Wendel cemetery. Some years after the war they found their final rest at Rheinberg War Cemetery near Krefeld, Germany.

In 1946 our local Standesamt (public record office) recorded that *"der englische Sergeant, Observer Renald Cole, am 3. Sept. 1941 in St. Wendel, Gemarkung 'Auf'm Spiss' durch Fliegerabsturz verstorben ist. Todesstunde sowie die näheren Personalien sind hier nicht bekannt"*. (the English Sergeant, Observer Renald Cole, died on September 3, 1941, at St. Wendel, district "Auf'm Spiss" because of a plane crash). Same was recorded for the pilot Peter DeBrath.

In 1957 the mayor of St. Wendel, Franz Graeff, gave the order to create a "Book of Honor" for all people who died at St. Wendel during both World Wars and for those who died elsewhere but came from the town.

In this book, 1,525 victims of both wars were listed, 274 of them from the Great War, and 1,525 soldiers and civilians from World War II. Among those were 86 soldiers of foreign nations and displaced persons plus 14 unidentified fallen German soldiers "known but to God."

Among the 86 soldiers were three British. Two of them were from the bomber that crashed near Alsfassen. They were the beginning of my research.

Through the Public Record Office in London, Great Britain, I got name and address of a professional researcher named Michael Gandy who knew the different ministries of the PRO very well and soon found what I was looking for. He was paid with Euro cheques but his work was worth every penny. The only thing he was not able to locate was the addresses of the surviving crew members.

AE313

Pilot of the plane was Sergeant Dennis Naville Napier DeBrath, serial number 778194, 23 years old, RAF. His parents were Harold DeBrath and Gwentyth Aileen de Brath from Ndola, North Rhodesia, Africa. He died during the night of September 2, 1941, when his plane crashed in a meadow near Alsfassen.

His 19 years old Observer, Sergeant Ronald Leslie Cole, service number 1163918, suffered the same fate. His parents were George Leslie and Gwendolin Charlotte Cole from Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, England. He was finally buried side-by-side with his pilot in the Rheinberg War Cemetery.



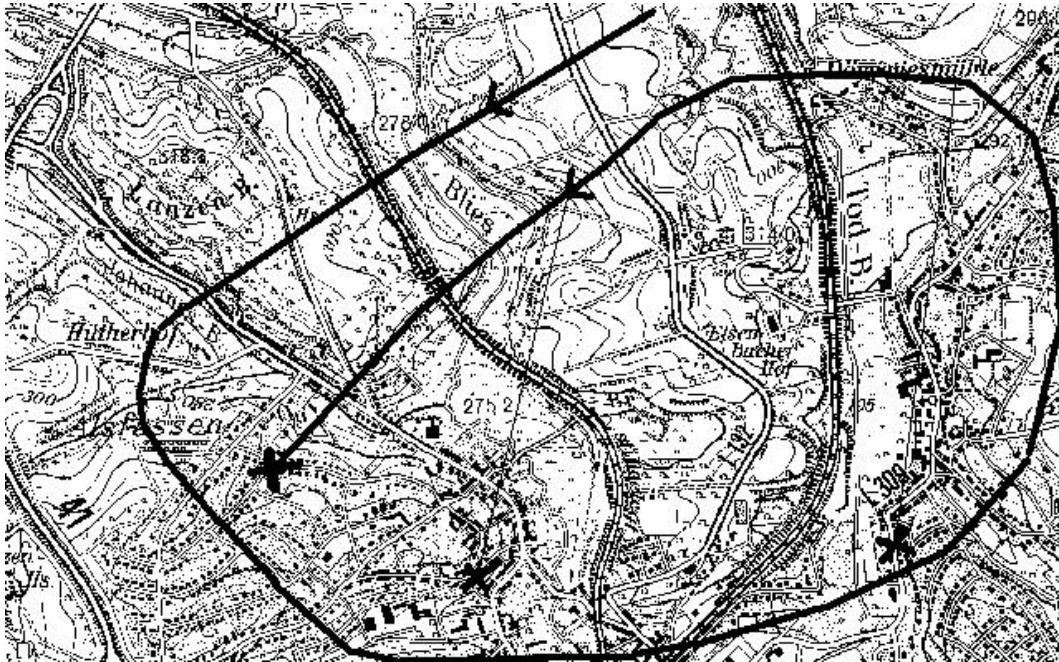
the headstones of the graves of Cole and de Brath in Rheinberg War Cemetery

Both gunners survived the crash because their positions were in the rear of the planes and they had a chance to bail out. Sergeant Cole didn't have that chance. He only could get out through the nose hatch which couldn't be opened during the flight. An alternative exit for him was through the cockpit - after the pilot had left the plane. He was sitting in a mouse-trap and had to remain in the airplane and trust the abilities of his pilot.



Based on the local surroundings and the testimonies of eye-witnesses on the ground, the final minutes before the crash landing could be reconstructed with considerable accuracy. We will never know the reason why the plane went down near St. Wendel. It may have been damaged or out of fuel after the crew had lost orientation - but the pilot decided to force land it into unknown territory in the middle of the night. First, it circled over the town, most probably to find the best landing site. In the moon-bright night he located a long meadow in a small valley

which today is the Voelklinger Strasse, but back then was known to the locals as "Hemmersch Viehwäed" (pasturage of the Hemmer Farm).



approximate course of the plane over Urweiler, Alsfassen and St. Wendel

The pilot made a hop to the north and east toward the villages of Bliesen and Baltersweiler then turning toward Urweiler. Here it closed in to the southwest toward the selected landing strip that was now directly in front of them behind the rim of a hill called "die Heeh" (the "Height"). The two men in the rear bailed out. Sergeant J. Rawson was the first. He opened the hatch beneath his position and jumped out. His chute deployed and he landed near the former Urweiler-mill.

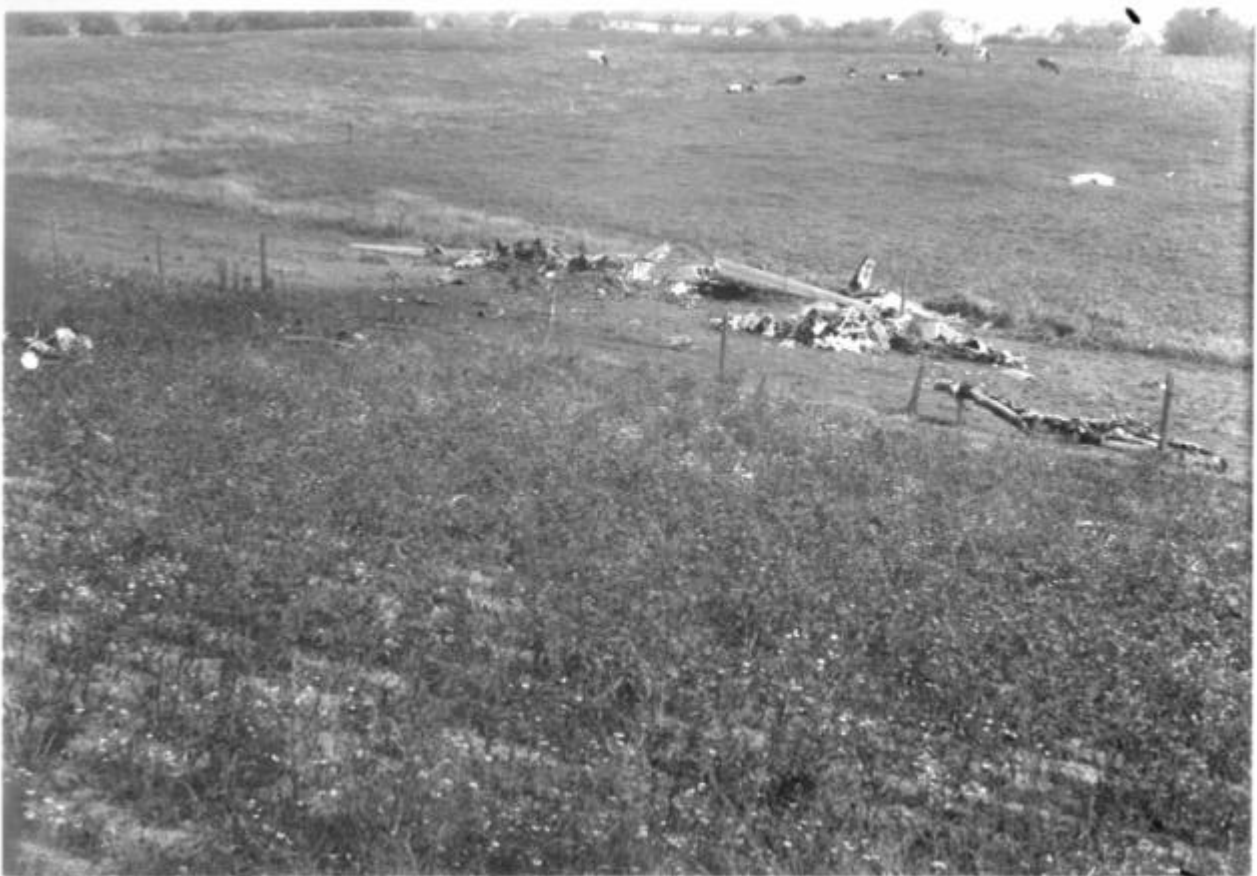
The plane passed the "Heeh" and began its final descent. Now, it was Sergeant Goldstone's turn. The radio operator jumped out into the darkness of the night, pulled his ripcord when he got clear of the plane and started drifting southward. He passed the valley of the Blies River to land near the old Alsfassen school in the backyard of the Stabler house.

Now the bomber descended fast and slid over Lanzenberg hill and the Greif house, the Alsfassener road and Johannisbach brook toward the little valley which carries the name "Auf'm Spiss". The pilot pulled the nose up and the landing gear touched the ground. But what had looked like a dry meadow proved to be swampy, soft soil. DeBrath and Cole did not have a chance. The landing gear collapsed, the nose went down into the ground, the tail came up, and the fuselage broke and scattered. The pilot was catapulted out of his cockpit and died in the grass of "Hemmersch Viehwääd" with a broken neck.

Egon Keller, who resides on Gruendchen road opposite the crash site, told about the building of the Voelklingerstrasse about 30 years ago. The valley's soil was swampy - about 25 feet deep. One of the heavy excavators had to be pulled out. Twelve feet down they found debris from the plane made of aluminum.



The approximate crash site in today's Vöklinger Straße



Wreck of the crashed Hampden at "Hemmersch Viehwaed" the day after the crash. Artur Krein from Alsfassen took this photo.

The search for the survivors

The sergeants Goldstone and Rawson were taken to the St. Wendel police station where they spent the remainder of the night. The next day they were transferred to Oberursel north of Frankfurt by train to be interrogated in the Auswertestelle West, the Luftwaffe's famous interrogation center. Via Dulag Luft (transit camp of the Luftwaffe) which at that time was still near Frankfurt (later transferred to Wetzlar) they were carried to permanent camp where they spent the remainder of the war as German prisoners. Here they were promoted to Warrant Officers. It was standard procedure in the war to promote a prisoner of war to the highest possible rank in order to let the prisoner's family benefit from the highest possible pension.

Rawson and Goldstone were transferred to different camps:

Goldstone became POW # 9529 in Stalag Luft 3 near Sagan, southeast of Dresden. In January 1944, he was transferred to a small camp near Luft 3 called "Belaria" - together with 200 other prisoners who had "distinguished themselves" by special behavior (that is, attempts to escape). He remained there for the rest of the war.

Rawson became POW # 9535 in the Stalag VIII B near Lamsdorf, which is today's Lambinowice in Poland, one of Germany's largest prisoner-of-war camps with an capacity of up to 300,000 prisoners of war. Unlike the "Stalag Luft"-POW camps, Lamsdorf was controlled by the Army, not the Air Force.

In 1946, both men returned to England. Around 1950 Rawson emigrated to Nigeria in Africa.

Today there is a military unit in England which forward letters to the last known address of Veterans, Royal Air Force, Personnel Management Centre, Headquarters Personnel and Training Command, Royal Air Force Innsworth, Gloucester, GL3 1EZ, England. They are not allowed to tell you that address - that's forbidden by law. Via this unit I sent a couple of letters to Rawson and Goldstone. None came back which indicates that they arrived somewhere. But no one has answered yet.

Jean P. Myrans, RAF Personnel Management Centre, wrote in a letter: :

*"Re: Mr A A Goldstone 1051488, Mr J Rawson 971985....
I have redirected these letters for you to the last known addresses on our records for these airmen. Unfortunately both addresses were from 1946 and one of them was in Nigeria, so you will be extremely fortunate if you hear from either of them. However I wish you well and hope that this action proves to be of assistance."*

Alan King from England who was very helpful during my research told me in one his letters:

"Alan Abraham Goldstone/Golston/Goldston is the most likely airman to be found. His name "Abraham" and his surname which is very like "Goldstein" indicate that he may be Jewish, and if he is, he may not want to help you. I have searched for a record of his death (between 1990 and 1994) in the registers (lists) in London but could not find it. That means that he is still alive or that he died outside England and Wales, ohre he diese before 1990 or after 1994. I will search again on my next visit, and will write again if I find that he has died."

Unfortunately all research was unsuccessful.

Epilogue

When I wrote this article at the beginning of August 2001, I noticed that the 60th anniversary of the day of death for the pilot and his observer would occur in about a month. In remembrance, I bought a service for both of them and their names were called during services in our local Sankt Annenkirche on Sunday, September 2, 2001.

Credits

While doing a research project like this I call upon friends who help me with data not available to me. I also would like to thank the eyewitnesses who provided me with their accounts. Many thanks to:

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Maria Scherer, Alsfassen
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and last but not least my good friend Heather Tyreman who edited the text and corrected my almost German-English. All that is left has "grown on my own manure" (as we say in German).