

VE Day 2020 Reflections; David Briggs.

Introduction:

A close inspection of the War Memorial at Styal, Wilmslow, Cheshire, reveals that there are only two names recorded as lost from the village between 1939 and 1945. Both share the same surname – Halliday. These were cousins Philip James Halliday and John Lawrie Halliday both of the RAF Volunteer Reserve.

Both lived at Holmlands, Styal, with Philip's accountant father, Donald Dunn Halliday, mother Elizabeth and their two daughters Joan and Barbara - John having joined the family in his late teens in the late 1930's after the death of both his parents.

Philip James Halliday:

Philip was born in 1920 – and spent his childhood in Wilmslow and attending Boothams School in York. By 1939 he was at Cambridge University – but chose to interrupt his studies to volunteer for the RAF. After training in Lancashire until late 1941, Philip was posted to 612 Squadron, Coastal Command operating from Wick in Northern Scotland.

612 Squadron at the time was equipped with Armstrong Whitley twin engine bombers newly equipped with air to sea radar to spot and identify U-boats threatening Atlantic convoys. By 1941, the Whitley was already dated and was largely withdrawn from any bombing duties – being underpowered, slow and with a tendency for wing icing and engine failure. It was therefore largely used for transport duties and – Coastal Command.



Armstrong Whitley "D" Delta – Wick 1941. Note radar antennae on top.

In December 1941, 612 Squadron was scheduled to relocate to Reykjavik, Iceland – following that country's "friendly annexation" by British forces – a strategy partly driven by the need to improve Atlantic convoy protection by increasing the range of air cover for the ships.

As part of the transfer operation - on Christmas Day 1941 - two aircraft, "A" – Archie and "O" – Oscar were slated to fly to Iceland.

Unlike most other Whitley's in the Squadron – "A" Archie was not fitted with radar – but seems to have been operated as the Squadron "Bus" – to transport equipment and personnel – rather than undertake anti-submarine operations. For this reason there were more people on board "A" for Archie than was usual for crew alone.

The Official Record:

As written from the Reykjavik base, the Squadron Operations Book for Christmas Day 1941 reads:

Weather fair at first becoming cloudy towards dawn and continuous snow setting in at mid-day. Wind north easterly veering east, light, becoming moderate gusty. Visibility good becoming very poor in snow and cloud on surface. Temperature 18 degrees F. during night and below freezing all day.

There was no operational flying by the detachment today. (ie no anti- submarine patrols)

Two aircraft "A" and "O", P/o (Pilot Officer) Catchpole and Sgt Ralph set out from Wick in the morning in an attempt to get to Reykjavik but due to bad weather here suddenly arising at noon, were both told to return to Wick. "O" safely returned but "A" who had been out of W/T contact since leaving Wick, failed to return. F/O (Flying Officer) Fiddes, Medical Officer, F/O Scholefield, Intelligence Officer and F/Lt. Spikins, Torpedo Officer were passengers. Second Pilot was P/O Halliday who had only recently joined the Squadron. It was P/O Catchpoles first trip as an officer, and the loss of the aircraft and those aboard was keenly felt by the Squadron.

Philip's family in Styal received the "missing" telegram – on Boxing Day.



Philip J Halliday

John Lawrie Halliday:

John, Philip's older cousin, was also raised in Wilmslow on Styal Road at the top of The Cliff in a house designed by his father. He attended Manchester University studying architecture, following in his father's footsteps.



Joining the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1940 John trained as a navigator, and as a Flying Officer joined 226 Squadron.

226 Squadron:

From the Spring of 1941 the Squadron was engaged in many bombing missions flying Bristol Blenheims and Douglas Bostons up to and including D-Day - mainly involved in attacks on German occupied ports and shipping from bases in Swanton Morley, Norfolk and Hartfordbridge, Hampshire.

By 1944 226 Squadron were part equipped with American made B25 Mitchell two engine strike bombers and a few months after D-Day, in October 1944, the Squadron relocated operations to Vitry-en-Artois in the very north of France and was engaged in supporting ground attacks on German forces retreating across Holland.



Mitchell of No 226 Squadron flying from Vitry-en-Artois between October 1944 and April 1945

The Official Record:

A month after locating to France, the Squadron Operations record Book for 18th and 19th November 1944 reads:

18th: This morning twelve crews were briefed to bomb marshalling yards at VIERSEN in GERMANY but GENERAL DEMPSEY requested the MITCHELLS bomb VENLO bridge again. The BOSTONS remained on the original target. Briefing times were 12 noon and 12.15 and the twelve aircraft led by S/L CAMPBELL took off at 13-00 hours. VENLO Bridge is now being used by Jerry to withdraw his troops and occupies the highest priority by the army for bombing. The operation was unsuccessful as a cloud bank obscured the bridge and the bombs were brought back. Moderate heavy flak was encountered but not very accurate, only one or two aircraft receiving minute holes.

19th:... S/LDR CAMPBELL, DFC led the six aircraft to attack VENLO Bridge. On the target after bombing sever flak was encountered and S/LDR CAMPBELL's kite received a direct hit in the port wing. The wing sheered off completely and the plane was last seen going down in an uncontrolled dive. The bombs undershot the bridge.



Aerial recon photo of Venlo bridge taken on the day of the attack. Note bomb craters to West of the bridge. The bridge was not destroyed until 25th November.

The Crew:

A further Squadron report gives the crew details for John's plane, Mitchell FW196 "P" Peter:

RAF Sqn Ldr Campbell, G DFC Captain (Pilot)	RAF FO Hodson, (Wireless Air Gunner)
RAF FO Farquhar D G, DFC (Navigator)	RAAF 421929 PO Osmond, W E (Wireless Air Gunner)
RAF FO Halliday J L (Navigator)	RAF WO J F Cote, (Air Gunner)

Remarkably Warrant Officer JF Cote survived! The Squadron records identify that after his aircraft took a direct hit which killed his three comrades and cut the fuselage in two. The after portion, with turret and Coté, plunged several thousand feet before it ceased spinning and settled into a prolonged flutter, rather like a leaf. The tail landed in an orchard and he staggered out, wounded with a broken leg, but alive. He ended up a prisoner of war.

The usual crew contingent for a B25 Mitchell was five – but on this occasion there were six on board and two navigators – one of whom was John.

"P" Peter was the leader of the formation of six, under command of S/L Campbell who frequently performed this duty in late 1944. It was common practice at this time to have one navigator responsible for the individual aeroplane, and another with responsibility for guiding the whole Squadron. So John was presumably conducting one of these two roles for this particular raid.

So, whilst Styal only recorded two losses in 1939 -45 they were suffered by the same family. My mother Barbara, Philip's sister, also related that the loss of his son broke the heart of his father Donald, who died only two years later.

Commemoration:

In addition to being recorded on the Styal War Memorial, Philip James Halliday is commemorated on the RAF Runnymede Memorial, Surrey.

John Lawrie Halliday is buried at JONKERBOS WAR CEMETERY, Gelderland, Netherlands and is also commemorated on the University of Manchester War Memorial plaque in the Quad on Oxford Road, Manchester.

References:

1. Whitley Photograph: IWM HU 26481
2. 612 Sqn records: AIR 27/2113 Public Record Office
3. 226 Sqn records: AIR 27/1407 Public Record Office
4. Sqn 226 Operations Pictures <http://aircrewremembered.com/smith-thomas-vivian.html>
5. Gazette entry for DFC awarded to S/Ldr Gilbert Campbell:
<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/36761/supplement/4866/data.pdf>