

Bruce Elrick FINDLAY

I have prepared this information as a result of speculation about the location and circumstance of Bruce death in action with the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Bruce's service in the RCAF, his training and operational posting information is held by the Library and Archives of Canada. As it runs to 68 pages, I will not attempt to repeat it here, however it makes fascinating reading. To locate this file search www.bac-lac.gc.ca enter the search:database and just enter FINDLAY Bruce and when the file opens click on the item number to the left of his details and you have access to his entire RCAF file.

This file includes a couple of excellent photos of Bruce and notes the fact that he tried to volunteer at the age of 17 and a half, he undertook a medical and passed all of the enlistment criteria but was deferred due to his youth. He maintained his wish to serve Canada and the Commonwealth and was accepted the day after his 18th birthday which was the 24th of June 1942. Enlisting as an Air Gunner (AG), he completed his training in Canada and he received his AG Brevet on the 19/3/1943. He then sailed to the UK where he received further training at a Heavy Conversion unit to operate in 4 engine bombers and then an Operational Training Unit to prepare for active service.

Bruce was posted to 427 'Lion' Squadron RCAF based at RAF Leeming in Yorkshire, arriving on the 21/8/1943, his squadron commander was Wing Commander RS Turnbull DFC AFC DFM. This squadron was part of 6 Group RCAF. The aircraft flown during Bruce's period of service were Handley Page Halifax B marks 3 and 5, the aircraft he lost his life in was a Mk 5 carrying the designation ZL-S with an identification number of EB246. This aircraft in keeping with others in the squadron had been named, and inscribed on its nose was 'Sierra Sue'. This particular aircraft appears to have had an unusually long service life considering bomber command losses at this time, the previous ZL-S was lost on a raid to Bochum on the 12th of June 1943. A photograph held by the Imperial War Museum depicts Bruce's aircraft taking off from Leeming for a raid on Hamburg on the 27th of July 1943, 4 weeks before Bruce joined the squadron.

While we know Bruce lost his life in this aircraft, he most probably flew various other aircraft in the squadron during his 5 months with 427, this would have been dependent on aircraft serviceability. The Halifax was a 4-engine heavy bomber and the models used by 427 Squadron had Rolls Royce Merlin engines. These were not a success on this aircraft as the original design was for Bristol

radial engines to be used. Due to engine shortages the air ministry instructed Merlins to be used, later aircraft used Bristol Hercules engines and were a great improvement. The major problem with the Rolls Royce engines was that they were underpowered and the exhausts glowed distinctively for any Luftwaffe night fighters in the dark.

The crew which Bruce died with were: -

P.O Norman COOK RCAF (Pilot)

P.O Robert THOMPSON RAF (VR) (Bomb Aimer)

P.O John COFLIN RCAF (Navigator)

Sgt James CHILD RAF (VR) (Flight Engineer)

F/Sgt Charles COOK RAF (VR) (Wireless Operator A/G)

Sgt Berle Clinton PRILL RCAF (Mid upper gunner)

F/Sgt Bruce FINDLAY RCAF (Rear Gunner, colloquially known as the Tail end Charlie)

Without engaging in lengthy technical information about the Halifax that Bruce operated in, it is of interest to know that as tail end Charlie his 'Office' was a Boulton and Paul type 'E' electrically powered gun turret armed with 4 Browning .303 machine guns and situated in the aircrafts tail. This was very tight for room and it was normally the smallest gunner who got this position, there was no room for a parachute to be worn in the turret consequently it had to be left in the fuselage behind the turret. Escaping from the turret and donning the parachute to bail out was a feat rarely achieved!

Bruce's colleague Berle PRILL was the mid upper gunner and operated a Boulton and Paul type 'A' electrically powered turret also equipped with 4 Browning '303's. Of note is that regardless of the 2 young men's achievements in their initial training, shortly before they died, 427 squadron undertook an assessment course for all of the squadrons gunners, (This would normally have been under the direction of the squadron gunnery leader) Berle was 1st on the course and Bruce 2nd, clearly the two of them were extremely competent in their roles.

Unfortunately, without having access to Bruce's aircrew log book I cannot identify how many previous operations he was engaged in. It would be fair to assume that with 5 months operationally with 427 squadron he had completed a fair number of "Ops". Information may be available from 427 Squadron who

reformed post war at CFB Petawawa, Ontario. It is likely they will have the WW2 history.

With regard to crew log books these were issued to all aircrew to record all flights both training and operational. Unfortunately post war there were so many in storage that the decision was made to retain a representative number and destroy the rest. Had the logbook had been amongst the deceased's personal belongings it would have been passed to the next of kin. There is nothing in Bruce's property list (this can be found in his personal file) to indicate it was passed to his wife.

It may seem surprising to know that at the age of 19 Bruce had married a young lady named Margaret, who would appear to have been a Scot, given that her family address was 38 Girdleness Road, Torry, Aberdeen, Scotland. Some error arose in recording his wife's address as it appears entered in records as Girdiness Road.

How Bruce met his wife and the circumstances of his marriage are not known, it is likely that he met her in England while serving here, she may have been a member of the WRAAF, or employed away from home on war work. It would seem that following his death Margaret remarried and her name changed to Margaret M CARON. She subsequently emigrated to Canada to live at 2116 Third Avenue in Calgary.

The operation that Bruce lost his life on took place on Thursday the 20th of January 1944, the target was Berlin and the RAF dispatched 769 aircraft. Records show that 35 aircraft were lost (4.6%) this was considered an acceptable loss rate at this stage of the war. The 472 Squadron aircraft apparently took off in the late afternoon/early evening, and on arrival (possibly at about 8pm) over Berlin the target was completely cloud covered. Pathfinders thus used a sky marking system to mark the target using red flares and green stars, this system was code named as 'Wanganui' and the target position was determined using H2S a ground scanning radar. A google search on WWW.427squadron.com supplies very useful anecdotal information on all of 427 squadron operations and is worth examining.

RAF records could not determine if any damage was caused to the target, the Eastern area of Berlin, but note Luftwaffe night fighters were very active. The records available from the RAF give little help on the loss of Sierra Sue, however Luftwaffe records which tended to be very accurate now give some insight into the raid from a German point of view.

The Luftwaffe records (OKL/RLM) are crucial to understanding the situation over Berlin that night, they record the raid occurred between 1910 and 2000 hours on the evening of the 20th of January. Causing damage to the East of the city in the areas of Neubrandenburg and Eberswalde. As these names are of German towns many miles from Berlin it would be reasonable to assume they are referring to streets of those names within the city area geographically. Also damage was caused to areas to the South of Berlin. With the last RAF bomber leaving German airspace at 2243.

Because of the extreme weather conditions the Luftwaffe only utilised their most experienced crews from 1 Fighter Corp, flying JU88, ME109 and ME110 night fighters. It should be noted that German aircraft were very heavily armed with cannon invariably 20mm, with some of the twin engine aircraft having 30mm. 98-night fighters were deployed using the Y Gerat radio beam system to locate the RAF bombers. The Luftwaffe note they brought down 33 bombers over occupied territory and lost 7 fighters including 1 to friendly anti-aircraft fire, with 5 aircrew dead and 6 wounded. The two additional aircraft lost by the RAF probably crashed as result of damage caused during the attack by either flak or fighters, into the sea on the return flight?

Further research has now revealed that 'Siera Sue' was in a stream of bombers approaching initially from the West but then turning South to South East into the city. From what occurred a few minutes later it is fair to assume that Bruce's plane satisfactorily bombed on the sky markers, then followed the designated departure route South of Berlin for some miles before turning South West. With the intention of then turning East to East North East on the home track.

We now know that as the bomber stream departed South of the city, they were tracked by radar and night fighters alike. Five Junkers 88, night fighters tracking the bombers dropped red sky marking flares for other fighters to be drawn on.

Before the crew had the opportunity to make the final homeward track they were intercepted by Hauptman Leopold (Poldi) FELLERER of Stab 2 NJG 5 and his crew, Fw (NCO) HATSCHER (radio and radar operator) and Uffz (Junior NCO) SCHOPF (air gunner). They were flying a Messerschmidt BF110 G-4 Wrk.No740039 C9+AC (they were pictured with this aircraft shortly before the 20th January raid).

This night fighter was equipped with radar and armed with two oblique cannon firing through the rear of the cockpit, code named as Schrage-Musik. These were magazine fed by the gunner and supplemented the forward firing cannon and machine guns. The oblique canons installed are attributed with bringing

down as many as 50% of bombers lost during the later part of the RAF night bombing campaign.

The actions of Fellerer and his crew are notable. Having joined the bomber stream at 1940hrs he shot down a Halifax LK958 of 76 squadron still carrying its bomb load. At 1950hrs he brought down Halifax LL141 of 434 squadron, at 1958hrs a third Halifax LL179 also of 434 squadron was shot down by this crew. By now the departing aircraft stream was South of Berlin when at 2005hrs Fellerer came upon 'Sierra Sue' he made short work of his attack and Bruce and his crew crashed near Trebitz, there is nothing to indicate they had any opportunity to escape the crashing Halifax. Still not finished with his nights work at 2011hrs Fellerer shot down his fifth aircraft of the night a further 76 squadron Halifax LK921 (initially mistaken as a Lancaster).

All of Fellerer's victims were confirmed by scrupulous German record keeping giving him the dubious honour of an 'Ace in a day' He was awarded the Knights Cross and German cross in gold.

The location that 'Sierra Sue' crashed is noted as Trebitz, Wittenberg, Germany, Trebitz is a very small village in Saxony region just over 80 miles from Berlin. From Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) records we know that the crew remains were recovered from the aircraft or its vicinity and buried locally in the village by the Germans. Consequently, we know now that the dates of death held by the CWGC are incorrect as the aircraft crashed shortly after 2000 hrs on the 20th of January.

At the end of the war the task of centralizing the Commonwealth war dead became the responsibility of the CWGC, as a result Bruce and his comrades were relocated to the Berlin British war cemetery. The crew plot is marked as VI row E with Bruce in grave 7. The reburial occurred on the 17th of June 1948. The records show a previous location of burial by German grid reference which is available on the CWGC graves concentration form.

The records tend to imply that originally five of the crew were buried as unknown airmen including Bruce and were at Trebitz in a common grave. Given they now have their own marked graves shows the dedication of CWGC staff in identifying the war dead, in what must have been an onerous task.

The Berlin war cemetery contains 3204 war dead, 80% of which were bomber command aircrew, they represent a small number of the 55,573 of the RAF and Commonwealth bomber crews who died in the second world war.





Sierra Sue taking off to bomb Hamburg 27th July 1943



Hptm. Fellerer, Kommandeur of II./NJG5 and his regular crew of Fw. Hätscher (Bordfunker, on left, WIA on 24-25 March 1944) and Uffz. Schopf (Bordschütze, on right) posing with Bf110 G-4 Wrk.Nr. 740039 in mid January 1944. By that time, Fellerer's personal tally stood at 22 Abschüsse, 19 of which were officially confirmed. (Coll. Chris Ehrengardt)