

THE LAST DAY OF LL 690

By Michel Lespagnol from Iwuy - June 2014

(In the limits of my knowledge in English)

We know few things about what happened during the night of June 15th to 16th 1944 when the Lancaster LL690 from 514 Squadron crashed in a place called " Les Moulins " in Iwuy, northern France .

Through the testimonies and documents gathered, we attempted to reconstruct the last day of the crew members until the fatal moment.

Let's go back , we are June 15th 1944 at Waterbeach airfield , about 7 km north-east of Cambridge and its famous university.

This base has hosted since November 23rd 1943, 514 Squadron which is part of the third group of the Bomber Command. Previously 514 was at Foulsham in Norfolk before being transferred here . The base welcomes about 30 bombers whose LL690 JI-J which is an Avro Lancaster II . That is one of the 301 units that were manufactured with a different motorized version than the other Lancasters usually equipped with four Rolls Royce Merlin engines. 7378 copies of Avro Lancasters have been produced in many versions (about 3700 were destroyed during operations and accidents).

Avro Lancaster II is powered by four air cooled engines Armstrong Whitworth Bristol Hercule. This engine was thought to prevent the shortage of Rolls Royce Merlin engines in the event of supply difficulties of the famous firm . At full power one engine developed 1,735 hp . Despite this performance Lancaster type II are worse than those of type I in particular as regards the operational ceiling and the weight of carried bombs.

THURSDAY, June 15th 9 .30 AM :

Seven crew members of LL 690 JIJ wake up in their half barrel iron Nissen shelter. It is the freshness of a spring morning day that wake them up. Last night they returned from a mission to Le Havre at 2.31 AM, it was the 25th for the Pilot Officer Ernest Arthur Kingham . He still has 6 missions to accomplish before reaching the 30th wich means for him the end of his tour of duty for a well deserved rest. His Fourth Mission has not been recognized, as due to bad weather the target could not be identified and the unit had to return to base without completing his work. The risk , however, was the same, but the rules are the rules and in time of war you should not try to understand.

Ernest Arthur Kingham , 23 years is surrounded by his comrades since 25 missions from which 22 were conducted with 690 LL JIJ . Strangely they have not decided to name the device as some usually do.

Here are our men and fonctions : Navigator, Sergeant Raymond Harold Hutt 23 years, Mid upper gunner, Sergeant Frederick Neale Ansell 34 years we can easily imagine the nickname " Grandpa " he is assigned , the radio Benjamin Bloom 23 " Benji " to intimate, he is reading a letter from his fiancée, the rear gunner Sergeant Daniel Davis George 27, a burly came from his farm far away from Canada where he left his most faithful companion Queenie , his dog cocker , Sergeant Joseph Black 21 the flight engineer and finally the bomber Franck Richard Spencer 20 years old, newly married .

They met to form a true team that works perfectly since February 21 this year 1944.

Since the night of June 6 to 7 when the crew was on a mission above Lisieux (night landing) , they performed five missions. Bomber Command leaves no respite to the enemy and it is rumored that something is up again for tonight.

THURSDAY, June 15th 10:00 : It 's time for breakfast and everyone has his comment about the yesterday mission . At this speed they will all soon be at the end of their tour of duty and everyone could return to civilian life except for those who would like to sign a new agreement as this often happens. .

THURSDAY, June 15th 10H 30: Pilot Officer Ernest Arthur Kingham leaves the Flight Commander's office, there will indeed be a new operation that night . Twenty crews from 514 Squadron are associated with this mission.

THURSDAY, June 15th 11H 00: The crew checks the status of the aircraft for the future mission and makes a run (test flight) to check the working condition of the plane. It is then verified by ground crews who load the bombs for the mission.

THURSDAY, June 15th 13H 00: The crew goes to the mess for lunch .

THURSDAY, June 15th 14H 00: The crew returns to take a little rest before going to the various briefings.

THURSDAY, June 15th 16H 30 : It's tea time

THURSDAY, June 15th 17H 00 : Sergeant Raymond Harold Hutt went with the bomber Frank Spencer for the briefing navigation . The navigator is the intellectual of the group , Frank , the bomber replace him above the target. A big Europe map is displayed at the bottom of the room, the objective is pointed , it will be Valenciennes Station where a strategic rail center is used by the German logistics. The road is symbolized by a piece of red wool to go and blue for the return. The flight plan displayed must be scrupulously respected, the margin of error is half- minute. Raymond Harold prepares his card, his "log" (track log) and "gen" a document typed on a special paper that the navigator will eat in case it may fall into the enemy's hands .

THURSDAY June 15th 17H 30 : In their respective room , Joseph Black , Frank Spencer, Frederick Neale Ansell , Daniel Davis and George Benjamin " Benji " Bloom meet with their 19 other counterpart's crews from Waterbeach . Each one level is informed at his level about the loading of bombs, the amount of fuel and oil carried , the radio information (frequencies) and the amount of ammunition that will be available on board. At the same time , Ernest Arthur Kingham who is the flight commander is informed about everything that has been told his crew. The aircraft has an extra fuel reserve of one hour based on the duration of the mission.

THURSDAY, June 15th 18H 15: Everyone returns to his quarters to make a quick wash before going to dinner .

THURSDAY June 15th, 20H 00: This is the pre-flight meal made of eggs , bacon, chips and bread and butter according to the tastes of each crew member.

Thursday, June 15th 20H 35: This is the main briefing, the general meeting with the 140 Waterbeach crew members who will participate to the operation. The same map as the one presented an hour earlier to the navigators throne on the back wall of the room. In addition to the specified route and purpose , also shown in red zones DCA areas projectors and in blue, no-fly zones. The " Jettison " aerea where the crew drop the bombs before returning to based in case the mission would be postponed. It was recommended to land empty to avoid accidents.

The room fills in, each crew has its table on which there are 2 bags of different colors per person . In the red bag each one empties his pockets and puts inside the belongings they wish to see destroyed if he doesn't come back . In the white bag are stored effects that are given back to the family in case of no return.

We recommend everyone to take the bare minimum personal effects : the identity of the RAF map , some money and especially no clue who could help the enemy. Our friends bring with them some pictures of their family, mother, wife, fiancée Harold Raymond carries a picture that represents him in his military uniform , his mother has one double, one way for him to be with her in bad times. At the end of the briefing each member receives a " Escape Box ", a transparent plastic one that will help everyone to survive 5 days in case of a crash in an occupied country : tablets food, razors, lime, material to catch fishes, a map, compass etc. an envelope with French and Belgian money is also given to each one (distributed currencies correspond to countries that crew members were supposed to find on their way in case of forced landing or escape with the parachute device .)

Each one takes his belonging and then there is silence and the weather officer speaks. He indicates the conditions that will be encountered during the mission. The intelligence officer (intelligence service) speaks : Tonight we attack the Valenciennes railway yard in northern France . The light turns off and a projector diffuses on a screen reconnaissance photos of the target taken yesterday. The officer indicated that a similar action will be performed at the same time on the railway yard of Lens by another "stream " (Wave) consisting of 121 bombers, the " stream " of Valenciennes will consist of 123 aircrafts .

Other Bombers will come from 105 and 109 Squadron part of Group VIII (5 Mosquitos) and 7 Squadron from Group VIII (9 Lancasters I and III of the Pathfinder Force) . Mosquitos will drop the red and green indicators to mark the target, the other 9 Lancasters will be tasked with flares to illuminate the target and continue to mark it with yellow and white "spot fires " . The 75,115 and 90 Squadrons, which are part of group III as the 514 (so far I have not been able to identify (s) other (s) Squadron (s) that were part of the " stream ") are involved to drop bombs (99 Lancasters of type I , II and III).

The other Squadrons are located in other bases spread throughout England.

Master bomber fly over the target area and give orders coded, he may modify the parameters set or cancel the mission in case of difficulty .

In their night mission heavy bombers do not enjoy the protection of fighter jets as is the case for the American day bombers (B17 , B 24 etc.) . Their safety is ensured in part by the various attacks on multiple targets often close (this is the case here with the combined attack over Lens) , which

defeated the German fighters . The " stream " (the wave of 123 bombers) will be formed above a place specified by the officer of the intelligence service, this time it will be " Bradwell Bay " The stream strengthens the cohesion of the group and makes complicated the attack of the enemy fighter who fears collision in the middle of so many aircrafts. Finally routes and altitudes change frequently to deceive the enemy defense. Against the detection of the radars "windows" , small metal strips are dropped by the radio operators to scramble waves of enemy radar screens , " Mandrel " are also used , it is a wall behind which radar hides the "stream ." Each unit also has a system of individual interference called " Tinsel ." The last bastion of defense are the guns of small caliber , 0,303 inches , installed in Lancasters. This is a weak protection and requires from the gun operators very high precision in their shots. To cause a vital damage to an enemy fighter, the munition must be fired at least 300 m from the target , beyond this distance, the impact has no effect on the enemy airplane

Finally the commander of Squadron Wing Commander Michael Wyatt DFC speaks to the group and using a long ruler indicates the route to follow and heights to respect . It ends like those who preceded with the traditional "no questions?" . As nobody talks, he asks everyone to set his watch by his so that everyone has the same measurement time.

THURSDAY, June 15th 21H 25: The main briefing is completed, each one takes his flight kit and goes to dress. Gunners are equipped with heated suits so they can withstand the extreme temperatures to which they will be subjected.

A medical officer distributes to each crew member " Wakey Wakey pills " to help them stay awake as long as possible (amphetamines) .

THURSDAY, June 15th 21H 45 : A car takes the crew to LL 690.

THURSDAY, June 15th, 22H 00:

The crew takes place :

Daniel George Davis rushes into the narrow rear gunner position , his parachute outside the tiny space. Frederick Neale Ansell climbs on his canvas seat hanging to access turret , Raymond Harold Hutt moves to his navigator's table with its instruments and maps, Benjamin Bloom lights his instruments and performs radios tests . Frank Spencer takes place in the front of the canopy. Ernest Arthur Kingham settled in the cockpit and began the long checklist helped by Joseph Black the flight engineer who monitors many counters located in front and behind him.

THURSDAY, June 15th 22H 30 :

The first engine backfires to the start and suggests his regular noise, it was soon followed one by one by the other three engines. The oil pressure is good, the temperature begins to rise soon the powerful four engined bomber receive an order to reach the runway. Tonight 690 LL wears number 19 and will be the penultimate unit to take off.

THURSDAY, JUNE 15th 23H 14

The first bomber took off at 22h 56, due to a device every minute our crew flew at 23 h 14. Devices that have gone before him perform circles around the airfield, waiting for the last bomber to take off. The stream is leaving the airfield all fires open towards the continent. From this moment all

radio exchange between aircraft is prohibited.

FRIDAY, June 15th 0 H00 :

The 123 stream's bombers to Valenciennes gather in one wave over the North Sea at " Bradwell Bay ." Everyone turns off the lights , there are no more landmarks and the risk of collision between devices is important , each Pilot Officer assisted by all crew members must be careful not to deviate from its path. The role of the navigator is essential.

FRIDAY, June 15th 0H 05:

The coast is in sight, the first enemy spotlight are scanning the sky .

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 25:

Valenciennes is on view

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 25 GERMAN AIR BASE ATHIES Laon :

90 km as the crow flies is NJG5 on alert, the German defense spotted an unusual air activity in the region of Valenciennes and Lens. Oberleutnant Peter Ehrardt, a German night fighter fighter ace settles flying his Messerschmidt 110 equipped with radars and a terrible weapon called Schrage Music (also called Jazz Music) . This gun fires multiple oblique 20 mm shells below the four-engine bombers . In August 1943 Oberleutnant Ehrardt is made famous by shooting down four bombers over Peneemunde, Belgium in about half an hour.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 30 :

The stream approaches the target , the weather is clear but the clouds at 8000 feet above Valenciennes railway yard. The master bomber (head of mission) located in one of the Pathfinders that will mark the target gives the order to bomb below the clouds , a chance, there is no spotlight on the target and there is no flak (antiaircraft protection floor) tonight. Pathfinders (scouts) cast off their " red target indicators" (target indicators), the master bomber realize that they are not well positioned , he gives the order to make a new mark.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 32: This time the target appears correctly marked and is confirmed by the green "targets indicators" . Bombardment can start but confusion reigns in the " stream " , these 3-minutes delay disrupt the progress of the operation .

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 33: This is the beginning of the bombing , Frank Spencer the bomber lies in the glass nose of the Lancaster . About 10 minutes ago, he relayed the navigator, he is now giving directions to the skipper to the road ahead over the target.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 34 GERMAN AIR BASE ATHIES Laon :

The Peter Ehardt's Messerschmidt 110 takes off, at a speed of 560 km per hour, the night fighter will be over Valenciennes in 10-11 minutes.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 45 :

LL 690 is part of the latest wave of release (assumption because we have no element on the subject) Frank Spencer via the intercom (internal radio communication system) gives final instructions above the target now illuminated by flares , green indicators do not burn anymore they are replaced by yellow and white spots. Ernest Arthur Kingham is listening intently to his teammate : " Left left right it is very careful bombs dropped " the target is reached, the aircraft suddenly gains height , it just comes to free the weight of 4500 kg bombs he was carrying that night.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 47

On board is the relief for the 22nd time the crew of LL 690 who has completed his mission. In two hours they will be at home, the road back is drawn , heading south-west, then at Cambrai full East Cape and a full North East cape over Arras not change to be change back to the base .

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 48

Frederick Neale Ansell just locate at the same time than Daniel Davis a glow in the sky, a stream of devices has been touched by a hunter whose shadow recedes into the distance.

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 48

The Oberleutnant Peter Ehrhardt sees several four engines on their way back, difficult to identify the model of the device : Halifax? Lancaster?.....

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 49

The anxiety is palpable for the gunners , Frederick and Daniel, recommend to Ernest of taking a little altitude , they are at 7000 feet (2100 meters) and below the clouds. Passing above the clouds, light would probably be better and the trained eye of these exceptional shooters would better see a potential enemy fighter . Suddenly , the shock has a mournful sound resonate in the cabin, the aircraft was hit . A left engine is on fire and Franck's canopy just exploded .

FRIDAY, June 15th 00H 50 :

The is panic in the intercom, Ernest tells everyone to remain calm and asks his navigator Raymond Harold for thier position without any answer . Then the plane starts to sting forward, Joseph says he can not extinguish the fire engine . Ernest asked everyone to bale out but he gets no response . Franck, who is injured to the face managed to return to the cockpit , he indicates that the escape hatch is blocked and that they must attempt to open the bomb bay to escape. Daniel can not get out of his gunner position , the turret had to be damaged by a shell. Frédérick's head struck the dome of his viewpoint and is unconscious. Benjamin lies lifeless

FRIDAY, June 15 00H 51:

The Lancaster is a fire ball , the temperature rises inside, the aircraft is low, very low, all crew members remained inside, the evacuation wasn't possible (no parachute was found on their bodies) . With some help from his mechanic Joseph Black, Ernest Arthur Kingham perceive below them the shade of a village that must be avoided at all costs to save the lives of civilians . This is their last reflex : to save people of this village that they will never know the name .

FRIDAY, June 15 0:51 A EARTH IWUY :

Miss Pierrette Dupuis hears the noise of a plane in difficulty , she sleeps in a garret near the Iwuy sugar works. She gets up and saw through her window's roof a fireball at very low altitude. A little further Ernest M Capliez who later wrote a book about the Iwuy story, and recently returned from captivity , lives on the May 1st street . He sees a burning aircraft whose engines have failed and he realizes that the driver tries to do everything possible to avoid homes to crash into a desert place .

FRIDAY, June 22 00H : It's over , M Capliez hears an explosion so that an intense light illuminates the place called " Les Moulins " virgin of all construction at the time. M Paul Sautier lives in the 4 septembre's street, he sees the same thing as M Capliez except that he assists to the fall of the plane which falls on the belly and explode in the mean time. seven hundred meters away my mother Bernadette Houriez her brother Gaston and my grand parents heard the sound of the plane in difficulty and the explosion. They live in the house of the gatekeeper , they stand behind the house and saw a fire that illuminates the whole plain .

Made on the basis of official documents available to Bomber Command " National Archives at Kew in London " reconstitution based about the excellent book by Dr. Jean Pierre Ducellier "The Air War in Northern France " published F Paillart in Abbeville .

Were also consulted : The journal « Icare » with the number about " Heavy French groups ", the book published by Harry Dison 514 Squadron " Some of the story of 514 Squadron , the book " Tombés du ciel "under the direction of Yves Le Maner in which Jocelyn Leclercq from Antique Association of Air Artois wrote a full article on the subject. Personally also met M Pierre Ben from the Association « Somme Aviation ». With the testimonies of M Capliez (deceased) of Miss Pierrette Dupuis (Widow Leclercq) and Mr Alfred Trioux, of Mr Paul Sautier and those of my mother Bernadette Houriez (Widow Félix Lespagnol deceased) and of my uncle M Gaston Houriez.