

The story of
Lancaster bomber W 4960



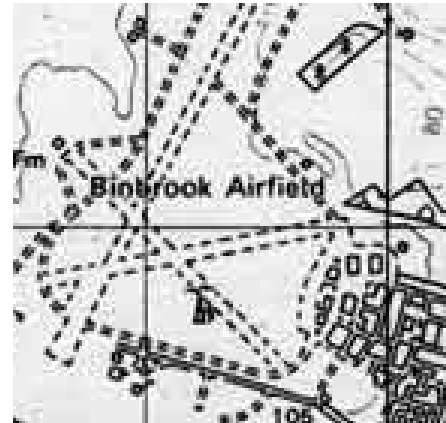
G.A.F. Maatje

Air raid on Düsseldorf, Germany, June 11 -12 , 1943

June 11th, 1943, a number of aircrafts took off from the English airfield of Binbrook in Lincolnshire. Among these was the bomber Lancaster W 4960, belonging to the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force).

The crew was comprising:

R.S. Christie captain/pilot
J. Heath navigator
J.H. Horwood bomb aimer
R.L. Lewis radio operator
P.J. Hogan on board gunner
B.W. Bennet on board gunner
R.S. Kerwin on board gunner



As it was the tenth sortie against German targets for this crew, they were experienced men in these nightly raids.

The aircraft was part of a large Armada of 783 aircrafts, 326 Lancasters, 202 Halifaxes, 143 Wellingtons, 99 Stirlings and 13 Mosquito's, taken off from various airfields.



The purpose of the raid was a heavy bombardment of the German city of Düsseldorf. The targets were to be marked using a so-called 'Pathfinder marking plan'. Unfortunately one of the Mosquito's dropped its 'target indicators' fourteen miles north east of the actual target. As a result a large number of planes dropped their bombs in open fields. Despite this, the majority of the planes dropped their bombs on the city itself, which was largely destroyed.

The attacking planes suffered several losses. 38 planes were lost: 14 Lancasters, 12 Halifaxes, 10 Wellingtons and 2 Stirlings (4.9% of the total amount of planes were to be deplored). On its return journey Lancaster W 4960 was attacked by a German night fighter. The plane was hit and crashed in the Reeuwijk area, the Netherlands.

June 12, 1943, Gravekoop polder

In the early hours of June 12, 1943, at approximately 1.50 a.m. S. Slappendel of the Reeuwijk Air Watch Service reported a large number of aircraft flying east to west across the district.

At 2.00 a.m. F. Smit reported "an aircraft is coming down and catching fire in the direction of Grauwkoop".



The inhabitants of the Gravekoopsedijk and surrounding area were roused from their sleep by a low flying aircraft in difficulty. The aircraft tried to make an emergency landing after losing an engine (which hit the ground behind the farm of Piet van den Heuvel). The aircraft, which exploded in mid air, fell in pieces on the land of Piet Rijlaarsdam and Adriaan van Dam, a hundred metres from the Kerfwetering in the direction of Lecksdijk and about halfway between the Gravekoopsedijk and the drive to the farm, nowadays known as

Hoeve aan de Kerfwetering. The event created a large disturbance to the usually quiet, slightly remote neighbourhood. The flames from the burning aircraft could be seen many miles around. Up to the present it is not cleared who did inform the German *Kommandantur* in Gouda (by phone?), as German soldiers arrived quickly on the scene.

At dawn the extent of the accident became clear. In the yard of farmer Van Spengen (Gravekoopsedijk 1) the body of gunner P.J. Hogan was found. He had tried to parachute to safety but failed due to the low height of the plane. The Bodegraven branch of the Red Cross recovered the bodies, as Reeuwijk did not have such a branch. Initially six bodies were recovered, later on the seventh body was found in the wreck. The crew's possessions were taken by a Katwijk-based company of the German *Wehrmacht*. This company had searched the wreckage, too. The *Zerlegebetrieb* (literally: firm, cutting dead animals to meat!) at Utrecht ordered the wreckage to be recovered on two barges, owned by the Sluipwijk skippers T. and P. van Vliet. They charged the *Wehrmacht* for f107,92 for labour and lock chamber fees. Afterwards the wreckage was taken by train to Germany to be recycled in the war industry, as aluminium was very scarce in Germany.

The expense-accounts

The Reeuwijk municipality had incurred expenses in removing and burying the airmen, which it very much liked to be reimbursed for. July 13, 1943, the mayor of Reeuwijk charged the *Reich* on account of costs, advanced by Reeuwijk for burying the airmen. The charges were the supply of three coffins at a total cost of f 123,52 and the purchase of four coffins delivered by the Firm de Jong from Bodegraven for the amount of f 154,00. f 58,50 was charged for digging the graves.

A separate bill dated July 30, 1943, from the Dutch Red Cross in Bodegraven requested "f 7,50 for purchasing 25 litres of petrol utilising our licence". The Reeuwijk records report on this subject as the "...purchase of 25 litres of petrol for transporting the bodies of 7 English airmen from the site of the crash to the cemetery in Sluipwijk." It seems a bit much, 25 litres for a trip from Bodegraven to Gravekoop and home again via Sluipwijk. Obviously not a very economic car! Reeuwijk transferred the amount, including 6 cents for the clearing form and postage!

On the church-yard in Sluipwijk

Only three victims could be identified: P.J. Hogan, J. Heath and R.S. Christie, all from Australia. They were buried as 'unknown airman' at the church-yard in Sluipwijk (part of the Reeuwijk municipality), together with the indentified men. A wooden cross was placed on each of the graves, three of which were named. September 16, 1945, deputy-mayor A. Olieman asked the Dutch Red Cross in The Hague if it knew the names of the crew of the crashed aircraft. October 5, 1945, the Information Bureau of the Red Cross at The Hague, sent him the names he had requested for. Apart from P.J. Hogan, J. Heath and R.S. Christie, the crew consisted of the Australians J.H. Horwood and B.W. Bennett, R.L. Lewis from England and R.T. Kerwin, an Englishman from Rhodesia. The missing names were added to the crosses on the unnamed graves.



Silent processions after the war

In the evening of every May 4, silent processions in memory of those who died during World War II are held all over the Netherlands. The first procession in Reeuwijk, however, took place May 3, 1946. A detailed account of the procession was written in the *Reeuwijk Weekblad*, reading: "At the strike of 7 [p.m.] a long procession, led by the Mayor and Aldermen, several town-councillors, members of the Home Guard, local societies and many private persons left the Town Hall for the old communal cemetery at Sluipwijk. Not a word was spoken and not a flag or banner was carried. Many had already gathered at the cemetery to pay a silent tribute to those who had fallen. At the cemetery nothing was said, but a few moments of silence were observed and it was permitted to place flowers on the graves of those Australian and English airmen who had died on our soil. [...] A floral tribute was placed at the foot of the seven crosses and in front of the memorial stone, which had been put there by the inhabitants of the Straatweg under the municipality of Waddinxveen [a part of the main road Gouda-Bodegraven, nowadays known as Zoutmansweg, Reeuwijk-Brug; FvW]. The memorial stone was decorated with the Australian and English coat of arms and inscribed with the names of those who had fallen. [...] From the cemetery the procession marched to the car park at Elfhoeven [a restaurant in those days, FvW]. There a Memorial Service was held, celebrated by the local clergy, i.e. Pastor Schneider, Chaplain Nederhof, Rev. P. Warmenhoven and Rev. E.S. de Lint, assisted by five local choirs. There was a large public attendance. During the Memorial Service all flags flew at half-mast. At the start of the service the church bells were rung. All public buildings were closed, which gave a solemn and impressive character to the evening."

The event at Elfhoeven, however, was so well attended that many neither saw, nor heard anything of what was done and said. For that reason next memorial services were on a smaller scale. The *Reeuwijksch Weekblad* of May 13, 1949, reports: "At 7.30 p.m. the Mayor and Aldermen, several members of the town-council, the town clerk, the chaplain and several inhabitants gathered outside the Town Hall. The procession marched in silence to the cemetery in Sluipwijk. There several floral tributes were placed on the graves. After the ringing of the church bells, two minutes of silence were observed, after which the procession left the cemetery in silence and returned to its starting point." The apparently lower public attendance and the absence of music and speeches are remarkable.

The first memorial stone

As already told, inhabitants of the Straatweg (Mr. G.J.J. Valette and others) had taken the initiative to put a memorial stone at the Sluipwijk cemetery to commemorate the seven airmen. It was erected in 1947, bearing the date, June 12, 1943, and the inscription "Fallen for the Liberation", as well as the names of the 7 airmen. Together with the seven bodies, this stone was taken to the Jonkerbos War Cemetery, where it was temporarily placed nearby the new graves, awaiting the erection of uniform tombstones.

Mr. Valette exchanged letters with some of the deceased's relatives in Australia. Complying with a request, in 1947 he wrote the Mayor and Aldermen of Reeuwijk about his intention "to plant a nice Australian shrub or bush nearby the graves, as the families have sent me various seeds." But being none of them "suitable for our climate, according to the Hortulanus [caretaker of a botanic garden] of Leiden University", Mr. Valette suggested "to plant a nice Dutch shrub or bush" instead, and asked permission to do so. August 12, 1947, the permission was granted and Mr. W. den Ouden was instructed to plant the shrubs.

The re-interment of the airmen

The *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* requested October 16, 1945, the 'eternal right' on the seven graves at the Sluipwijk cemetery. The Mayor and Aldermen of Reeuwijk replied November 4, 1945, that the Sluipwijk cemetery belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church of Sluipwijk and that the board of this church had given these rights to the municipality, subject to certain conditions. "In order to prevent any future difficulties it seems best to us to transfer the seven graves to our public cemetery. This cemetery is the property of the municipality and it is a dignified resting place for our fallen British friends." says the letter, referring to the public cemetery at the Schinkeldijk, in the hamlet De Tempel.

The *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* thanked the Mayor for his kind offer, but advised that such a proposal would need to be approved by the central board of the commission in London. April 13, 1953, the Mayor and Aldermen of Reeuwijk were informed about the decision of the Commission: the mortal remains were to be transferred to a British War Cemetery, the Jonkerbos War Cemetery at Nijmegen. Monday April 27, 1953, a Mr. McMann was to come to Reeuwijk to make the necessary arrangements.

May 4, 1953, Mayor and Aldermen visited the Jonkerbos War Cemetery and laid a wreath on the seven graves, "to give evidence of our honour and gratitude to those who had been fallen for our freedom." as the local newspaper *Nieuwe Reeuwijkse Courant* reported, May 8, 1953.

Nowadays memorial monument

After the removal of the memorial stone of the seven airmen to Groesbeek, it was decided to erect a new local War Memorial, nearby the town hall. A committee to raise money for building the memorial was founded. Mayor jhr. mr. W.D.H. Quarles van Ufford was its chairman.

The memorial was made by the Carlier company after the design of Mr. P.J. de Klerck. It was placed at the south side of the Town Hall. On a separate stone, incorporated in the memorial, there are the names of the seven airmen, together with the names of the three Reeuwijk soldiers who died because of the acts of war of May 1940. In the local paper *Nieuws uit Reeuwijk* of May 12, 1965, Mr. De Klerck gave this description of his design:

"The monument represents in a simple way an open page from the book of the History of the Dutch People, recording the suffering of the people.

The cross represents, without detracting from its religious significance, the justification of the battle for a great and good cause and the memory of those who fell and were unable to witness the final liberation."





About the year 1985 it was necessary to find a new home for the memorial, because of the construction of a new and larger town hall at the open place south of the old town hall, and the old town hall itself being converted into an apartment house. A good site was found at the Dag Hammarskjöldplantsoen, a public garden next to the Thorbeckelaan, on the other side of the Breevaart canal, just opposite to the old town hall. At the end of april 2004 a stone, carrying the names of the Reeuwijk Jews who died in the Nazi annihilation camps, was added. After a year the victims of warfare in the former Netherlands Indies (Indonesia) came along.

The area of the public garden provide a suitable background, a quiet place and enough room for the annual memorial service. Since 1985 it has been held there.

Text:

- Based on " 'Opdat wij niet vergeten' - Reeuwijk in de oorlogsjaren 1940-1945 ", by G.A.F. Maatje; © 2004 gemeente Reeuwijk; pages 50 - 52 and 82 - 83.
- Translation: april 2004, made by an unknown person, commissioned by mayor J.C. Bauer.
- Original version: booklet, A5-format (lay-out and printing: gemeente Reeuwijk / Frans D. van Wijck).
- The original version was handed over by mayor J.C. Bauer to the brothers John and Michael Lewis, during the World War II-commemoration , May 4, 2004. The Lewis brothers are sons of R.L. Lewis, radio operator on the Lancaster W 4960.
- Revision of the translation and addition of some information: Frans D. van Wijck, 2008

Pictures:

- Lancaster bomber at Binbrook airfield:
<http://users.tpg.com.au/adsls7ld/binbrooketc.html>
- Binbrook airfield: **www.raf.mod.uk/bombercommand/images/binbrook.jpg**
- Düsseldorf Markt: details of origin lost, picture found through internet
- Sluipwijk:
www.sluipwijksekerk.nl/mediatheek/Kerk%20en%20Omgeving/slides/17.html
- Entrance Jonkerbos War Cemetery:
<http://www.battlefieldsww2.50megs.com/jonkerboscem01.JPG>
- Memorial Dag Hammerskjøldplantsoen: gemeente Reeuwijk.