

On 07 JUL 2021 this feature about **PERILS OF THE SEA** from Paul Allonby was received for [AirmenDK](#) with this text: Hello, Please find attached a feature I have researched and written on the anniversary of a 1941 RAF Bomber Command mission which has links to Denmark. Please feel free to use it on your excellent site. With good wishes, **Paul Allonby - military historian**. (See [Paul Allonby's books](#).)

Comments by Anders Straarup: Read about the crew of Whitley T4209 and other crews not on [AirmenDK](#) till the middle of page 5 to see details about being shot down over the North Sea.

From the middle of page 5 you read about **2 planes and their crews**. More details on [AirmenDK](#) about [WHI Z6555](#) with [Byrne](#), [Martin](#), [McLean](#), [Mountain](#) and [Noddle](#) (notice links to [The Walls of Names](#) at the [IBCC](#) and detailed records of the airmen of Bomber Command) and [BLE V6375](#) with [Guesford](#), [Rolfe](#) and [Shearn](#). [Kirkeby Churchyard – Cemetery](#) is mentioned.

PERILS OF THE SEA: AN AIRMAN'S COURAGE.

NORFOLK. JULY 9TH 1941.

THEY were called freshers but they'd been allocated a good tutor, a 20-year-old Aussie pilot named Bill McQuitty who'd flown 16 dangerous long-range missions with Bomber Command already.

Bill - a devout Christian and pre-war civil pilot - had been handpicked by his bosses with 78 Squadron at RAF Middleton St George in County Durham to be a mentor to fledgling crews.

Previously he'd shepherded safely home one crew when their aircraft was severely damaged by anti-aircraft fire, and had guided others through the hazards of flak and searchlights over Germany.

He'd flown 16 missions when he met the new crew he was to usher into combat operations flying the Whitley bomber.

The new personnel - referred to as "freshers" in 78 Squadron's Operational Record Books - were:

Pilot-Officer Edward Scott, 24, a married solicitor from East Boldon, Sunderland who was to be the crew's pilot and captain when they'd accomplished half-a-dozen 'check ride' sorties with Bill and another assessor;

Sgt John Haffenden, 28, from Sussex, was their navigator/bomb-aimer; their wireless-operator was Sgt David John Clow, 21, from Medicine Hat, Alberta, and the rear-gunner Sgt Bill Forster, 33, from Fawdon, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The crew had teamed-up at 19 Operational Training Unit at RAF Forres in Scotland, learning their skills on the Armstrong-Whitworth bombers they'd fly at 78 Sqn.

The mission they were briefed to fly on the night of July 8th/9th 1941 was their first operational sortie, the crew having assembled within the last 24-hours at their new base.

Their Whitley - serial T4209, unit/aircraft code EY-Q which was a Merlin-powered Mark 5 - took off at 11pm for the seven-hour round-trip to Hamm, a major railroad town in north-west Germany.

Eleven aircraft departed Middleton St George, but only seven made it back to base.

One of those which didn't return was Bill's bomber.

Sgt Haffenden (with notes by author in brackets) takes over the story: "The target was bombed from 18,000-feet. En route we'd encountered a severe storm front over the North Sea, but by the time we reached Hamm it was a clear, moonlit night.

"Hits were observed directly on the railway line. Over the target, heavy flak broke the perspex in the nose section, and then the starboard engine got hit and had to be shut down. Evasive action was then needed as the aircraft became coned by searchlights. We were being bracketed by flak - near misses, and hits.

"We were finally able to break free, and set course for base but the pitot head (essential for measuring the aircraft's speed) was shot away and it was thus not possible to tell the airspeed we were travelling at. Immediately crossing the coast at Texel (a Dutch island in northern Holland), we were attacked by an Me-110 (a Luftwaffe night-fighter) at 03.00.

"The enemy aircraft followed us for five-minutes, and then the rear-gunner put a long burst into it and it went into a steep dive and out of sight."

By now, the crew had been in the air for just over four-hours and still faced a journey of 200-miles across the open sea in their badly damaged aircraft which had been peppered with shrapnel.

Sgt Haffenden: "We then began losing height and, at 400-feet, the remaining engine, overheating badly, lost power. Bill suddenly shouted for us to brace for a ditching. The aircraft then dived into the sea, and there was a wall of water, a dreadful shudder, some cracking noises and the sea began flooding-in. I noted the time was 04.29.

"The incursion of water focussed the mind, and with the help of Sgt Clow and Pilot-Officer Scott, I got the dinghy out. However, it had been punctured by shrapnel and while it could be inflated, it quickly became water-logged and then when Pilot-Officer Scott got in it, it over-turned."

The aircraft was still afloat although escaping from it had been extremely difficult as impact damage had buckled the escape hatches and Sgt Haffenden had to use a knife to open one near the rear turret. Escape along the fuselage had involved wading through chest deep water in the dark.

"Then Sgt Forster, who I knew from training to be a poor swimmer, found his Mae West (life-jacket) was been damaged and would not inflate, so I gave him mine.

"I also noticed Sgt Clow was bleeding heavily from severe head injuries, caused as he was trying to send a distress signal from the radio: he had been thrown forward, smashing his face against it.

"I reckoned we were some eight or nine-miles off the Norfolk coast, so - being a strong, confident swimmer - I volunteered to swim ashore to seek help.

"My offer was accepted, and having stripped off my heavy flying suit, I entered the water and struck out, first breast-stroke and then when cramp set-in, crawl.

"By now it was dawn, and my last view of my colleagues and the aircraft was one of them clinging on the wing and fuselage, with Sgt McQuitty calmly standing on the top of the fuselage giving advice and instructions in an effort to save his companions."

Sgt Haffenden then began swimming in the direction of the coast, towards a pinpoint of glimmer from what he thought was a lightship, but which turned out to be a star.

After some 15-minutes he heard shouts from behind him, and began swimming back to where he'd left the stricken airmen but only found his own flying jacket and a petrol slick on the ocean, which was now turning turbulent.

There was no-one visible and his shouts were met with silence.

The sky then became overcast, with no sign of moon or stars. He then saw the first dim light of dawn, and with renewed vigour began swimming with new hope and finally he was rewarded with the sound of waves hitting the shore. Land! He was safe! He stated: "I don't know what it was, but when daylight appeared on the horizon, I became infused with energy."

The swim was estimated to have taken Sgt Haffenden nearly five-hours. When he arrived at land, he then however faced another hazard - getting up the beach which was mined, and strewn with anti-landing craft defences.

Slowly he advanced, squirming eventually through barbed wire. He was finally safe.

He went to a nearby Army pill-box but it was unmanned. However, he was able to dry off using a blanket and was able to put his sodden flying boots back on, which he'd carried laced over his shoulders and onto his back during his swim.

Then, he set off walking.

Some two hours later he arrived at a Coastguard cottage at Burnham Deepdale, whose officer raised the alarm with RAF Bircham Newton who at 11.55am despatched the first of four Blenheim aircraft from 500 Squadron to begin a search for the missing fliers, having confirmed the Whitley's estimated location with Sgt Haffenden who was by then being treated in the base's sick bay for exhaustion and dehydration.

The crew of one Blenheim spotted wreckage in the sea but nothing else. The searches went on until 3.30pm with three Blenheim crews now having sighted floating wreckage and a life-jacket but no survivors or any sign of the damaged dinghy.

Other aircraft then took over the search but it was a Blenheim from 500 Squadron which spotted an airman floating face-up next to a damaged dinghy on July 16th which, when recovered by an RAF launch off Brancaster, turned out to be the body of Pilot-Officer Scott.

The body of Sgt Forster had already been washed ashore in the same area where Sgt Haffenden had finished his land trek - and was recovered after being spotted by a member of the public.

The other men were still missing. In the interim, 500 Squadron aircraft had flown a reconnaissance patrol almost

to Texel, during which they followed the Whitley's path, but for naught. Sgt McQuitty and Sgt Clow were recorded as missing, presumed drowned.

Sadly, however, no-one notified Sgt McQuitty's family.

They heard nothing for 10-days, and then only when news of his disappearance appeared in the newspapers in Australia, and in the UK. The headlines reporting the mystery of the "bravery Aussie pilot" going missing were how his father Jim, in Tasmania, and his grandfather Robert, in Belfast, learned the appalling news.

Official notification did not reach Mr McQuitty, a widower and father-of-six who worked in insurance investigation management, until August 10th, a full month after his son - a leading light as an organiser with St John's Church in Hobart - had disappeared.

Meanwhile, the mission to Hamm had proved to have had a similar outcome for the crew of Whitley Z6555 which disappeared without trace after a 03.35 radio message requesting a bearing back to base.

Operators at Middleton St George replied, but got no response from Sgt Oliver McLean, 24, a former bank officer and pre-war pilot, from Queensland, or his crew. (The notification to the family of Sgt McLean also went astray - one of four RAAF airmen this happened to at the same time which led to an inquiry and changes in procedure - and demotion postings - at the RAF Casualty Reporting Unit at Gloucester.)

Another 78 Sqn aircraft, Whitley Z6625 (Pilot-Officer Wright), experiencing engine trouble, force-landed in a field near Sherborne, Norfolk, at 04.05, without any injuries - while exactly the same minute, Whitley Z6491 (Sgt Jones) force-landed at Thirsk in North Yorkshire, having run out of fuel.

Private funeral services were held for P/O Scott and Sgt Forster, and the missing aviators were eventually declared dead.

Their names were, after the war, inscribed on the Memorial to the Missing in Runnymede. Sgt McQuitty's father, one of four brothers who went to war in WW1 with only three returning, one of them badly wounded, travelled from Australia for the ceremony. (Bill had, during flying training in Canada, had been able to meet an uncle living there and then, when on leave, was able to meet his Northern Irish grandfather for the first - and only - time.)

Sgt Haffenden spent three-weeks recovering. He received no award for his valiant efforts albeit he said he was pleased enough to receive an RAF letter of commendation for "courage, endurance and endeavour" as "that was recognition enough for what I did as, of course, I'd have been far happier if the outcome had been different."

He'd joined the RAF in 1940, having some experience as a civil pilot, but after a crash in Derbyshire while training on a Miles Magister aircraft, he switched disciplines from pilot to navigator - coming top of his class.

In 1941, Sgt Haffenden joined 24 Squadron based at RAF Hendon, responsible for ferrying VIPs and key personnel, plus essential documents, equipment, freight and post, primarily to Gibraltar and Malta, utilising a wide variety of aircraft. He finished the war as a Flight-Lieutenant, and in 1944 was awarded a commendation for valuable contributions in air operations. (Post-war he began a director of a whisky company.)

Sgt McQuitty received no award for courage that night, nor recognition for his previous bravery which on one

occasion (June 23rd) involved the hazard of landing with a 500-lb bomb hung-up from a mission to Cologne, and then - as referred to earlier - nursing a Whitley back from another raid on Cologne (June 26) despite flak damage to the petrol tanks, fuselage and wings. (78 Sqn's ORB showed he completed the following missions: Bremen (May 8th as second pilot); Hamburg (May 10th - encountered heavy flak); Cologne (May 13, 15 and 27); Duisberg (June 11th - "accurate heavy flak"); Dortmund (June 12th - ditto); Cologne (June 16th, final flight as a co-pilot); Emden (June 18th); Kiel (June 20th); then the Cologne missions; Bremen (June 29th); Cologne (July 2nd); Munster (July 5th and 7th), then Hamm (July 8th). (The last nine missions were as a tutor pilot.)

Two of Bill's brothers followed him into RAF Bomber Command, while one of his sisters served with the RAAF. David - a Pilot-Officer - made it home after flying as a Lancaster pilot; Bob - a Flight-Sgt who was a bomb-aimer on Stirlings - was shot down by anti-aircraft fire and killed with his six colleagues on his crew over France on June 23rd 1944. Their aircraft, from 149 Squadron at RAF Methwold, Norfolk, crashed at Plougonvelin in the Department of the Finistere, killing a family of five in a farmhouse. A memorial now marks the spot. Bob was 21.

* THE night mission of 8-9 July 1941 to Hamm involved 73 Whitley and Hampden aircraft, and it followed the RAF's first daylight B-17 mission to bomb Wilhelmshaven (on the 8th), a small-scale, but highly advantageous mission in propaganda terms. Also airborne on the night of the 8th-9th were 51 bombers heading for Munster, 33 going to Bielefeld and 11 to Merseburg. (RAF Bomber Command on July 9th also announced a tactical change to multi-aircraft attacks on focussed industrial and strategic targets as opposed to smaller operations against wide-ranged varied industries and communication links.)

* WHITLEY Z6555 was shot down by Luftwaffe night-fighter over the North Sea. Danish military historian Søren C. Flensted reports: "At 02:51 the aircraft crashed into the sea some 60 km north west of Vlieland after being attacked by a BF 110 nightfighter of 4. / NJG 1 piloted by Lt. Rudolf Schoenert with Bordfunker Uffz. Hans Richter. The Bf 110 was operating from Bergen. (Author note - the time referred to is continental ie 03.51 UK)

"The body of W/op-Air Gnr. Sgt Kenneth Noddle was found on the beach of Rømø on 15/8 and was laid to rest in Kirkeby cemetery on 16/8-1941. The Parish minister Rasmus Jørgensen and the Marine Pfarrer Müller from Sylt officiated at the graveside ceremony."

However, further investigation reveals the following entries on the RAF Commands forum:

"My aunt's brother was co-pilot on this aircraft, he was Clifford MacKenzie "Mack" Martin. Whilst researching our family tree I came across Mack's military records in Canada. Amongst these is an Investigation Report. There was a crew of five on board, four sergeants: McLean, Martin, Noddle and Byrne and a P/O observer Mountain.

"This report states: 1. Some time after the crash all members were washed ashore on the island of Rømø. Due to the heat in summer, all bodies were fairly decomposed and identification was very difficult. Only SGT NODDLE wore his identification discs. Therefore it is doubtful if exhumation would bring any results, and it is not recommended. There were no other crashes in that area at that time.

2. The chief of police at TØNDER managed to hide his police reports about the men washed ashore. They were helpful in identifying the bodies.

3. On 20th July 1941 a body was washed ashore south-west of LANOLD on RØMØ. On his person were some

Canadian Yale keys and a flying boot marked "Made in Canada". Obviously it was the body of SGT MARTIN. The only Canadian in the crew.

4. SGT NODDLE was washed ashore near HAVNEBY on RØMØ on 15/8/41; and on the same day another body on HAVSAND beach. He is believed to be P/O MOUNTAIN.

5. A further body believed to be SGT BYRNE was washed ashore on RØMØ on 25th August 1941.

6. On 28th August 1941 a fifth body was washed ashore on the southern beach of RØMØ. It was in an advanced state of decomposition. It was dressed in a purple sweater and a pair of blue overalls, and was mistaken for a sailor or a civilian. It is obvious that he was SGT McLEAN, the only Australian in the crew. Wearing overalls for flying was popular among Australians in summer time.

7. All effects found on the above airmen were taken by the German army. All five were buried in KIRKEBY on RØMØ.

SGT MARTIN in Grave 262 on 22.7.41

SGT NODDLE in Grave 263 on 16.8.41

SGT McLEAN in Grave 266 on 13.9.41

Graves no. 264 and 265 contain the bodies of P/O MOUNTAIN and SGT BYRNE but it is impossible to confirm in which of the two graves these two airmen are buried."

It is signed by "Wing Commander, Commanding, No. 3 M.R. & E.U., Denmark" (submission to the forum by 'Greenwich' October 14th 2018 - their only posting).

This posting then received a reply from Finn Buch, a Danish researcher, who wrote of a follow-up enquiry by the RAF: "SGT MARTIN in Grave 262 on 22.7.41 - Grave cannot be accepted as Sergeant Martin...evidence insufficient...Flying boots size 9. Sergeant Martin was issued with Flying boots size 9 1/2 according his document file. Grave Registered as "An Airman Of the 1939-1945 War", RAF, Known unto God.

SGT NODDLE in Grave 263 on 16.8.41 - Grave accepted as Flight Sergeant Guesford. (pilot of Blenheim V6375 of 110 Sqn, RAF Manston, shot down over the North Sea June 15th 1941)

SGT McLEAN in Grave 266 on 13.9.41 - Grave registered as "A Sailor Of the 1939-1945 War", Known unto God.

Grave no. 264 - Grave accepted as Flight Sergeant Noddle. (Z6555)

Grave no. 265 - Grave accepted as Flight Sergeant Rolfe. (V6375)

Sources: Kirkeby Cemetery Record Book, CWGC Headstones on same Cemetery, Correspondence from R.C.A.F. Ottawa to R.C.A.F. Casualty Liason Officer, London. Officer Commanding, No. 18 Section, Missing Research and Enquiry Service, Royal Air Force, Kolding, Denmark. 4th January and 14th February 1947."

Sgt McLean was the pilot; Sgt Noddle, from Chelsea, the wireless-operator; Sgt Martin, 27, from Hamilton,

Ontario, the co-pilot; Pilot-Officer Hubert Mountain, 24, a married man from Bristol was the navigator; and Sgt Louis Byrne, 30, from Lambeth, the rear-gunner.

It is worth noting that between April 11th and July 9th 1941 alone, nine RAF bombers were shot down over the North Sea off the Danish/North Netherlands coastline alone...during the war 25 RAF aircraft disappeared off the Danish coast, leaving 127 airmen with no known grave (www.airmen.dk).

It is also worth recording from an RAF Bomber Command report that "by the end of 1941, Hamm had been bombed by the RAF 81 times!" ("Bomber Command Continues" - Air Ministry/Crown Copyright 1942, author's collection - exclamation mark in original text.)

* For further reading "Down In the Drink" (1955) by Ralph Barker, who spent 20-years in the RAF and who was a renowned aviation and cricket writer, includes in the 2008 edition a chapter on Sgt Haffenden. His books were, for me when growing-up, a great source of inspiration. Ralph penned a letter to the 24 Squadron Association in 2006 to contact John; unfortunately there are some errors in the chapter (no doubt given the passage of time and the difficulty then of accessing records to refresh the memory) which I have discreetly corrected without comment in my narrative as the account is about a modest - and brave - man. I recommend all Ralph's numerous books.

* Books on the units and bases mentioned are also available via on-line searching, many making fine reading.

* NAMES, crew positions, times and all aircraft details relating to Bill and his crew as per AIR27/660 (operational record books) for 78 Sqn May-August 1941, held at the UK National Archives, plus service files totalling 107-pages of Sgt William Morrison McQuitty, RAAF - held at the Australian National Archives which includes a lengthy and detailed report by Group Captain T.G. Mill, Commanding Officer RAF Middleton St George, into the circumstances of the loss of Bill's Whitley). Records Crown/Australian Govt. copyrighted and used with thanks.

Also, information sources (beyond those referred to in the text) include the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; the British Library; the Australian Newspaper Archives; the RCAF Archives, 500 Sqn and 149 Sqn ORBs; the RNLI; HM Coastguard; The London Gazette, and the Imperial War Museum.

~ PAUL ALLONBY RAeS, RAeC July 2021