

The story of Lancaster bomber “LL963” that crashed near Avernakø on 16 May 1944.

7 young Englishmen found death south of Funen

By Ebbe Bork-Pedersen, Avernakø, 21 June 2008, sent to AirmenDK, translated 2017 by Anders Straarup.

The situation in the spring of 1944

It is May 1944. Hitler is on the retreat on the eastern front, but still he rules over all of western Europe.

The invasion by the Allied in northern France on 5 beaches in Normandy *Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno* and *Sword* on Tuesday 6 June - “*The longest Day*” - is only 21 days ahead.

To weaken the German Wehrmacht as much as possible before the invasion British and American bombers intensify the raids on strategic military targets. The Americans bomb in daylight, the British at night.

One of the targets for the British bombers this night is the big naval harbour of the German Kriegsmarine in Kiel, which is also a base and a supply station for German U-boats.

Kiel has 3 shipyards. The largest is *F. Krupp Germaniawerft*, which built 128 U-boats during the war, about 20 % of all German U-boats.

A precondition for success of the invasion is that the German U-boats are contained. More than 7000 ships, of which 1200 warships, 4100 landing boats and 860 transport vessels, are to cross the Channel in connection with the invasion.

By and large it was a success to keep the German U-boats confined in the German harbours, but from ports at the Bay of Biscay U-boats are heading for the Channel.

Prime minister *Winston Churchill* of the United Kingdom wrote in his war diary:

- Neglecting all caution the German U-boats from the Bay of Biscay sailed on the surface to gain maximum speed. But we were there to meet them. The western entrance to the Channel was guarded by numerous aircraft as our advanced line of defence, and behind them were the naval forces that covered the actual landing operation. The U-boats suffered, when they were met by the full power of our defence. During the first decisive days 6 of them were sunk and a similar number damaged by our air forces. They were completely unable to damage the invasion convoys that sailed with quite unimportant losses. From then the U-boats were more cautious, but not luckier.....



The Captain of the Lancaster, Kenneth Walther Mitchell, 22, was the last of the crew members who were found. His life jacket with the initials “K.W.M.” was washed ashore near Avernakø Hoved. His body was found in Kildekrog near Nab.

Lancaster LL 963

On Monday 15 May at 22.45 hrs *Lancaster LL 963 of 103 Squadron – The Black Swan* takes off from Elsham Wolds – an airfield in Lincolnshire in East England with its crew of 7 men. The target is Kiel, and the mission is to drop mines in the Kiel Bay. The mines are to confine the U-boats.

The Lancaster piloted by *Kenneth Walther Mitchell, 22*, flies low over the North Sea with its heavy load of sea mines to avoid being spotted by the German radar stations on the west coast of Jutland. The flight is according to plan also across the central part of Jutland to the Kattegat where the plane heads south.

However, at the Little Belt Bridge the fate of the Lancaster is sealed, when it is hit by a number of rounds from a Messerschmitt 110 night fighter piloted by Hauptmann Franz Buschmann. The Lancaster catches fire.

Apparently it is the assessment by Mitchell that the damage should not prevent them from carrying on towards the target in the Kiel Bay. 14 days earlier LL 963 had also been hit by flak during the raid on Friedrichshafen in South Germany from which they successfully returned to Elsham Wolds.



The standard operation procedure is that if you are unable to carry out the operation

you are to drop the bombload and return to England – and if that is not possible – to try to land in neutral Sweden.



Most likely the crew try to put out the fire. A weakness of the Lancaster is the oil used in the hydraulic system of the machine guns. This oil is flammable like fuel. One spark – and the plane is on fire. Another cause of the explosion may be that the fire has spread to the fuel tanks.

Like a flaming torch the plane is heading south, across Horne Land and out between the islands of Avernakø and Lyø, where the fuel tanks explode in an inferno of fire.

Two engines and a wing and then two other engines and the other wing are torn off the Lancaster, and the plane crashes into the sea about 1 km north west of Avernakø Hoved.

The explosion does not affect the bombload. The fuselage and the two gun turrets fall far from where the wings with the engines crash.

The body of one of the 7 crew members, F/Sgt *R.A. Tapp* of the RAF, is washed ashore near Avernakø Hoved. Tapp is wearing his Mae West and his parachute has been released.

The end of Lancaster LL 963 is observed on Avernakø and Lyø, but particularly on West Funen from where the plane can be followed down across the Little Belt like a flaming torch lighting the night sky, ending with an explosion over the waters south of Funen.



An eye witness, sub-editor *Tor Hansen*, *Sydfyns Dagblad*, relates:

- *The bomber caught fire over Horne Land. All of it only took a moment. Between the bright May leaves of trees in a garden on Østerbro in Faaborg we followed the luminous arch of the flaming torch across the night sky till suddenly at a dizzy speed it crashed into the sea and was put out like you put out a candle. From the moment the plane caught fire and till it crashed into the sea there were hardly more than a couple of minutes. There was a great overflight that night, and the air was vibrating from the noise of the engines from the invisible planes over the town and the area. However, the spectators were aware that here at this moment in the bright night of May they had witnessed one of the many dramas of the war.*

The find on Hvilbjerg Beach

As the day breaks on Avernakø parish executive officer *Rasmus Rasmussen*, *Munke* and Vicar *Edmund Jensen* cycle to Hvilbjerg Beach. Near the coast they see the top of the tail plane and two oil stains where the engines have fallen.

On the beach they find a fully dressed body and near it a pair of binoculars, a map bag and one boot. No bruises are visible on the body apart from a small red mark in his forehead.

Parish executive officer *Rasmus Rasmussen* calls the police in Faaborg, who send police inspector *Carl Rasmussen* to Avernakø, and he has time to take a number of photos on the spot, also of the body that had drifted ashore, before German soldiers arrive.

The Germans also observe the air crash and dispatch a platoon of 12 men to Avernakø to search for possible survivors. However, the Germans are not familiar with the timetables of the local ferries. They enter the ferry "Mommark"...! As it was said in Faaborg:

"- If they were on their way back to Germany we would not stop them from going there. So we said nothing!"

Nobody tells the Germans that it is the wrong ferry. When they realize their mistake, they hail the ferry to Avernakø.

In Faaborg the leader of the German expedition to Avernakø soon realizes that his soldiers are aboard a ferry with a wrong destination and he sends another platoon towards Avernakø in two motor vessels. The delay means that the Germans with a Corporal in charge do not arrive in Avernakø till the middle of the afternoon.

In the absence of Germans police inspector *Carl Rasmussen* has time to try to establish the identity of the man who had drifted ashore. There is a number on his neck-band and for the identification the police inspector takes off a finger ring and takes a photo of it. In one of the boots the name *Martin Normann* is seen and on a paper in the map bag another name: *Kenneth Gordon*.

German soldiers on the island

The Germans start a thorough search for surviving crew members. Houses, farms and barns are searched and the residents are interrogated. In a threatening attitude to Vicar *Edmund Jensen* the Corporal states that one of the crew members has survived the crash, and that he is hidden on *Avernakø* or has been helped to evade! Edmund Jensen denied that but the Germans do not believe him and carry on searching houses.

At *Christen Jensen's* on "*Kulagergaard*" on *Korshavn* the farm is also searched, but in spite of a rather threatening way of handling their rifles the Germans got no more from their visit than Christian Jensen's comment:

- *We have neither heard nor seen anything...!*"

On the adjacent farm "*Hestemarkshuset*" at *Lars Chr. Pedersen's* they also had to leave without any success after the remark:

- *Do you want some bacon? Have you found any Englishmen?*

When the Germans have searched the island without any result the Corporal calls chairman of the parish council C.C. Bro, parish executive officer Rasmus Rasmussen and Vicar Edmund Jensen in the vicarage. Here the Corporal states:

- *We are honouring a fallen adversary. You hate us!*

The Germans decide to stay for the night on the island to resume the search on the following day. As a warning to the residents the Germans place a poster on the gate to the blacksmith's in which they threaten with a punishment of death according to German martial law if they hide Allied soldiers. But the poster is quickly removed by unknowns....

The Vicar banished from the church

In *Faaborg* the Germans order a white coffin that arrives on *Avernakø* on Thursday. Parish executive officer Rasmussen has had directions from the police in *Faaborg* and informs Vicar Edmund Jensen that he is allowed to sprinkle earth on the grave – without words – and neither before nor after that is he allowed to say anything, not even a part of the burial service.

At noon the Germans are on the way to the church with the coffin with the English airman placed on a horse-drawn cart. The Germans state that residents of the island are neither allowed to follow the coffin as mourners nor to attend the funeral service in the church because they take it as a demonstration that flowers were laid on the road to the church. The Germans do not know that it is a local tradition. They only fastened on the colours of the flowers on the road being in the Royal Air Force colours blue, red, and white – hardly unintended.

The wife of Vicar Edmund Jensen and a number of young girls on the island have walked ahead with a wheelbarrow with flowers and scattered them on the road to the church. Vicar Jensen did not feel himself included in the sudden order of not participating in the interment and stands wearing his vestments at the gate of the churchyard to receive the coffin and walk in front of it to the grave.

The procession – only German soldiers – stops and the Corporal informs Vicar Jensen that his presence is undesirable because "*there had been demonstrations*".

Vicar Jensen:

- If it is the flowers that are scattered on the road, then it is our costum that wives and girls do so!

The Corporal:

- There have been demonstrations right from the beginning. Please leave the churchyard, or you will be locked up in the church till the burial has taken place!

The Germans spot digger *Carl Kuba* standing in the hatch of the church tower, aim their rifles at him and order him down immediately. Vicar Jensen and Carl Kuba leave the churchyard together and go home. After an unostentatious interment the Germans place a guard at the gate of the churchyard, but rather soon they give up maintaining the ban against placing flowers on the grave. Before it gets dark many people, particularly young people, have crossed the low stone wall and decorated the grave with flowers in the RAF colours.

The Germans leave the island, and on the following Sunday 21 May after the service the congregation meet at the grave where Vicar Jensen reads from the Burial Service – the part used at the grave. Vicar Jensen does not sprinkle earth on the grave, but he pronounces the blessing over the grave, and the congregation joins in the hymn “Always dauntless –“!

3 more airmen found

In June a body is washed ashore near Nab. At the identification it is established that it is the body of the Navigator of the Lancaster *William Kelly*. He is taken to Faaborg, where he is laid to rest in Faaborg New Cemetery.

On Drejø another body drifts ashore – the body of Flight Engineer, Sergeant *David Howells*. He is buried in a beautiful ceremony attended by all of the residents of Drejø, and a stone with an inscription from Psalms, Chapter 139 is erected on his grave.

Neither Ralph A. Tapp and William Kelly nor Howells appear to have been bruised by the explosion even if as the flight engineer he was placed next to the fuel tank he was the most exposed.

All of the 3 airmen found till then are wearing their life jackets. That is not the case with the fourth crew member who drifts ashore near Nab. His body is severely bruised by the explosion. He is buried in Aastrup Churchyard.

In “Stavn” 1996 fisherman *Anton Jørgensen* relates how he found the captain of the Lancaster *Kenneth Walther Mitchell* and the navigator *Kelly*:

“- In the spring of 1944 I had to go to Little Svelmø to check the shrimp traps. It must have been in early June. I was rowing a small shooting punt, and when I reached Kidholm I noticed that something was drifting at a distance. Of course I was curious to see what it was. It was a drowned airman. The wind was easterly and he was drifting to the open sea. I could not take him on board in the boat, so I made a noose on a piece of rope and got it over one of his legs. Then I dragged him to the coast and from “Nabgaarden” I called the police who came right away and examined him. It was a Canadian airman, and the Germans buried him in Faaborg.

The other airman had drifted ashore where there is now a camping ground. It was in September. I called the police, and they came and examined him. It was the pilot of the same plane as the first airman. In one of his breast pockets they found a small plate, about 5x6 cm and ½ cm thick, of very transparent plastic, and at the centre of the plate there was a rather big hole. It looked as if

a bullet of a rather heavy caliber had gone through. The two policemen took it with them to Faaborg.

In late afternoon two German soldiers came and I had to show them where he was lying, but I do not think that they found anything on him. The next day he was buried in Aastrup Churchyard. Nobody knows where the plane crashed, I think. After the war his parents came and visited his grave. They had come to Avernakø and stayed at the vicar's over there. An airman from the same plane had fallen down near Avernakø Hoved. A Danish policeman, who had hidden over there, had taken all of his papers and after the war he sent them to his mother. She had been told that her son was buried in France.

She easily recognized him in a very distinct picture taken of him where he had fallen. I had been called to Aastrup Church that day, and it was a moving sight, when the two elderly people hand in hand went to their son's grave and kneeled.

During his stay in the churchyard his father asked me, with the vicar as interpreter, if there were any visible indications whether he had drowned or died in another way. I hesitated a little with the answer, but then I was told not to restrain myself from answering, as he himself had been in World War I all 4 years. Then I told him that half of his head was missing. He was glad to hear that, because then he knew that it was a sudden death.

I told him about the small plate he had in his breast pocket. It might have been from the hard battle at El Alamein in Egypt. His best friend had been shot and killed there, and then someone cut a piece like that out of the aircraft and kept it in his breast pocket. The plate may have been lost, when the Germans arrested the Danish police – only 3 or 4 days after I found the airman.

At the request of British authorities an exhumation was made, and it was established that it was the body of the Captain of the Lancaster, *Kenneth Walther Mitchell*.

On the very day of the air crash a life jacket was washed ashore near Avernakø Hoved with the initials "K.W.M. - for *Kenneth Walther Mitchell*. The life jackets were uncomfortable and it was common for crew members not to wear them.

At a ceremony when a memorial stone to Kenneth W. Mitchell was unveiled, the memorial stone was covered with an old Danish flag.

This flag has a particular symbolic significance as it was owned by Vicar *Chr. Knudsen*, Avernakø, who in 1864 had escaped from South Jutland, as he did not want to be a vicar under German occupation.

Rasmus Nielsen, "Sjællændergaarden", Aastrup made the speech at the unveiling of the memorial stone. With a reference to the historic background of the flag he ended his speech by saying "that now a stone covers another who also fought for our freedom."

No trace has been found of the three other members of the crew. The two air gunners, *Douglas Frank Pegrum*, from Burma, and *Thomas Kitchener Wright*, placed in respectively the Mid Upper Turret and the Rear Turret, and wireless operator *Claude Frederick Bish* remained in the fuselage of the plane.

New exhumation

In 1946 the identity of the English airman buried in Avernakø Churchyard is still in doubt. On Friday 11 October 1946 a group from SHAFE (*Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe*)

come to Avernakø. In the delegation there are officers of both the ARMY, the NAVY and the RAF together with private British soldiers from Montgomery's British Army on the Rhine. Germans are also present on this occasion – as POWs (*Prisoners of War*). They have to carry out the exhumation.

During this somewhat macabre affair Vicar *Knud Svejstrup Nielsen* in English tells the delegation about the circumstances of the air crash in 1944 and about the conduct of the Germans on the island in connection with the search for possible survivors.



The air base Elsham Wolds: The picture is taken on 26 June 1943 from an altitude of 10.000 feet. The three runways and the hangars are clearly seen. It is a typical design of an air base for squadrons of bombers during the war. At least 17 Lancasters can be identified. The village of Elsham is seen at the bottom right corner. The geographic location between the Humber og Nene made it easy for German bombers to find the air base. During the first years of the war it was exposed to a number of bombing raids.

It was not possible to establish the identity of the deceased based on the exhumation. When the British delegation had made their records Vicar Svejstrup sprinkled earth on the grave – in English – according to the orders of service of the Danish national church

The British officers and private soldiers stand at attention while the Germans are sent out of the churchyard – as the Germans did with Vicar Edmund Jensen and gravedigger Carl Kuba in 1944!

The private British soldiers started filling up the grave, before the German POWs were ordered to finish the job. One year later – on 6 December 1947 – two Englishmen come to Avernakø with a cross bearing the name and data of the airmen buried here, R. A. Tapp.

When the British delegation in 1946 has established that the buried airman is Ralph A. Tapp Vicar Svejstrup through the RAF contacts the *Air Ministry* in London to get into contact with Tapp's family.

It is not so simple, as standard procedure is not to hand over names of deceased to "next of kin". With this practice the aim is to avoid

that the grief of families is not unnecessarily renewed. But Vicar Svejstrup receives a letter from the Air Ministry stating that they will make an exception in this case, because of "Svejstrup's position as a Vicar and the comprehensive account" he has sent to the RAF.

Tapp's mother on Avernakø

The Air Ministry writes to the Tapps, 1008 Albion Hill, Brighton, Sussex, and informs them of Svejstrup's inquiry and address. The Air Ministry will leave it to Tapp's parents to decide whether they want to establish contact with Avernakø.

Very soon Vicar Svejstrup receives a letter from the Tapps as the start of a long correspondence, which has unfortunately been lost.

It ends with the visit in Denmark by Mrs. Tapp from 4 June to 17 June 1949.

Captain Mitchell's parents join her on her visit to Denmark. Mr. Tapp decides to stay at home in England. When Vicar Svejstrup visits the Tapps in England Mr. Tapp expresses his bitterness over the death of his son. Mr. Tapp himself is marked by his participation in World War I, where he was exposed to gas attacks in the muddy trenches of Flanders. Vicar Svejstrup and Mr. Mitchell start a major work of research ending up with the official recognition of the airmen buried in Aastrup Churchyard as being the son: Kenneth W. Mitchell.

On 6 June – 5 years after the invasion in Normandy – Mrs. Tapp and Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell arrive at Avernakø. Two days later they and Vicar Svejstrup visit Aastrup Churchyard, where Mitchell's son is buried.

Teacher *Würden Petersen*, cemetery gardener *Aagaard*, and fisherman *Anton Jørgensen*, who found Kenneth W. Mitchell on the beach at Kildekrog near Nab, have all seen the deceased and have no doubt that they are facing Mitchell's parents. The resemblance is unmistakable, and the last remnants of doubt were dissipated, when the parents show a picture of their son.

After the visit at the grave all of them go to Kildekrog near Nab, where Vicar Svejstrup says a prayer in English.

Back in Aastrup Church the parents perform their devotions. Mr. Mitchell sings and Mrs. Mitchell plays the organ. Finally all in the church sing "Nearer My God to Thee".



VISIT ON AVERNAKØ: During 4 – 17 June 1949 Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell (left) and Mrs. Tapp visited Avernakø, where they attended a memorial service. They also visited Aastrup Churchyard, where Mitchell's son, the Captain of the Lancaster, Kenneth W. Mitchell was buried.

Mr. Mitchell says that now with peace in their minds they can go back to England in the confident assurance that they have seen the last resting place of their son. On the return trip to Avernakø the party visit the Englishmen's Grave in Faaborg New Cemetery.

Back on Avernakø the party go to Avernakø Hoved where Ralph A. Tapp was found. Vicar Svejstrup says a prayer and Mrs. Tapp lays flowers on the spot.

Next day they go to Drejø where Sergeant Howells is buried. They sail with "Ellen" via Søby and on their way they pass the spot where the 7 British airmen crashed into their deaths. The Mitchells and Mrs. Tapp lay bunches of flowers on the surface of the sea.

The memorial service

On 10 June 1949 – an extremely beautiful summer evening – a memorial service is held in Avernakø Church attended by Tapp's mother and Mitchell's parents.

The church is decorated with flowers in the Royal Air Force colours blue, white and red. In front of the altar and among a number of wreaths a wooden cross is placed with the inscription RALPH TAPP.

After the ringing of bells the congregation sings two hymns in Danish.

Kipling:

"At the going down of the sun

We will remember them"

Vicar Svejstrup speaks in both Danish and English over the words of Mark, Chapter 16, 5-6.

"And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted; Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified; he is risen; he is not here; behold the place where they laid him".

After having told about the air crash and events that followed Vicar Svejstrup says,

- The parents present here today appear as representatives of all relatives of the boys in the crashed plane. Now they have seen the resting places of their boys in the beautiful graves that will be tended by the people, because we see these boys as liberators of our country. Your boys are not here. They are with the Lord in a place that he has prepared for them – they are with us in our hearts. As residents of this island we feel that we have a share of your grief, and I would like to quote some words by your great poet Kipling:

"They shall grow not old,

As we that are left grow old.

Age shall not weary them

...At the going down of the sun

We will remember them".

After his speech the congregation sing three hymns in Danish and the wreaths are carried to the grave.

A number of wreaths and bunches of flower have been sent from Faaborg. A wreath decorated with the armband of the Resistance Movement has the inscription

"Always loved and remembered".

In the churchyard the last hymn is sung. It is a moving moment for the many residents of the island gathered here, when Mrs. Tapp kisses the memorial stone to her son erected by residents of Avernakø.

"You made our grief yours"

From the churchyard the mourners go to Avernakø Village Hall to a common coffee table. The Danish flag Dannebrog and the British Union Jack are placed on a wall, and the tables are decorated in the colours of the RAF – blue, white and red.

Mr. Mitchell, the father of Kenneth Walther Mitchell, took the floor,

- When we left England we were heavy at heart. We did not know how we would be received in Denmark, but now we have no more doubts. You have made our grief your grief. Thank you!

Then Vicar Svejstrup reads a letter from an English Methodist minister, and Mrs. Tapp rises,

- I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done for my son. We have found honesty and compassion, and I am proud of being the mother of a boy who has taken part in the fight for the freedom of this beautiful country. And I shall be happy to go home to England knowing that he rests with you. God bless you all. Good luck in all of your deeds.

The gathering in Avernakø Village Hall ends with two more hymns.

On 17 June Mrs. Tapp and Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell left Avernakø – and they went back to England by ship from Esbjerg.

A note in the history of the war, a tragedy to English families – and a bloody page had been turned in the history book of Avernakø.

The world war had come to Avernakø.



Propeller from the Lancaster:
In the spring of 1999 a fisherman from Horne got one of the four propellers of the Lancaster in his net. Here it is seen in Faaborg Harbour.



The official British gravestone in Avernakø Churchyard.



The memorial stone erected by the residents of Avernakø. When Tapp's mother visited the island in 1949 she wished her son to be buried under the stone from the residents. Of course her wish was complied with.