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Rowland Williams' Visit to Denmark during the Spring of 1944

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Prologue

Wednesday 17th May, 1944, at 05.00 hours double British summer time, the pilots in Royal Air Force's fighter squadron No. 65 on Funtington air base, near Portsmouth, in Southern England, were alerted and called together for a briefing. Y-service, the British radio monitoring service, envisaged comprehensive activity in the air around the air fields at Aalborg; and therefore a day ranger-attack was planned on the German planes with six of the squadron's Mustang fighters, as well as two Mustang fighters from squadron No. 122, which were at the same base.

The formation was headed by Wing Commander Johnston (65), and comprised otherwise of 65's Squadron Leader D. F. Westenra, Captain Nyerod (122 - a Norwegian, who had enrolled in the RAF), Flying Officer Pinches (122), Flight Lieutenants R. Barrett (65) and Collins (65) and Flight Sergeants R. T. Williams (65) and Kelly (65).

Flight Sergeant Rowland T. Williams from squadron No. 65 was born in Wales on 9th June, 1923, and in 1942 went through the basic theoretical and practical flying training at the University of Cambridge. The practical training took place on the de Havilland DH82 Tiger Moth biplane. After seven flying lessons he went solo. When Rowland had qualified for the advanced training, he was sent on the troop transport ship Batory to Canada, where in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, at EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School), SFTS (Service Flying Training School) and OTU (Operational Training Unit) he had 300 flying lessons within nine months, on aircraft like the North American Harvard (Royal Air Force's version of the American Texan) and Supermarine Spitfire Mk. I and II (the early Spitfire versions, which were used during the Battle of Britain in 1940). Rowland's training as a pilot was finished in the Spring of 1943, and he returned to England on board the Cunard liner Queen Elizabeth, which served as troop transport during the war. On the way home he was very seasick! In May 1943 he was assigned to Squadron No. 65, where he remained until January, 1945. On 7th August, 1943, Rowland got married to Joan, and their eldest son, Michael, was born six weeks before the mission to Denmark. In honour of him, Rowland christened his Mustang "MIKE - FIRST of the FEW", and had that name painted on the port side of the engine cowling; on the starboard side he had "JOAN" painted.

No. 65 was a fighter squadron, which in May, 1943, used Spitfire Mk. V A and V B, and IX A and IX B. When Rowland joined the squadron, it was situated in Selsey Bill near Portsmouth, but it was moved round a lot, and was in no less than eight air bases in Southern England. The tasks of the squadron were mainly to undertake fighter sweeps over Northern France. The range of the Spitfire did not permit it to operate further away from its base than Paris. No. 65 was the first squadron to receive the new North American Mustang Mk. III fighter. The first planes arrived at the squadron in December, 1943, and were operational in January, 1944.

Mustang III was Royal Air Force's version of the American Army Air Force's P51B and P51C, which were the first Mustangs to be equipped with Rolls Royce Merlin engines, built under licence by the American firm of Packard. In comparison to the Mustang's original American Allison engine, the Rolls Royce engine meant a noticeable improvement of the Mustang's performance at high altitudes. The RAF modified the cockpit hood on its Mustang III's. The original side-hinged cockpit hood was replaced by a bulged, frameless 'Malcolm hood', which slid backwards to allow access to the cockpit, and which improved the pilot's rearward view. The USAAF (United States Army Air Force) quickly introduced the same modification on their own Mustangs. The RAF received about 887 Mustang III's altogether, which equipped at least 17 squadrons. The Mustang had a much greater range than the Spitfire, which made possible actions like the one over Denmark.

On 17th May, 1944, squadron No. 65 was, as mentioned, based at Funtington air base near Portsmouth. One of the reasons for its being moved so often was the preparations for "Overlord", the allied invasion of France in June, 1944. For the mission against Denmark, the eight Mustang fighters were equipped with drop tanks for extra fuel. They landed at Coltishall air base in Norfolk, 150 miles North of Funtington, to tank up for maximum range. Apart from the Mustang's fixed machine guns, no weapons were carried. The take-off was from Coltishall at 9.09 hours in the morning. It was agreed to fly at wave top altitude in order to avoid detection by the German radar, but because of the hard wind and rain, part of the approx. 520 mile long flight to Aalborg was made at altitudes from 50 and up to 3000 feet. The weather over the North Sea was so bad that at one point Johnston considered calling off the mission; but the warm front, which they passed, caused atmospheric disturbances, to the good luck of the Britons, so that they were not detected by the German radar stations at Thyborøn and Hjordemaal. Over Denmark the weather was good with clear sunshine. The drop tanks were jettisoned before the attacking formation crossed the West Coast of Jutland at about 11.15 at Lild Strand at an altitude of 3000 feet, to avoid the light German flak.

The Air Battle

At the approach, the eight planes divided into two groups. Three aircraft headed for Hobro to attack from the South; they were led by Johnston, and also comprised Westenra and Collins. Barrett should have been with this group, but followed - by mistake? - the blue group, led by Nyerod, which also comprised Williams, Kelly and Pinches. The blue group headed straight for Aalborg. Rowland flew Blue 2. His aircraft, Mustang FZ110, carried the recognition letters S-YT.

The attack came as a complete surprise for the Germans. Not only had the radar warning let them down; but the German observation posts on the ground registered the attacking formation as **German** aircraft, which later resulted in the officer in charge being court-martialled.

In Aalborg, the Germans had three air fields: Rødslet or Aalborg West, Rørdal or Aalborg East, and the seaplane base at the extremity of Vester Fjordvej (West Fjord Road). At Aalborg West were units of the bomber regiment “Kampfgeschwader 30” (KG30), amongst others group IV, which was a training unit, which comprised at least the squadrons (Staffels) No. 10, 11 and 13. They used the twin-engined Junkers Ju 88. Apart from them, the 4th and 5th Staffel of the KG100 “Wiking” bomber regiment were at that time at Aalborg West, converting from the twin-engined Dornier Do 217 to the four-engined Heinkel He 177. At Aalborg East was a conversion unit under Jagdgeschwader 11, equipped with unarmed Messerschmitt Bf 109G’s, and also the 10th Staffel of the same flight regiment, which was a fighter readiness force.

Rowland approached Aalborg from South West, and observed South of the Limfjord a German Junkers Ju 34 (single-engined training and liaison aircraft), which flew South East at an altitude of 1500 feet, little more than one mile in front of him. At 11.25 Rowland opened fire at a distance of 1150 feet, and maintained his fire, until he had reached a distance of 500 feet from the German. He observed hits in the fuselage and the engine, which emitted black smoke and seemed to have stopped. Rowland then broke off to port. It appeared as if the Ju 34 was attempting to glide back to the air field north of the Fjord, about 5 miles away. Rowland was certain that it would not succeed in doing so, and therefore decided to join up with his formation again.

Rowland flew towards the North over the Western end of Rødslet at an altitude of 1000-1500 feet, and then saw three German Heinkel He 177’s from KG100, which flew towards North-Northwest with a distance between them of 100 feet. He began a diving attack from port and opened fire on one of the He 177’s from a distance of 1150 feet, and gradually approached to 600 feet. He observed hits on the port engine, port wing root and fuselage, and the port engine stopped. At this point, another of the Mustangs, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Richard Barrett, overtook Rowland underneath, making an attack on the same German. Rowland was therefore forced to stop, as his colleague came into his line of fire. He saw the German crash north of the air field.

Rowland now turned towards the East, and saw more German planes shot down by his colleagues. Straight after each other, he himself shot down two more Ju 34’s, which were coming in to land at Rødslet. Finally Rowland flew towards the North and according to his own statement observed an He 177 (which was, however, probably a Junkers Ju 88), which was on its way towards the air field from the east at a very low altitude. He positioned himself behind the German, and when he was 1,100 feet behind him, he opened fire, which was answered by the German plane. Suddenly the German pilot pulled his aircraft up in a very steep jerk, which Rowland interpreted as an attempt to ram him. Therefore he pulled hard to port, thereby avoiding a collision. The German plane’s manoeuvre was more likely made in order to gain height, so that the crew could bale out. The German aircraft crashed. At this point, Rowland became aware that his engine was overheating and stuck, and began to leak both oil and glycol, which he believed was caused by the fire from the Ju 88 having hit the cooling system of his Mustang.

From the German side, however, another explanation has been given for Rowland’s engine stopping. This comes from the leader of the 11th Staffel at IV/KG30 at Aalborg West (Rødslet) air base, Oberleutnant P.W. Stahl, who in his book of memoirs “Kampfflieger zwischen Eismeer und Sahara” (“Fighter Pilots between the Arctic Ocean and the Sahara”) relates that the crew of the 88,

in preparation for the parachute jump, released the escape hatch, just as Rowland was attacking from the rear. In going down, this escape hatch, which was armoured and weighed 1 cwt, hit the radiator air intake under the belly of Rowland's Mustang, where it got wedged and caused a reduction of the cooling ability, so that the engine became overheated.

Emergency Landing

Rowland realized that the Mustang was no longer airworthy, and therefore prepared to escape by parachute. He removed his radio and oxygen mask and undid his safety harness, but then realized that he had misread his altimeter. He was not, as he first thought, at an altitude of 1,110 feet but only 110 feet, which is far too low for a parachute jump. Therefore he had to make an emergency landing. He opened the cockpit hood and sideslipped so as not to have his view blocked by the smoke and steam from the damaged engine; but he still did not have a complete view of the situation. Whilst coming in to land, his port wing hit a high voltage transmission line, but even so he managed to make a normal belly landing from West towards East. He did not put his undercarriage down, since the plane would have nosed over in the soft field. Therefore the propeller blades got bent during the landing. During the landing, the aircraft skidded round, so that it stopped with its nose 60 degrees towards starboard as compared to the landing direction. As a result of Rowland having undone his safety harness, he was thrown round in the cockpit during the landing and received several bruises, especially on his left shoulder, just as he hit his forehead against the gunsight. The emergency landing took place at 11.30-11.35, on Stagsted Meadow, southeast of Hjallerup, on a field due East of the farm of Diget.

Result of the Air Battle

In Rowland's case the air battle had not lasted longer than 5-10 minutes. During that time he had managed to shoot down four German planes alone, and one together with Richard Barrett. Altogether the Germans lost 11 planes at the encounter. Apart from Rowland's aircraft, the attackers lost Barrett's, which was shot down into the Limfjord near the brickworks in Nørre Utrup – according to a report by Robert Spreckels, pilot from Jagdgeschwader 11, Barrett was shot down by Sigfried Rudschinat in a Focke Wulf Fw 190 from JG11's 10th Staffel. Barrett was killed in the crash. It is evidence of the confusion that the Germans at first believed Barrett's aircraft to be one of their own. It was only when the wreck was salvaged the next day, that they realized it was a Mustang. The six attackers who returned home had mistaken Barrett for Williams; and Williams was therefore initially reported "missing, believed killed". Rowland's wife, Joan, did not receive a telegram correcting the mistake until Rowland's 21st birthday, 9th June. Richard Barrett was buried some days later – about 20th-24th May – in Frederikshavn Cemetery. He was 24 years old, and came from New Zealand. Just as many other pilots from the Commonwealth countries – Australia, Canada, etc. – Barrett served in a British squadron, even though he was in the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

In Frederikshavn Cemetery the eight German pilots, who were killed in the battle, were also buried.

The Air Battle Seen from the Ground

In Hjallerup Meadow, workmates Knud Jensen and Niels Larsen were digging for peat; there were two teams of peat diggers working, assisted by their wives and children, who piled up the peat. Knud Jensen has related the events to the Local History Archives of Hjallerup:

“I was standing in the peat ditch, digging peat and therefore I only had my head above the ground. Suddenly I could hear engine noise, but we were so used to that. We saw and heard the old German transport planes several times a day. They flew low and at a minimal speed. The noise became louder, but I still could not see the plane. Suddenly it appeared from the West. When I saw it, it went a little higher to clear the telephone wires at the Sæby road, but it went low down as soon as it was over the road. At the same time, I noticed that there was a plume of black smoke trailing from it. – It’s on fire, it’ll crash – I thought.

“The plane was heading directly towards our heads, and it was about two thirds of a mile away. When it was almost over us, I heard a squeaking or hooting noise from above. When I looked up, there was a British fighter, which dipped down towards the German plane.

“I yelled to the folks up on the ground, “Throw yourselves down, it’s crashing now!” As for me, I squatted down with my back towards the side of the peat ditch and could see the whole area up in the air. It was as if time stood still.

“I was the one who saw most during the battle. All of them up on the ground only had time to throw themselves face down on to the ground. The British pilot came in a steep dive from the one side, and when he was almost under the German plane, he turned and levelled off. At that moment he was no more than 30 feet from me, and I could clearly see him sit under the transparent hood. But then all hell broke loose. The pilot fired his machine guns, and the German rear gunner answered the fire with his. How many seconds it lasted, I do not know.

“As we could not see any other planes, one of the workers shouted: “Now you can get up, they’ve gone now”. But suddenly there was more shooting from the machine gun over the meadow, and the man, who had shouted, got busy getting back under cover. Then it was quiet - no shooting and no engine noise.

“A lot happened within a few seconds, and when we finally dared to get out of cover, we saw that two German planes were lying there burning, and further out was a plane which had made an emergency landing near the Kærsgaard farms. Later we learnt that it was the British pilot who had made an emergency landing, because one of the wings had hit the top of an electricity mast. The pilot had disappeared after the landing.”

Afterwards, one of the peat diggers admitted that he had been so terrified during the air battle that he had bitten his pipe mouthpiece to pieces.

Down on the Ground

Rowland realized that his emergency landing must have been watched, and that he did not have any time to waste. He got away from his plane so quickly that there was no time to set it on fire, as was otherwise the order in such cases. He did not even have the regulation flying suit and boots on, but wore battle dress trousers and tunic and (contrary to regulations) ordinary shoes (he was to regret that later on). Under his tunic he wore a polo neck sweater. He discarded his tunic, after unpicking the RAF emblem; he retained that in order to prove he was an RAF pilot, if he were captured by the Germans; unless he could prove he was a serviceman, he risked being shot as a spy in such a situation. In the polo neck sweater, he could pass for a civilian.

Rowland hid in a ditch, where he must have been when the first authorities came along, less than an hour after the landing. They were four Danish auxiliary policemen, who had been ordered by village constable Jens Bødker Jensen in Dronninglund to guard the shot-down plane. A little later came police constable Frode Clausager (1915-1983) from Hjallerup together with some German officers. At the demand of the Germans, Clausager asked for more men for guard duty, since 11 German planes had been shot down. Bødker Jensen only had the four men, however, who therefore stayed with Rowland's Mustang, which they guarded along with four German soldiers. It was undoubtedly very fortunate for Rowland that these first Germans did not have dogs with them. The Germans have presumably not imagined that Rowland could still be so close to the landing spot. Police constable Frode Clausager, who became the leader of the resistance movement in Sæby in the spring of 1945, was already at that time involved in the resistance movement, and would have helped Rowland escape, had he met him without German accompaniment; but Rowland was not to know that.

The German soldiers, who shared the task of guard duty with the Danish auxiliary policemen, were old, amiable people; one of them had a camera and took pictures of the wrecked Mustang. Later he presented the negatives to one of the auxiliary policemen, Bernhard Lignell, in whose custody they have been ever since, and whose merit it is that this report can be illustrated with pictures of Rowland's plane.

The above-mentioned Oberleutnant Stahl relates that – when the air battle had quietened down after half an hour – he took a Fieseler Storch staff plane and flew out to the field where Rowland had landed. Stahl landed in the Storch next to the Mustang, and examined it, and presumably it was then that he found the escape hatch stuck in the air intake. The Danish auxiliary policemen, who as mentioned arrived on the scene less than an hour after the landing, saw nothing of this flying German visit, nor was it observed by anyone from the nearby farms of Store Kærsgaard and Diget. It **was**, however, seen by Søren Jensen, at that time apprentice to the electrician in Hjallerup; Søren Jensen had been sent out to repair the damaged electric wires.

Rowland's landing spot was just near Store Kærsgaard, which belonged to Thorvald Aaen, and from his ditch Rowland could see a German car arriving at the farm, and German soldiers searching the buildings and the nearest fields. The ditch was filled with water and was not suitable for spending the night in. Rowland reckoned that the most sensible place he could hide was at Store Kærsgaard, after the Germans had left it. According to his own statement, Rowland got to Store Kærsgaard about 19.00-19.30 on Wednesday evening. Thorvald Aaen's son, Knud (who was 13 years old in 1944) thinks, however, that it was at 13.00-13.30 in the afternoon.

At Store Kærsgaard, Lille Nedergaard and Store Løgtved

Rowland hid in the silo, about ten feet above the floor, in Store Kærsgaard's barn. As he remembers, several hours passed; then a lady came into the barn with a bucket in her hand. That was Thorvald Aaen's wife Sigrid, who came to fetch feed for the hens. According to Knud Aaen, that was about 15.00-15.30. Rowland watched her from the edge of some sacks. At that point he was moving a bit. Sigrid Aaen discovered him and stood paralyzed for some seconds, after which she hurried out. Rowland, who did not know whether she was a friend or foe, decided to stay where he was. A little later a man – Christian Christensen (born 1912), the cowman of the farm – came into the barn. He had Rowland hidden at the side of an old, empty water tank in the attic above the cowshed, and in that hiding place, Rowland stayed until the evening of the following day – that is the evening of Thursday, 18th May. It proved a wise precaution to move Rowland from the barn, since the next day the Germans returned to Store Kærsgaard to search the farm once more. They fired machine guns into the hay in the barn to drive the pilot out. It was a miracle that the farm was not burnt down. The Germans did not like the idea of going up the narrow ladder to the attic as they did not want chaff on their uniforms. Therefore they ordered Christian Christensen to go up and look. The cowman came down again and could confirm that there was no-one there. It certainly would not have continued to go well, but then some people told the Germans that they had seen a man run in the direction of Dronninglund Road. The Germans thought that this man must be the pilot, and hurried away to the road and the Dahl farms to look for him. Of course without success; and later it appeared that the man they had seen running, was Vester Dahl's servant boy.

Rowland thus spent the night between Wednesday and Thursday and the whole of the following day, Thursday, 18th May, at Store Kærsgaard. On that day Christian Christensen brought him some sandwiches from the Aaen family, and after dark – Knud Aaen thinks about 23.00-23.30 – Rowland set off towards Frederikshavn, but at first he went towards the East so as to avoid the busiest roads.

The next stop on Rowland's route was Lille Nedergaard, which lies due east of Stagsted. It is only a few miles from Store Kærsgaard, but if Rowland did not leave Store Kærsgaard until shortly before midnight, there is a possibility of his having gone round in circles in the dark. Then he has gone into Lille Nedergaard's barn and stayed there through most of the next day, Friday, 19th May. He made his presence known to the family on the farm at about 15.00. Lille Nedergaard belonged to Anna and Peter Johan Pedersen, who made Rowland welcome. Rowland gave his hosts a pea whistle, which was a part of his emergency equipment. It had been attached to his battledress tunic, which he had thrown away after his landing, so he must have put it in his trouser pocket then. They looked at a map, which was printed on Rowland's pilot's silk scarf, but unfortunately, it was only a general map of France, Western Germany, Holland and Belgium, so it was of no real use. The Pedersens found a map of Denmark, perhaps in a school atlas, and looked at it together with Rowland. What seemed to be most important at that time was to avoid the places in the local area, where there were Germans, including the places where planes had crashed after Wednesday's air battle. Rowland did not spend more than 2-3 hours with the family, and most likely left Lille Nedergaard at around 18.00. Rowland himself had forgotten all about his visit to Lille Nedergaard, but it came back to mind, when he met Peter Johan Pedersen's son, warrant officer (senior sergeant) Albert Pedersen, on a visit to Aalborg Air Base in 1992.

Albert Pedersen, who was 10 years old in 1944, went to Rosenby School. He remembers that when the air battle took place on the Wednesday, they had arithmetic – which did not have the attention of all the pupils; so they followed the action in the air through the school's windows. The teacher was at first irritated about this; but when the children reported that they could see a German plane, where the crew were baling out, he had to watch it, too! It was a Ju 88 – probably the last one Rowland had been fighting. It looked as if it were heading straight for the school. The teacher hurried out of the schoolroom to get his family into safety, whilst the schoolchildren remained behind and watched the drama in the air with great interest – at the last minute the German plane changed its course and crashed half a mile southeast of the school, where it was completely disintegrated. As far as is known, the entire crew of four had got out of the plane beforehand.

During the evening of Friday, 19th May, Rowland got to Ørsø, where he hid in the barn of Store Løgtved farm, which belonged to Anna Sofie and Knud Nyholm Callisen. On the Saturday morning he was discovered by the family dog. The Callisens treated him to breakfast, and a map of Denmark as well as a Danish-English phrase book, which was a big help to him later. - Rowland was warned by the Callisens not to go further east, as there were many Nazis living in Agersted.

On the Road

By looking at the map of Denmark, Rowland came to the conclusion that his best chance of getting to Sweden was across the Øresund, so he decided to try and get to Zealand. Therefore he set off towards Nørresundby. Some uncertainty remains as to how soon he reached there, and whether he walked during the night between Saturday, 20th, and Sunday, 21st May. Anyway, he arrived at Nørresundby one of the two days, most likely Sunday, 21st. Whilst he was plodding on, a large lorry came past with the wreck of his Mustang on the platform. That was an emotional moment for Rowland, because his son's name was painted on the plane – but that strengthened his resolution. He vowed to return home to his family.

At the Limfjord bridge an unforeseen obstacle presented itself. The bridge was guarded by Germans, who demanded to see identity cards for everyone who went over the bridge. Whilst Rowland was wondering how to overcome this obstacle, a convoy of eight German canvas-covered lorries drove past in the direction of the bridge. On the lorries were men in grey denim working clothes, whom Rowland judged to be forced labourers, working for the Germans. When the first lorry stopped at the northern German checkpoint, 1/4 way out on the bridge, the last lorry was right beside Rowland. By sudden impulse, he jumped up on the platform. With his finger to his lips he signalled to the men on the lorry not to give him away. They willingly made room for him, and he sat right up against the driver's cabin, where the others covered him. Judging from their language, Rowland thinks they were Polish workers. When the lorry reached the checkpoint, the man next to him discreetly slipped an identity card into his hand, which he handed to the German guard. The latter handed it back without examining it, and the lorry was waved on. At the Southern checkpoint the examination was even more perfunctory. Rowland thinks it was lucky he was in the last of the eight lorries, as the Germans checked it less thoroughly than the first ones.

When the lorry was over the bridge, it stopped at the statue of the Cimbrer Bull - maybe because of traffic lights – and Rowland used the opportunity to jump off. The whole trip over the bridge had

perhaps taken five minutes.

There were a lot of German soldiers in the crowd on the street, and Rowland, who was somewhat nervous, just drifted along with the crowd. When he came to the top of a hill, he saw a park to the right and a crowd of people, who were going in there, so he decided to do the same. When he came in the park, which must have been Skovdalen, he saw that a football match was in progress between two German teams. He took his place together with the other spectators, and saw the first half of the match, which did not particularly appeal to him. During the break, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, he left the park and walked south of the town.

Once out of the town, he kept to the fields, and hid at night once more on a farm (which he has not been able to identify), where the next morning – as in Ørsø – he was discovered by the family dog. Fortunately once more they were friendly people, who not only gave him food (greasy boiled pork, which he did not like), but also an old coat, which he put on, making him look less conspicuous.

Rowland decided to speed up his march, and the next night he only slept a few hours in the forest at Arden. He thinks it was on the sixth day after his emergency landing that he reached Irma and Anthon Munk in the old Sognefogedgaard in Bigum, west of Hobro. He now had a problem with his feet, as his shoe soles were worn through, and his feet were full of inflamed sores and blood blisters. Anthon Munk welcomed Rowland, and when he saw the state of his feet, he contacted Doctor Knud Repholtz (1892-1964) in Klejtrup.

At the Home of Walter Lonsdale

For Rowland this contact was a stroke of good luck. Knud Repholtz' wife Betty Sofie, née Petersen (born 1892) had been married before to a New Zealander, Walter Lonsdale, who had fallen during the First World War as a major in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. In this marriage she had a son called Walter Lonsdale, who had been a pilot in the Danish Fleet Air Arm until 29th August, 1943 (before the war he had flown in Greenland, and did so again after the liberation, when he rejoined the Fleet Air Arm). Walter Lonsdale Jun. was living at the home of his mother and stepfather in Klejtrup, and was an active resistance man, in the group of the well-known supervisor of supply droppings, Anton Toldstrup (1915-1991).

After Walter Lonsdale and Knud Repholtz had satisfied themselves that Rowland was in fact the person he claimed to be, and not a German infiltrator, they took him home and nursed his feet.

The next day – probably Wednesday, 24th May – Walter Lonsdale and Rowland cycled from Klejtrup to Hobro, from where they went by train to Randers. The plan was to install Rowland at a safe place in Randers, whilst his escape was planned. But unfortunately the Gestapo had made a raid the night before against the local resistance movement, and the flat in Randers was no longer safe. Whilst Walter Lonsdale was finding out the lie of the land, Rowland spent an hour alone looking at the shop windows in Randers. Then he and Walter Lonsdale went on by train to Aarhus, where the managers of the Town Hall canteen, Halding and Ditte Thun, were contact people. The Aarhus resistance movement met there, and even used the Town Hall basement for shooting practice!

Walter Lonsdale returned to Klejtrup. The Gestapo had apparently been watching him, for two days later they made a raid on the doctor's house. Walter Lonsdale got away, but the Germans took Knud Repholtz with them and interrogated him for 24 hours. However, they did not get anything out of him and finally drove him out into a forest 30 miles away, took all his clothes from him and left him! - They also questioned Walter Lonsdale's young son, Allan. His father had instructed him that, if he suddenly had to go away, the boy should say that "Daddy has gone to Sweden". However, as Allan wished to cover up for his father, he told the Germans that his Daddy had gone to Viborg – and that was exactly where Walter Lonsdale was! However, he managed to stay free, and came through the war unharmed. Walter Lonsdale died during the autumn of 1984.

Underground in Aarhus

In Aarhus Rowland was interrogated by a 'parachutist', an agent of the SOE (Special Operations Executive), as the resistance people were still afraid that he might have been "planted" by the Germans, but when they were convinced that there was nothing "fishy" going on, Rowland was escorted by Toldstrup personally to a hiding place, Ydunsvej 35, in Aabyhøj, just outside Aarhus.

It was the home of the newspaper Jyllands-Posten's sub-editor, Lasse Egebjerg (1900-1960). Lasse Egebjerg was the son of H. R. Egebjerg (1860-1924), editor of the newspaper Folkebladet for Svendborg Amt. Egebjerg Senior had been very interested in defence, took an active part in the voluntary rifle movement at the end of the 1800s, and was one of the founders of the Conservative Party in 1915. As a young man he had travelled in England and took a keen interest in English politics; for instance, he published a book on Gladstone in 1896. His sympathies had been inherited by his son Lasse, who later translated Winston Churchill's volumes about the Second World War into Danish. - So it was very natural for Lasse Egebjerg to shelter the fugitive Rowland. Later that year Lasse Egebjerg himself had to escape to Sweden, where he lived in Gothenburg as a member of the staff of the Danish Press Service in Sweden; he was also employed at the refugee office.

Rowland remained in Lasse Egebjerg's home for a week, whilst his shoulder and feet recovered. Rowland does not remember much of this period. After the resistance movement had taken him under its wing, he felt that everything was much more relaxed – and therefore he no longer remembers any details.

North Again

Most likely on Thursday, 1st June, Rowland was escorted by Anton Toldstrup by train to Aalborg. On 26th May Toldstrup had been asked by the Jutland resistance leader, Vagn Bennike, to take over the leadership of Region 1, Northern Jutland, after its previous leader, Captain Carl-Gustav Schøller, who had been obliged to go underground. Toldstrup continued to perform the duties of supervisor of supply droppings in Jutland after he had become regional leader. But in September, 1944 he moved his headquarters from Aarhus to Aalborg.

In Aalborg, Toldstrup handed Rowland over to a resistance man called Andersen, who had the cover name of "Jens Lyn" ("Flash Gordon"). Rowland was installed by him with a family, which it has not

been possible to identify again. Rowland thinks the family had a couple of sons of his own age, and together with a friend of the same age, they were members of an arms receiving group. In Rowland's opinion, these young people were extremely reckless. For example, they took him with them to the barber's for a haircut. The barber's shop was in a basement, and whilst Rowland sat in the barber's chair, he could see German military boots walk past at eye level.

Rowland spent two nights with the Aalborg family. Probably on Saturday, 3rd June, he was fetched by a resistance man called Kaj Mortensen on a sidecar motorcycle. Equipped with false identity papers as a deaf and dumb brush maker, he was taken to Albæk Rectory.

Arne Madsen Hindsholm (1895-1974), rural dean and rector in Albæk, often sheltered people escaping from the Germans, on their way out of the country. For this reason, the resistance people had nicknamed him "The Pilot of the Heavens". During the winter of 1944-45 the Germans became aware of this unauthorized use of the rectory, and Dean Hindsholm therefore had to go underground. The previously smooth-shaved dean grew a beard, which he kept after the liberation.

Rowland believes that he spent one night at the rectory. The rector's family had a guest, a young man, about 17-18 years old. Rowland had the impression that he was a relative, maybe a nephew of the dean. The young man was very fascinated by Rowland's silk pilot's scarf, and on the Sunday Rowland let him borrow it to wear in church.

During the service on the Sunday morning Rowland hid in the attic of the rectory. Suddenly he heard shooting outside. He sneaked downstairs and looked out, and saw German soldiers in the little wood behind the rectory! However, he realized that they were on an exercise in the wood, so he went back to his hiding place. A little later, but still before the service was over, Rowland's contact man came and knocked the agreed code signal on the door – so Rowland did not get his silk scarf back. Rowland does not remember what kind of transport was used for the journey to Sæby.

The German soldiers, whom Rowland saw, may in fact have been billeted in the rectory. In any case Albæk Parish had German military billeting during the last year of the war – and Dean Hindsholm has related after the war that at one time there were 11 German privates installed in one end of the large rectory (which was nearly 100 feet long), and three German officers in the other end, whilst he himself in the middle part housed fugitive Danish resistance people and allied airmen.

Away from Sæby

As far as he remembers, Rowland spent the afternoon hours in a house in Sæby, before he was taken on board the "Laura" at 9 o'clock in the evening. FN366 Laura was an 11 ton fishing boat, owned by fishing skipper, later harbour master, Jens Christian Jensen (1909-1986) – called Asaa-Jens, and also manned by Henry Christensen.

Asaa-Jens was contacted in the autumn of 1943 by shipbuilder Ditlev Pedersen, called DP (1885-1966), who was the leader of the fugitive transports from Sæby. DP enquired if Asaa-Jens would like to help out with the illegal voyages with fugitives. Asaa-Jens agreed, and made his first trip on 17th December, 1943. He managed to get 150 people in safety in Sweden, before he and several

other members of the escape organization in Sæby were arrested by the Gestapo in Sæby on 24th January, 1945, and had to spend the last months of the occupation in German captivity, first in Kong Hans Street Prison in Aalborg, later in the Frøslev Camp in Southern Jutland. - Henry Christensen, who was from Asaa, stopped sailing with Asaa-Jens after six months, as his family thought it was too dangerous. The trip with Rowland Williams was probably the last one he was on. After that Asaa-Jens had Oscar Isaksen as a partner for a longer period.

The Laura's usual mooring place is shown on the map of Sæby Harbour. Rowland may have gone on board here, but there is also the possibility that he did so at the fishermen's equipment place, east of the lifeboat station of that time. Kalle Moss (alias Carl Rasmussen, skipper of FN359 Karen) relates that that was where both the Karen and the Laura were moored when they had to unload the weapons and explosives which were brought back from Sweden. The coastal police had an office in the eastern corner of the fertilizer warehouse of the time. The coastal police, whose local leader was later detective superintendent Anders Poulsen (1920-1988), was completely integrated in the escape organization, and often had fugitives hidden in the fertilizer warehouse, before they could go on board in the escape ship. The greatest number of fugitives ever to be sent off at any one time was 20 – who sailed on the packet boat Elise, which had its mooring place near the crane, just outside the fertilizer warehouse, and the building east of there which was a beer depot. Further out in the harbour was a German guard ship. There was no telephone on it, so when the Germans had to communicate with the outside world, they used the telephone of the coastal police. Apart from the guard ship there was a German guard tower on the beach, some distance south of the town, just about where the house of No. 61 Solsbækvej is today. From this guard tower all the activity in the harbour could be monitored, also at night by the help of searchlights. The guard tower was manned by elderly reserve soldiers, German home guard members, who were hardly very efficient. The crew of the guard ship (who were probably Austrians) presumably had more than just an idea about what was going on in Sæby Harbour – but most of them preferred to turn a blind eye to it. They were war weary and did not want to have any bother with the Danes. Several of them used to listen to the BBC at the coastal police office. Frede Hansen, coastal policeman at the time, who came on duty at 7 o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, 6th June, recalls that he told the Germans the news about the allied invasion of Normandy, and that during the conversation he said something on the lines of "Now Germany is finished": "Deutschland kaput". That infuriated one of the Germans – who was perhaps a die-hard Nazi. After that time the coastal policemen were more careful about what they said to the Germans.

The route which the Laura took, went south of Læsø. The Laura should have met a contact boat, maybe the Mercur, the illegal fishing boat of the Danish Relief Service (christened in honour of its head sponsor, the Swedish Commercial Bank), or the Beltana from Hönö, which sometimes relieved the Mercur. During Christmas 1944, the Beltana's skipper and his five sons, who were sailing with him, were killed when their ship struck a mine. – If it was blowing more than speed 7, it was impossible to transfer passengers and goods from and to the contact boats in the open sea, and in such cases the Danish boats had standing orders to go direct to a Swedish harbour. On this trip the contact boat did not arrive, and the fugitives were therefore taken in the Laura right to Gothenburg, where they arrived in the morning at about 5.30.

According to the Danish Relief Service passenger list, the travelling party on Laura consisted of 11 people, viz.:

Rowland T. Williams
 Harry Kjeldrup Hvistendahl, engineer,
 Johnny Alfred August Segers, mechanic from Antwerp
 Mrs. Kamma Emilie Larsson
 Harry Larsson (with the code name of “Bagger”)
 Arne Anders Nielsen (Espegaard), junior master, Aalborg (with the code name of
 “Wendelbo”)
 Christen Hovgaard, office clerk
 Poul Erik Blok, apprentice
 Kjeld Ewers Nielsen, ship’s captain
 Ejnar Madsen
 Finn Madsen

At that time, “Wendelbo” was the resistance leader in Aalborg and member of the regional staff, but had to leave the country. Both he and “Bagger” were ardent communists at that time, and during the voyage they started a lively discussion with Rowland about why the Western allies had not yet opened “the other front”, so as to relieve the Russians on the Eastern front. It was not easy for Rowland to give those two a satisfactory reply, partly because he was seasick, and partly because he did not know enough about the future strategy of the Western allies.

A “Vanished” Day

At the entrance to Gothenburg, the Laura was received by a Swedish patrol boat. When the Swedish sailors heard that there was an Englishman on board the Laura, they told the good news that the allies had started landing in Normandy that very morning. Thus a heavy burden was lifted from Rowland’s shoulders with regard to the two critical travelling companions.

But that also means that the arrival in Gothenburg took place on Tuesday, 6th June. And Rowland remembers going from Albæk to Sæby on Sunday, 4th June, which is supported by the fact that the departure from Albæk Rectory took place whilst a church service was in progress. That means that one day has “vanished” in the time schedule. After so many years it is hardly possible to account satisfactorily for the missing 24 hours. The most likely explanation is that Rowland has stayed overnight in Sæby – but does not remember anything about that himself, and neither Asaa-Jens nor other members of the escape organization in Sæby have been able to shed any light on the matter.

Kalle Moss surmises that Rowland has possibly been fetched by car from Albæk Rectory by Doctor Frederik Gybel of Sæby (1909-1977). As a doctor, he had a petrol ration and driving permission. If Rowland spent the night in Sæby, it might very well have been at Frederik Gybel’s house, at No. 7 Hans Aabelsvej. At this time, numerous Sæby homes housed fugitives en route to Sweden. Niels Christian Fabricius, dental mechanic (1909-1965), acted as lodging chief.

In Sweden – and Home Again

The Danish Relief Service, which had its office in Gothenburg, handed Rowland over to the British Consulate General, who sent him to Stockholm, where he spent some weeks. A telegram was dispatched to Joan about him being safe and sound – which, as mentioned above, reached her on Rowland's 21st birthday, 9th June, and so the whole street celebrated! – Anyway, Joan had refused all along to believe that Rowland could be dead. – With the help of the British air attaché, Rowland was flown home from Stockholm on 1st July, in one of BOAC's converted Mosquito courier planes. The trip ended at Leuchars Air Base in Scotland. Rowland was granted a month's leave, and returned to Squadron No. 65 on 30th July. The 3rd July it had been moved to France, and was at Berre, when Rowland returned. - As recognition for his efforts, Rowland was awarded the DFM – Distinguished Flying Medal. - It was not until he had returned to his squadron that Rowland made his personal combat report about the events of 17th May – the report is dated 7th August, 1944. It has been a main source for the description of the air battle in this article.

Squadron No. 65 was based at different places in France and Belgium until October, 1944, when it was moved back to England and based in Norfolk. It carried out mostly escort flights for the American long range bombers, which performed daylight missions over Germany, as well as for RAF's Lancaster bombers, which flew daylight missions against shipping in Norwegian waters.

In November, 1944 Rowland – who had by now been promoted to Pilot Officer – visited the exhibition called "Fighting Denmark", which was held in the showrooms of the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Factory in Old Bond Street in London. - His visit here was mentioned on the front page of the weekly "Frit Danmark", which was published in London, in the number for Friday, 24th November. Here his participation in the mission against Aalborg on the 17th May is described, but **not** his emergency landing and escape from Denmark – probably because of the risk of German reprisals against those who helped him during his stay in Denmark.

In January, 1945, Rowland became a Mustang instructor at an OTU (Operational Training Unit) for 3-4 months until the war in Europe was over in the month of May. Then he was given the opportunity of becoming a test pilot for a civil aircraft manufacturer in Barrackpore, north of Calcutta in India, which assembled Mustang fighters, to be used against the Japanese on the Burman front; at the same time as carrying out the Indian job, Rowland remained in the RAF. His appointment came on VE-Day itself, 8th May, 1945. – During some unrest in India, he was wounded by a knife, and spent three months at a field hospital and convalescing in the hills. In September, 1946, he was demobilized from the Royal Air Force.

Back to Denmark

Rowland studied to become an electrical engineer and at first had a job in the Welsh coalmining industry, then for the mill concern of Rank Hovis-McDougall. Until retirement at the age of 60, he had no contact with Denmark.

In May, 1984, 40 years after his emergency landing, Rowland visited Northern Jutland and met amongst others, Knud Aaen, son of Thorvald Aaen, farmer at Store Kærsgaard, and he revisited the place where he landed.

In June, 1986, Rowland was in Denmark once more together with Joan, and at a festive celebration at Sæby Town Hall, he met Asaa-Jens and Arne Espegaard as well as a wide selection of old resistance people and members of the Sæby escape organization.

In 1990 Rowland was in Denmark alone, and visited Sæby during the days of 3rd-4th May, when he participated in the commemorative annual reunion of the Frøslev Comrades at the Sæby Søbad restaurant. On 5th May he took part in the unveiling of a memorial stone in Rebild for the 69 allied pilots, who lost their lives during the dropping of weapons in Denmark during 1944-45.

The latest visit of Rowland and Joan to Denmark took place in April/May, 1992; at a celebration in Sæby, Rowland was presented with photos of his wrecked Mustang by Bernhard Lignell, who had kept them since 1944. On this visit Rowland and Joan also attended the annual reunion of the Frøslev Comrades.

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Picture Captions

(p. 31)

Flight Sergeant Rowland T. Williams, Royal Air Force. – The only photo from the war years of Rowland in uniform.

(p. 32)

The flight route on 17th May, 1944, from Southern England to Northern Jutland.

(p. 33)

General arrangement drawing of the North American Mustang III.

(p. 34)

A Mustang III in the air (this is **not** Rowland's aircraft).

(p. 35)

Richard Barrett's tombstone in Frederikshavn Cemetery (Sæby Museum, negative no. 463.5.39-40).

(p. 36)

Rowland's aircraft after the emergency landing – at the belly landing, the propeller blades were bent, but otherwise the aircraft is almost intact. – As can be seen, the German guards are very busy taking photos of the aircraft and of each other.

(p. 38)

More photos of Rowland's aircraft after the emergency landing. On the top photo, the damage to the port wing can be seen, which was due to the close encounter with the electricity mast. – These were the photos which were given to Bernhard Lignell of Dronninglund by the German who took them.

(p. 40)

Rowland's escape route through Denmark and to Gothenburg. The route between Sæby and

Gothenburg is shown as a straight line – but Asaa-Jens recalled that they did in fact go round Læsø to the South.

(p. 43)

An aerial view of Albæk Rectory. Above the rectory is the church and the churchyard. To the left is the church hall of the time (it is now the residence of the sexton); behind this building is Albæk School. One notices that the road passes the church hall to the **east**; today, it has been moved and passes the house to the West.

(p. 44)

Dean Arne Madsen Hindsholm (1895-1974). A post-war photo, where the dean sports a beard.

(p. 45)

FN366 Laura of Sæby. Photo from the Spring of 1939, probably from Asaa Harbour. The Laura was of 10.68 gross tons, and had a 35 horse-power engine. Asaa-Jens owned the boat from 1944 until 1948 (Sæby Museum, negative no. D.4.1.31).

(p. 46)

Map of Sæby Harbour from 1941. The two possible moorings of the Laura are indicated: at the equipment quay furthest north (which is where Rowland and the other fugitive passengers probably embarked), and at the southern quay. Also shown are the usual mooring of the packet boat, and the mooring of the German guard ship. – On occasions, there were more than one German guard ship. In the corner of the large fertilizer warehouse near the mooring of the packet boat, the office of the coastal police has been indicated.

(p. 48)

The article from “Frit Danmark”, vol. 4, no. 47, 24th November 1944, which features Rowland’s visit to the exhibition “Fighting Denmark” in London.

(The text of the article)

Fighter Pilot from the Aalborg Raid visits ”Fighting Denmark”.

The exhibition in London closes on Saturday, 25th November at 6 p.m., but re-opens in Newcastle on 5th December.

Our photo shows pilot officer R.T. Williams, D.F.M., visiting the Danish exhibition in Bond Street, London. Pilot Officer Williams was particularly interested in those sections of the exhibition that deal with the illegal Danish organizations.

The young English airman participated as a fighter pilot in an attack on the large German air base at Aalborg in May, and shot down four German aircraft – three bombers and one fighter.

On our photo, P.O. Williams is seen talking to managing director Emil Bech, the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Factory, about the courageous R.A.F. Mosquito raid against the Gestapo headquarters at Aarhus University. In the foreground is the R.A.F. model of the City of Aarhus, which was used at the briefing of the pilots before they took off for the Jutland Capital.

The exhibition “Fighting Denmark”, which has been visited by a very large number of people, closes on Saturday, 25th November at 6 p.m. Do take your English friends to the exhibition and let them see the film about the Danish underground movement, which is shown continuously throughout the day.

After finishing in London, the “Fighting Denmark” exhibition will be transferred to Newcastle-on-Tyne, town of the Danish sailors, where it opens in Lane Art Gallery on 5th December.

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Sources

The primary source to Rowland’s experiences in Denmark has been Rowland himself. His personal combat report of 7th August, 1944, has been unearthed from the RAF archives in England. – In addition, Rowland has been interviewed by the authors of this article – as well as others – several times since 1984. His story has been related (in Danish) in:

Ole Rønne: MIKE - FIRST OF THE FEW. A brief sketch of the wartime history of RAF pilot Rowland Williams.

Local History Archives for Hjallerup and Surroundings: A Translation [into Danish] of ex-fighter pilot Rowland Williams’ report about the air battle over Aalborg on 17th May, 1944, told at Kærsgaard, Hjallerup, on 2nd May, 1984 – plus the report of a Danish eye witness, Knud Jensen, about the shooting down.

Verner Jensen: Three Paths Crossing at Sæby. Published by the Bangsbo Museum, Frederikshavn, 1986, on the occasion of Rowland Williams’ visit to Sæby (also in English translation).

A number of the Danes, with whom Rowland was in contact in 1944, have contributed their versions of the story. Since the unravelling of the events only began after 40 years, it is not always possible to obtain complete harmony between individual testimonials, and some obscure points will never be completely elucidated, because the participants of 1944 have died in the meantime.

Among other, more important printed sources to the train of events, the following may be mentioned:

Henrik Skov Kristensen, Claus Kofoed & Frank Weber: Vestallierede Luftangreb i Danmark under 2. verdenskrig (Air raids in Denmark by the Western Allies during the Second World War), vol. II (Aarhus, 1988), pp. 541-550, 673, 755 & 833-34 (annotated).

Frank Weber: “Luftkampen over Aalborg i 1944 – fly for fly” (“The Air Battle over Aalborg in

1944 – Plane by Plane”), in the newspaper Vendsyssel Tidende, 16th May, 1984.

Jørgen Helme: “Day Ranger Aalborg”, in Flyvehistorisk Tidsskrift (Journal of Aviation History) No. 4, November 1984, pp. 77-80 (annotated; also based on German source material).

Anders Bjørnvad: “De fandt en vej” (“They found a way” – Odense, 1970) briefly mentions Rowland on p. 150. But this book – as well as two other books by the same author: “Natten, der varede otte dage” (“The Night that Lasted for Eight Days” – Copenhagen, 1967) and “Faldne allierede flyvere 1939-1945” (“Fallen Allied Airmen 1939-1945” – Odense, 1978), provide a good introduction to the aerial activities of the Western Allies in Denmark during the German Occupation.

The fugitive transports from the harbours of Eastern Vendsyssel to Sweden have inter alia been described in:

Ejnar Jakobsen: Sæby under besættelsen 1940-1945 (Sæby during the Occupation 1940-1945 – Sæby, 1970, reprint 1985).

Poul S. Poulsen: Færgen til friheden (Ferry to Freedom – Hjørring, 1978)

Kalle Moss (Carl Rasmussen): En fiskerdrengs oplevelser på ondt og godt (The Experiences of a Young Fisherman – for Better, for Worse – printed privately, Sæby, 1989).

Rowland Williams’ visits to Denmark in 1984, 1986 and 1992 have been extensively covered by the local press. The newspaper cuttings – and the other sources mentioned – may be found in the newspaper cutting file “Rowland Williams” in the Local History Archives, Sæby Museum.