

YOUR YESTERYEAR

Film commemorates the crew of Wellington lost in bombing raid

VETERANS AND RELATIVES
OF THOSE LOST IN RAID UNITED
AT CATHEDRAL CEREMONY

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"Pay attention everybody: we're over the aerodrome but I can see practically nothing. We could have a stab at landing."

"Have a crack at it, sir."

"Okay, keep your fingers crossed."

On December 18, 2018, a commemoration ceremony was held in Ely Cathedral to honour the young members of the RAF who perished during The Battle of Heligoland Bight - the first named aerial battle of the Second World War.

Today (May 11), a new film, entitled, *Catharsis: Reconciling a Tragedy*, will premiere in Ely, a film that will contain footage from December's ceremony alongside historical footage shot in 1939.

The ceremony was remarkable in that the occasion had not been organised by officials as part of a national day of mourning. Instead, the occasion was engendered by a small group of local citizens involved in the Heligoland39 Project, a project that aims to track down and unite relatives of the Allied and German airmen who died fighting in The Battle of Heligoland Bight on December 18, 1939.

Having tracked down a significant number of people connected to this event during the course of a two-year worldwide search, 82 friends and relatives travelled from Australia, Canada and Europe and from across the UK to participate in the ceremony at Ely Cathedral. Many of them met there on that occasion for the first time.

A large contingent of RAF personnel also attended the ceremony, and the Royal British Legion standards for Ely, Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, and Rickmansworth led the Mayoral procession down the Nave.

One of the men who played an integral part in the organisation of

that ceremony was Jack Waterfall, leader of the Heligoland39 Project. Mr Waterfall has a personal attachment to this episode in military history, being nephew to an uncle who, like many of the airmen involved in the Battle of Heligoland Bight, departed from RAF Feltwell in a Wellington Bomber, never to return.

Born nine years after his uncle passed away, Mr Waterfall spoke about what he knew about his uncle.

"I know quite a lot about him. He was born in 1918 (he would have been 100 years old last year). He and I were born into similar circumstances on the very same small-holding in the middle of the Fens. We resided in the same bungalow," he said.

"His grandfather had gone bust on the holding in 1908 and his father had lost his first wife, Alice (my grandmother), with babe in arms, to tuberculosis in 1929.

"He was born into pre-depression conditions, surrounded by horse and steam-driven technology. A very hard life, with little disposable income.

"He joined the RAF seeking a better life for himself."

Mr Waterfall's uncle, John Henry Waterfall, sought a better life for himself at the age of 20, when, on January 23, 1939, he joined 37 Squadron at RAF Feltwell.

Supplanting the Handley Page Harrows, Wellington Bombers began to arrive at RAF Feltwell in the May of that year. Come

September, war was declared.

John Waterfall, serving as a rear gunner in a Wellington Bomber, flew his first mission on January 14, 1940 - a practice sweep over the North Sea. He was to fly 20 missions between January and July of that year.

Following one of these missions, a report on the actions of Aircraftman 1st Class, John Henry Waterfall, appeared in the *London Gazette* on May 17, 1940. The report said:

"This airman was the rear gunner of an aircraft attacked by a superior number of enemy fighters, but by cool, deliberate and accurate fire, he shot down one Messerschmitt 109 in flames and severely damaged one Messerschmitt 110. His actions were undoubtedly instrumental in securing the safe return of his aircraft to its base."

Some time between this report and May 31, John Henry Waterfall was promoted to Sergeant.

Sgt Waterfall continued to fly missions over enemy territory for two more months, and flew his last mission on the night of July 6/7, 1940.

That night, three Wellington Bombers took off from RAF Feltwell on a mission to raid Bremen, Emden and Wilhelmshaven in northern Germany. One of these planes, Wellington Bomber R3236, contained F/O Doug Lindsay, P/O Ralph Ball, Sgt Alec Aitken, Sgt Alexander Glen, and Sgt Jack Waterfall DFM.

Due to unpropitious weather, that

night's mission was unsuccessful: "the weather was bad with heavy cloud extending up to the heights of 10,000 to 14,000 feet. Severe icing was experienced at some altitudes. Over the target area, the tops of the clouds were at 10,000 feet and small gaps were present which enabled the ground to be seen at intervals. Owing to the cloud, the aircraft were unable to identify either the primary, secondary or last resort targets and were forced to return with bombs on."

However, only two of these three aircraft returned to base; one arriving at RAF Feltwell at 1am, the other at 2.55am. Wellington R3236 failed to return.

According to a document found

in the military commandant's headquarters in Jever, "at 0.15am, I was informed by the air raid protection command that several enemy aircraft were flying towards Jever. I therefore sounded the air raid alarm at 0.28am."

Then, according to the notes in the Operations Record Book for the raid of July 6/7, 1940, "at 0.55am, the position of the aircraft was fixed at YZLZ 2625, 14 miles south west of Borkum by RAF Bircham Newton. From that time onwards, no further positions or messages were received from the aircraft."

The document from the headquarters in Jever in Lower Saxony continues:

"Up until 2.15am, there were several inward and outward flights, flak was fired by several batteries. At 2am, I went from my battle station in the commandant's HQ to the machine gun position in the commandant's HQ. At about 2.20am, noise could be heard from an aeroplane approaching rapidly from the north.

"Immediately afterwards, an English plane, probably a Wellington, approached the airfield at a height of 40 to 50 metres and in the direction two-to-eight. The aircraft immediately came under fire from the airfield's six flak-machine guns. The plane swung away over the landing field to six. Then it was also shot at by a 2cm gun from Halle 3.

"Several places reported that they had observed something jettisoned over the airfield (but) there was no explosion on the airfield. No unexploded bombs have been found so far.



Jack Waterfall with
representatives of the RAF

MARTA LOTYSZ-VEIGA



Unnamed painting
by Willy Müller