

Stanley Chapman's Recollection – posted in Britmodeller discussion

(<http://www.britmodeller.com/forums/index.php?/topic/234998720-halifax-hx333-np-j-revell-172-the-groningen-connection-ft-percy-the-peguin/>)

Halifax HX333 of 158 Squadron was lost in action during the night of 28/29 January 1944. The crew consisted of pilot D.A. "Robbie" Robinson, engineer L.A. "Les" Cardall, 2nd pilot D.A. Wilkinson, D. Rosenthal, S.E. Chapman. G.E. Hale, C.N. Durdin and E.J.L. Cote.

The crew took part in a bombing raid on Berlin. They reached their target, but at around 03:20 the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire over the target area in the tail section. The aircraft sustained such damage that the aircraft became very difficult to control; the pilot was barely able to steer the aircraft and to keep the nose pointed down. Stan Chapman recalls how they were lucky to have a 2nd pilot on board for the flight. Only by working together Robinson and Wilkinson were able to regain some control. Stan Chapman, the crew's bomb aimer, recalls: "The following hours were spent flying over a blacked out countryside on our own and every so often the aircraft was permitted to 'take up' its climbing and turning attitude under partial pilot control. The reason being our second pilot had to sit alongside the Skipper and hold the control column forward by sheer brute leg power, keeping this position until cramp overtook when he had to remove his leg, replacing it with the other one (...).

They were scheduled to arrive back at their base of Lissett, Yorkshire, at approximately 07:37 hours. However, at around 06:00 the aircraft was still somewhere over the northern Netherlands. Chapman: "I remember Les, our Flight engineer drawing attention to our petrol situation which was causing him some concern. I believe our height was about 13,000 feet when an unhealthy burst of flak brightened the clouds around us with dabs of orange. The Skipper put the nose down, at the same time turning back towards the Dutch coast that was behind us (...). The Skipper asked me to keep a look out for the coast and to bale out when certain we were over land. (...) Eventually could see the dark outline of a coast a few miles ahead. Our height was now between 4-5,000 feet, and it was getting lighter outside. I reported this to the Skipper who replied "Out you go first Stan, Best of Luck". I stuffed Percy the mascot inside my flying jacket, put on my parachute, opened the escape hatch, sat for a few seconds with my feet dangling in the slipstream, looked up to where I could see Wilky's flying boots, Dave our Navigator's face under his flying helmet. I gave him the usual thumbs up sign and lowered myself until the slipstream took over and whisked me smartly away (...). I recollect the snap as my chute opened, it felt as though my neck had broken. Looking down I could make out some farm buildings and an orchard, plus an uninviting barbed wire fence almost beneath me. I cleared the fence and finished up with my silk covering a small fruit tree and hanging with my feet about two feet from the ground. (...) Coming along the road in my direction two cyclists in uniform with rifles slung across their backs. Their arrival was meticulously timed, dropping their cycles against the hedge as I 'dropped in"! (...) The two questions asked me were "Are you R.A.F.?" and "Are you armed?". I was then marched in front of my captors towards the village noting the flat terrain with no hiding place and the rifle pointing at my back. This started my journey to Stalag Luft 4 at Sagan in Silesia.

The rest of the crew also escaped unhurt. The story wasn't quite over for the pilot Robbie and Les the engineer. As they were getting ready to abandon the aircraft in mid-air, they discovered that Les' parachute had been damaged by the anti-aircraft fire. Robbie and Les executed a perfect crash landing just outside the village of Zandeweer, in northern Groningen. When the aircraft had come to a standstill, Robbie and Les exited the plane and started inspecting the considerable damage to the tail. Suddenly they were greeted by a man who identified himself as "Mr. White" who offered them a meal. Because they didn't know if they could trust the man Robbie and Les began to walk away. (It has been suggested that this "Mr. White" might have been Piet de Wit, a local member of the resistance). Although they tried to avoid roads and villages, eventually the two crewmen were arrested by a Dutch police officer and later captured by German soldiers too. They were transported to the city of Groningen. Robbie recalls: "I will never forget the few hours that I spent in that town and the wonderful people there. Something special happened to my Engineer and I there. Later in the afternoon of the day that we were shot down we were taken there by the Germans. When we left the station we were taken along a road to a detention centre of the navy (this may have been the Engelse Kamp). In front of us walked a German officer with a pistol in his hand, next to us was a soldier with a rifle and behind us a soldier with a machine gun. This all, I assume to show the people that the Germans were winning and that the RAF was beaten. Instead of being impressed by this showing, the people gave us a wonderful reception. They would stand still on the pavement and give us a 'thumb up' or 'victory' sign, and a tram, which was over crowded, kept pace with us while everyone in it was waving at us and cheering us on. When we reached the camp, instead of depressed we felt like victors". Robbie and Les only stayed in Groningen for a few hours. Soon they were taken to the air force base at Leeuwarden and kept in jail there for a few days. After about a week they were taken to an interrogation center in Frankfurt. From there they were taken to Stalag Luft 6 prison camp at Heydekrug and in July 1944 they were taken to Stalag 4 in Pommeren. The last 3 months of the war they were 'on the march' being taken away from the advancing Russian forces and later away from the Americans. They were liberated by British troops and eventually repatriated.

Canadian Sgt Durdin, the mid upper gunner, who also bailed out just after Stan Chapman, was the only crew member to initially avoid captivity. Durdin was first hidden under straw bales in a sheep shed by locals where he stayed for about a day. He was then taken to a farm. The next morning together with two members of the resistance he biked to the city of Groningen (35 km!). It was a busy day and there were no ID checks. In Groningen he was transferred to the care of Tine Mulder (a.k.a. "Black Tine"), a Frisian female resistance fighter who had aided many other allied airmen. They took the tram to Drachten which was full of drunk German soldiers. Unfortunately, Durdin's luck ran out a few days later on his way down south, reportedly near Arnhem, where he was arrested. He also spent the rest of the war in captivity.

Percy the Penguin, Stanley Chapman's mascot, has been part of the RAF museum's collection since 1980. Clare Carr, the museum's curator, wrote a blog post about this curious item. She concludes: "You could say that the crew were unlucky to have to bale out and become prisoners of war, but Stanley's view was quite the reverse. He believed Percy had brought the crew good luck *"...Like many others on active service a mascot answered some unexplained*

need. The word 'lucky' is always associated with such items and it can, perhaps be born out on our surviving the night of January 28/29th 1944. Our losses were 44 aircraft that night, the vast majority of these crews did not witness the dull dismal dawn of the 29th which looked pretty good to me".