

Mini narrative: Sgt Laurence Whittle RAF



Laurence Whittle was my great-grandmother's cousin, and they lived together in the Durham mining town of Craghead. When Laurence turned 19 in 1938, he joined the RAF and was quickly picked to train as a wireless operator (WOP).

RAF Bomber Command was expanding in the period and on the very first month of the War he was posted to 9 Sqn stationed at RAF Honington. 9 Sqn were one of the few units in 1939 to be given the Wellington bomber and they also led the very first RAF bombing raid of WW2 on the 4/9/39. On this operation was Flight Officer (F/O) Bob Turner and his role during the raid on Keil Canal was to act as a firing controller for the full formation.

9 Sqn had few air gunners (AGs), and so Laurence was trained to be a WOP/AG. This meant he could operate both the gun turrets and the wireless set. He completed his training in October 1939 and became a member of a reserve crew. Sqns were split into numbered sections of 3 aircraft and Laurence was posted to number 3 section. Commanding his Wellington was F/O Bob Turner (the same Bob as previously mentioned) alongside his second pilot F/O Bill Craigen.

On the 18th of December 1939, 24 Wellingtons were detailed to take part in an unescorted daylight reconnaissance mission over Heligoland Bight. 9 Sqn committed 9 machines, and they were accompanied by a force from 149 Sqn and 37 Sqn. Leading

the force was a 149 Sqn Wing Commander called Richard Kellet with his second pilot F/O Raymond Cruikshank.

Daylight flying in formation was an unproven science and the events which took place over the German Bight changed the entire air War. The German's Freya Radar picked up the oncoming force and quickly dispatched many fighters to intercept. The Messerschmitt (ME) 109 and 110 were up against the Wellingtons and the result was a blood bath. Over 50% of the force was destroyed with over 60 airmen either being killed or captured.

Wolfgang Falck of the Luftwaffe led an attack on 9 Sqn's 3 section and his unit succeeded in destroying the whole section, there were no survivors. Another Nazi pilot called Helmut Lent claimed to have shot down 3 from 37 sqn but only 2 were confirmed. Both Falck and Lent later played a big part in Laurence's story, and they also changed the air war all together.



This is a 3 section picture from around October 1939. Craigen and Fordham (standing together) did not take part in the battle. The remaining 14 of these men did and died to Falck's force of fighters.

With the entirety of 3 section gone, Laurence and his new crew in Wellington N2942 were suddenly at the forefront of one of the RAF's most advanced bomber sqns.

Ronnie Driver (Father of Actress Minnie Driver) survived the battle of Heligoland after his Wellington crashed into the English Channel. His best friend, called Walter Lilley was the crew's only loss. They were taken to Grimsby hospital, and it was Bob Turner and Bill Craigen who were sent to bring the airmen back to Honington. Ronnie Driver was the first airman to receive the DFM in the War and this was something he hated. He later suffered PTSD and left the Sqn (**See Minnie Driver: Who do you think you are? Accessible from YouTube**).

With Laurence Bob and Bill becoming integral characters in 3 section, they were to be thrust into the chaotic and historic year of 1940 as a frontline crew. Together they flew during the battle of Norway and the entirety of the invasion of the low countries. By the end of Laurence's tour in August 1940, he had become one of Bomber Command's most experienced AGs at the mere age of 21.



Bob Turner



Bill Craigen

1940 was arguably the year the war became a total War as the RAF was starting to bomb the Ruhr region and the Luftwaffe was also bringing the War to British lands. Then the bombs finally dropped on civilians when the Blitz period started. Wolfgang Falck was

one man irritated at the RAF's new ability to bomb during the night, and he sought to find a solution. He submitted a report suggesting the creation of a Luftwaffe Night Fighter Force which would hunt the bombers down in the night. He was inspired by the capabilities of the Freya radar seen at the battle of Heligoland and suggested a strategy which would use the fighters, Radar and anti-aircraft fire.

Falck's ideas caught the attention of those high up in the Luftwaffe and in the summer of 1940, he was called for a meeting with Göring himself where he was asked to create a night fighting force. Helmut Lent was one of the airmen who were sent to serve in this new force, an important detail.



Wolfgang Falck

After Laurence's tour in 9 Sqn, he became an instructor for AGs. This allowed him to visit his school sweetheart and fiancée May. She moved to Coventry to aid in the war effort. This meant she was present during operation 'Moonlight Sonata' which saw around 500 German bombers attacking Coventry and obliterating it. It is possible Laurence went absent without leave (AWOL) to make sure she was ok. Thankfully she was but if he did truly go AWOL, a punishment would have been waiting. Laurence was scheduled for a promotion to Flight Sgt but this was cancelled. It is possible this was the reason. **(See photo Album pages for Coventry)**

In the last month of 1940, Laurence was posted back on operations and was sent to RAF Oakington. Awaiting him there was the brand new and experimental Short Stirling bomber. It was the RAF's first 4-engined heavy bomber and it represented the future of

Bomber Command, it could carry 3 times the payload of a Wellington and could travel large distances. The Stirling had not yet flown on operations, Laurence's role was to test and practice on the new machine with the view of being one of the very first airmen to fly it on missions.



This example of a Stirling was examined by Churchill in 1941. Its serial number was N6003. Laurence served on this exact plane as a front AG

Laurence's first operation was in April 1941 and his captain was Flight Lieutenant Raymond Cruikshank **(the same one from Heligoland)** but then he was afterward crewed with Squadron Leader (S/L) Terry Seale. Being crewed with a S/L would have been a massive privilege for Laurence who at the time was only 21. Laurence had a lucky escape as 2 weeks after he left Raymond he sadly died in a crash when he was evading an intruding fighter. Raymond was a famous pilot as he was shown in a propaganda film **(See The lion has wings 1939)** and won a DFC.



Raymond Cruikshank

The Stirling was an unreliable plane, and the early models sometimes had faulty equipment. Laurence and Seale were involved in 2 recorded crashes due to undercarriage failure and engines cutting out. On top of this, the German Night Fighter Force was slowly beginning to become effective under the supervision of Falck. It was becoming clear that Laurence was gradually being put in more danger.

Laurence was permitted to miss an operation with his crew to get married in mid-May 1941. He immediately went back to Oakington afterward



Laurence and May on their Wedding Day

Helmut Lent did not find any success after his posting to the Night Fighter Force back in 1940. He got so frustrated in May 1941 that he asked to have a meeting with Wolfgang Falck to discuss a possible transfer. Falck asked him to put faith in the process and if he did not get a kill in one month then he would be assured a transfer. It was in that very May that Lent shot down 2 Wellingtons from 40 Sqn and decided to stay.



Helmut Lent

Laurence and his crew were detailed to take part in an incredibly dangerous mission on 30/6/41 when they were sent to bomb the city of Hamburg. Many Stirlings from the Sqn were unserviceable and so very few aircraft were up that night. Hamburg was a heavily protected target that was under the guardianship of night fighters, radar, and anti-aircraft guns. The crew certainly would have been anxious.



This is Stirling N6001, and Laurence was its front AG on 30/6/41

Laurence and his crew did not return from this operation, and they became missing in action. Helmut Lent was flying that night and wrote a letter about what happened:

'On the night of 29/30 June, there were three more, three 'Short Stirlings', a new kind of bomber. I saw two of them go down in flames myself, so there's no doubt about them. The first one was a very tough opponent. Although I had set his port-inner engine on fire, he flew on into the Flak fire over Bremen where I couldn't follow him, and crash-landed later southwest of Bremen. Thank God, the prisoners said that it was a Messerschmitt 110 that shot them down, so the Flak can hardly claim it. The third bloke shot one of my engines out and as a result I made a smooth night-time belly landing'

Laurence and his crew in Stirling N6001 were indeed 1 of these aircraft that Lent fought with that night, though there is conflicting evidence to suggest which one they were. All that is known for sure is that they certainly flew into the Flak. A farmer could see the Stirling flying very low hedge hopping buildings to avoid being shot at. The engines appeared to be running perfectly when it suddenly dipped, sank into the ground and blew up violently. Laurence and his other 6 crew mates died instantly. This was only a month after his wedding.

Lent quickly became arguably the most feared pilot of the Night Fighter Force after he accumulated over 100 career kills. He finished as the 2nd highest-scoring pilot of the force. If it was not for his untimely death in 1944 when he crashed into power lines, he may have been top.

Bob Turner returned to operations in September 1941 and was posted back to 9 Sqn at Honington. He was promoted to S/L and flew on Operation 'Millenium' on 30/5/42 which was Arthur Harris's first 1000 bomber raid over Germany. Cologne was the target and it sustained a large amount of damage. Wolfgang Falck's defences would not withstand the force and so Bomber Command finally got an edge in the Air war.

Laurence and his comrades were laid to rest at Beckligen War Cemetery in Germany in 1947 sharing a communal grave.



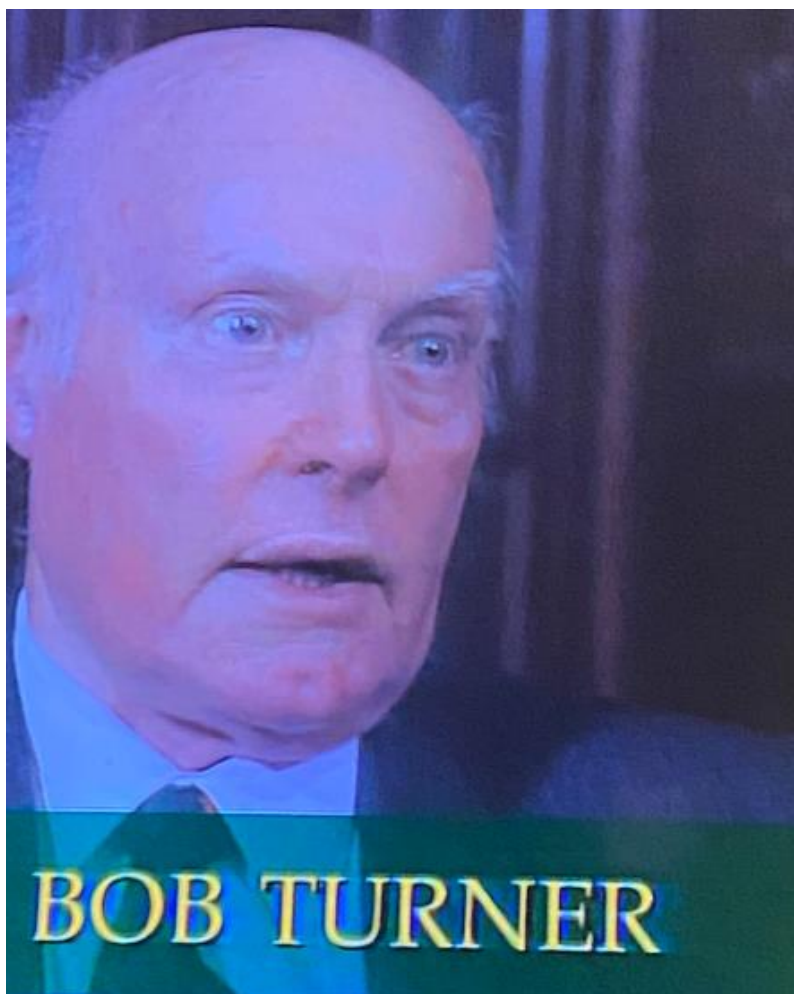
**The blocked writing says: 'In heavenly love abiding
He died that we might live'**

May remarried an American GI and moved to the USA. She never forgot Laurence and worked hard to maintain a relationship with his family until she died of Cancer in the 1960s.



May with her 2nd husband Louis Young

With Laurence having no children some of his belongings were given to his cousins. Among these belongings was a photo album he masterfully created before his death. In it was memories from his earlier life and service in the RAF. As the years passed his story was forgotten until I (**his 1st Cousin 3 removed**) inherited his album in 2019. It was by chance that I had already grown up with a fixation with Bomber Command and specifically the Wellington Bomber. I was gifted a documentary about it when I was about 11 and rewatched it to see if it may aid me in my research. There was a section where a gentleman was interviewed who claimed he flew on the first bombing raid of WW2. His name?.....



Other relevant pictures

N. 2942.	F/O. TURNER.
	F/O. CRAIGEN.
	SGT. ROGERS.
	A.C. POWIS.
	A.C. WHITTLE.
	A.C. GIBB.

This is a list of Laurence's crew in 9 Sqn. They flew in Wellington N2942.



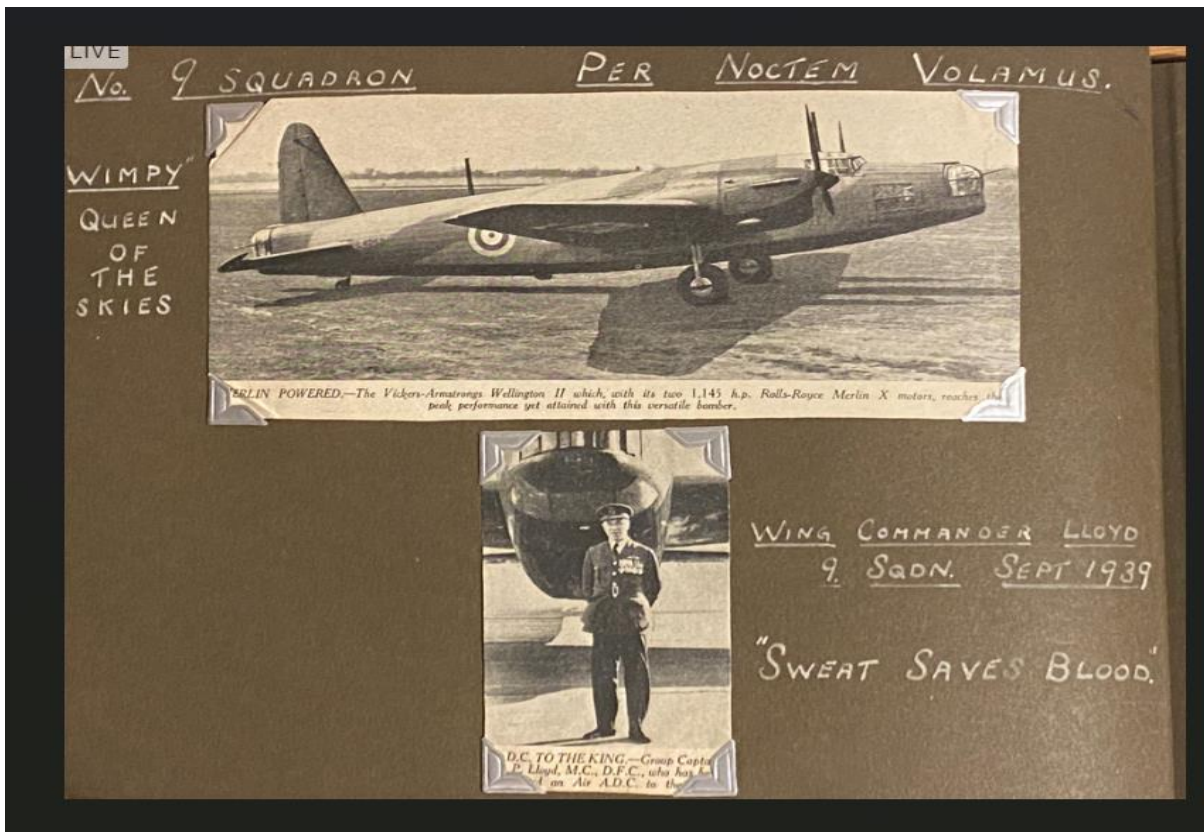
Coventry in April 1940. May stayed at Hermitage Road while she was working in the city



Laurence would have written the captions after Operation 'Moonlight Sonata'



Laurence and a Wellington crew in 1939. Notice the Wellington in the background and the caption confirming he was part of 3 section in 1939.



Laurence never had the chance to finish his album. This was his last page. Wing Commander Lloyd was in command of 9 Sqn in 1939 and the quote belonged to him.



This is a propaganda leaflet that Laurence kept after a raid in March 1940. These raids were codenamed 'Nickle' Operations. Wellington N2942 would have dropped many of these over a German city