

Laurence Whittle AWSS 1919-1941

Laurence Whittle was born in October 1919. His mother and father were called Florence and John (Jack). His sister was born in 1923 and was called Irene. The family lived at 1 Railway Street in Craghead. Laurence's Dad had served in the First World War in the Royal Marines light infantry and was injured multiple times in the Gallipoli campaign. After the war, through his wife's family, John became a respected Deputy of the pits.

Laurence's school was AWSS. He was academically talented. Despite this, he was not interested in classes. Laurence had a fascination with contemporary technology, the car and aircraft industry was radically changing in the period. Laurence found love at the school when he met May Colledge, another student at the school. The two were described as a very nice couple, this is also reflected in the photos in his album.

After leaving AWSS, Laurence was pushed to continue his education by his father at another constitution because he did not want his son to work down the pits, however, he failed multiple entrance exams. It's believed he failed these tests because he was not interested in continuing his education and in December 1938, he joined the RAF and took part immediately in basic training.

After his basic training, Laurence was selected to train as a Wireless operator and air gunner. He continued his training for the majority of 1939 until he was called to join number 9 heavy bomber squadron (9sqn) in September, 2 weeks after the start of the war.

9sqn is the oldest bomber sqn in the RAF. They operated the Vickers Wellington bomber, which was at the time the best bomber the RAF had. They took part in the first bombing raid of WW2 on September 4th, 1939.

After just a week in the sqn, Laurence was sent to complete his training as an air gunner. He returned to 9sqn in November 1939. The sqn was stretched because 5 wellingtons and over 20 men had died in either combat or flying accidents.

Famously on the 18th of December 1939, the RAF sent 22 wellingtons in formation to do reconnaissance over Heligoland Bight, this was an area around the coast of Germany that housed battleships. 9sqn committed 9 planes to the force. They were attacked by many German fighters and of the force of 22 wellingtons, only 6 returned to their bases. 9sqn took over 50% casualties. This event changed the tactics of the RAF, they moved to almost bomb during the day exclusively. Up until that point, this was the bloodiest air battle of WW2

Laurence did not take part in this raid. Despite this, he was at the base to see only 2 aircraft return. One can only imagine what he was thinking as only 20 years old because he would become one of the replacements for the men lost at Heligoland. Elements of Heligoland followed him until death.

In February 1940, Laurence flew on his first documented mission. He was probably a front or rear gunner in this period. There is an outside chance he was a wireless operator. The pilot was called Flight Officer Robert, Woodward, Turner (Bob). He was a very experienced pilot and flew on the first RAF raid of WW2.

On one occasion a Squadron Leader (S/L) Mar-Wood-Elton joined the crew for a sweep over the North Sea. He later crash-landed a Wellington called N2980 (R-Robert) in Loch Ness. It was fished out of the lake in 1985. It now exists as the only surviving example of a Wellington in Britain. It was restored and is now on display at Brooklands Museum in Surrey. Shockingly (R-Robert) was also one of the few Wellingtons to survive Heligoland Bight

1940 was a very hectic time. In early April Laurence and 9sqn were sent to RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland to do reconnaissance over Norway. There were suspicions of invasion, and they were correct, Norway was quickly invaded. 9sqn took part in many bombing missions over German airfields in Norway, and Laurence took part in a significant number of them.

The sqn returned to their usual base at Honington in late April 1940, but the chaos did not end there. The invasion of France started in May and the British and French forces were pushed back very quickly by the German Blitzkrieg tactics. Laurence was sent on multiple missions to assist the retreating soldiers. Missions were undertaken to bomb more airfields that were being used to bomb the British forces. 9sqn used low attacks with machine guns to fire at German convoys.

France fell very quickly, and the Remaining British and French forces were stuck in Dunkirk, and they awaited evacuation. In the meantime, 9sqn flew missions around the outskirts of Dunkirk, trying to drop bombs to slow the German advance. One pilot said it was an 'awesome sight' to see the British sunset behind him and the artificial French sunset ahead of him, caused by the fire. Thankfully many Soldiers were saved from the sands of Dunkirk

Laurence flew regularly with F/O Turner until he finished his first tour of Service in August 1940. During this time a young 19-year-old lad called Kevin, Barry, Brennan was lost at sea with his crew. He is remembered on the Chester-Le-Street war memorial.

Laurence tried to enjoy his life in relative peace after his first tour. He would have had a short period of rest, that he would have spent with his Girlfriend May, who was working at Coventry for the war effort, and he possibly visited his family at Craghead.

He did not return immediately to a Bomber sqn. Instead, he became an instructor and taught the next generation of air gunners, his vast experience was probably very useful, and these new men would have taken part in the battle of Britain and beyond. May and Laurence both witnessed the Coventry Blitz. This was when waves and waves of German Bombers hit the city to hurt the war factories and Morale. One can only imagine what was going on in Laurence's mind. Was it regret that the RAF was subsequently going to do the same? or was he filled with anger?

In December 1940, Laurence was given an exciting proposition to join 7sqn. The newest bomber was being implemented there and they were the first to receive it. They likely wanted seasoned airmen to fly the brand-new planes. It was called the Short Stirling. It had 4 engines and carried 3 times the payload a Wellington had. Unfortunately, Laurence would learn quickly, that this was a mistake.

The Stirling was tested and fitted at 7sqn, but not without many issues. Its Engines often cut out and there were sometimes issues with its landing gear. It was quickly identified as an unreliable plane in 1941 and was phased out in Favor of the Avro Lancaster in 1942. Laurence likely took part in multiple training flights but was not mentioned in the records book until April 1941.

Before he officially took part in operations on the Stirling, he went back home to Craghead to get married to May. He had likely experienced enough of the war to know that he needed to enjoy as much of life as possible. He wanted to be married to the sweetheart that he met so long ago growing up at AWSS, and almost immediately, he was sent back to 7sqn.

Laurence was crewed with Flight Lieutenant Raymond Cruickshank, a massive coincidence because he was one of the few survivors of Heligoland with 149sqn. He did not fly with him for long. He was moved to join the crew of Squadron leader Seale. Perhaps they wanted the most experienced front gunner possible to fly with the S/L. Laurence avoided death in doing this because not long afterward, Cruickshank and his crew died after they crashed into trees whilst avoiding a German fighter. Very tragic because Raymond had only just gotten married like Laurence.

Laurence had a very hard time between April and June 1941. He had to turn back on multiple operations due to technical problems. On one occasion the engines of his Stirling cut out whilst he was at 100ft, and S/L Seale had to crash land it in nearby fields. The aircraft was written off, so it's likely after the crew escaped it set on fire or blew up. On another occasion, the crew discovered after they returned from a mission that the landing gear would not go down, Seale was forced to make a belly landing on the airfield. It's safe to say the crew were not happy with the Stirling and there was a feeling that luck would eventually not be on their side.

Laurence has a connection to Jack Edward Wishart, who is also commemorated on the remembrance plaque at Tanfeild School. Jack served in the Royal Marines on the HMS Hood. It was the flagship of the Royal Navy. It entered combat with Bismarck, the flagship of Germany on the 26th of May 1941. The Hood sank and unfortunately, Jack Wishart died with it. On the same day, Laurence was sent

with 7sqn to search for the Bismarck. He probably didn't know a fellow student of AWSS had died in battle with the ship.

On the 30th of June 1941, Laurence and his crew were sent to bomb Hamburg. The sqn only committed 2 planes to the city due to many of the others having technical difficulties. They successfully bombed Hamburg and were flying back when they were attacked by a German night fighter. After this encounter, Laurence's Stirling was observed by a farmer to be flying extremely low to avoid Anti-aircraft fire, it was flying so low that it was clearing houses. It suddenly dipped, sank into the ground, and exploded violently. All members of the crew died immediately. Laurence and May were married for less than 2 months.

Officially the Stirling was shot down by Helmut Lent, he shot 2 Wellingtons down at Heligoland in 1939, however, there is a chance, it was the anti-aircraft fire, technical difficulties, or misjudgement that killed the crew. Despite this, it is certain Lent played a part in the loss of the crew. This adds a chilling and poetic nature to Laurence's story because the losses at Heligoland brought him into service, and a person surrounding the battle played a part in ending his career in the RAF.

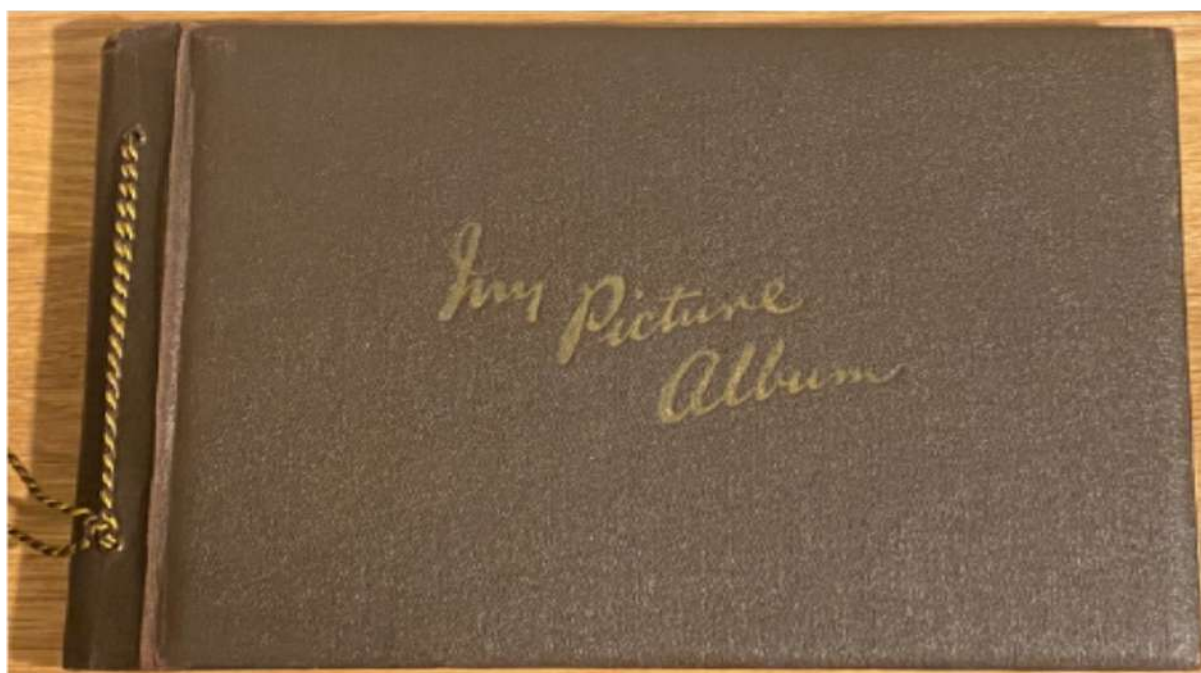
Laurence was laid to rest with the rest of his crew at Becklingen War Cemetery in Lower Saxony, Germany. He had to share a communal grave because he could not be identified, thankfully he has a gravestone and an epitaph that says, 'In heavenly love abiding', 'He died that we may live'.

May met an American GI years later called Louis Young and went on to remarry and have children of her own in Utah. She still loved Laurence's relatives and sent cards and photographs until she died of Cancer in the 1960s. Louis had children from a past marriage and they were taught Laurence's sacrifice and legacy.

Laurence is commemorated at the international bomber command centre in Lincoln around a monument called the spear and his name is also shown locally in the Craghead War Memorial.

Lesley and Joyce (Joy) Davies went to school at AWSS. They were both born shortly after WW2. Laurence was their 1st cousin 1 removed. They both got to see the remembrance Plaque with Laurence's name on it.

Laurence was a very kind and beautiful person. He sacrificed so much in the service of his country, family, and fellow students of AWSS. I hope the letters on the Plaque now spell a lot more than just a name.



CRICKET TEAM
AWSS. 1935



CRICKET TEAM
AWSS. 1937



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FIRST MEN IN.
(J. Vickers. R. Jeffery)

GENTLEMEN OF LEISURE



SHAKESPEARE - 1936 EDITION
(In Westgarden)



PASTURES





"JONATHAN"



"NANNETTE"



"MARIE"



R.A.F. CARDINGTON 1938

RAF YATESBURY 1939

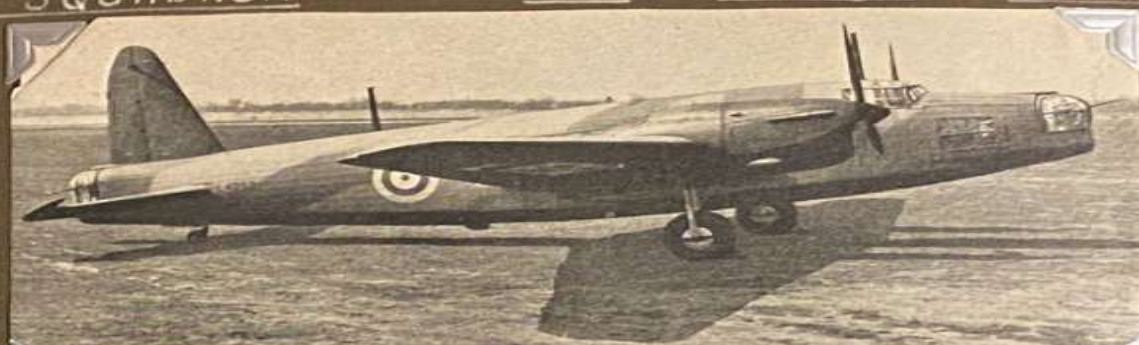
914 SQUAD. CARDINGTON 1938

SPIT AND POLISH PERIOD

LIVE
No. 9 SQUADRON

PER NOCTEM VOLAMUS.

WIMPY
QUEEN
OF
THE
SKIES



"BELIN POWERED.—The Vickers-Armstrongs Wellington II which, with its two 1,145 h.p. Rolls-Royce Merlin X motors, reaches the peak performance yet attained with this versatile bomber.



WING COMMANDER LLOYD
9. SQUAD. SEPT 1939

"SWEAT SAVES BLOOD."

D.C. TO THE KING.—Group Captain P. Lloyd, M.C., D.F.C., who has been an Air A.D.C. to the King.

Photos outside of the album





May with Louis young in the USA. She still sent letters and pictures to the family.

IN MEMORY OF

NORMAN AINSWORTH
ALBERT ARMSTRONG
OSWALD BECK
JOHN L BELL
JOHN BLIGHT
WARWICK BOLAM
RALPH BROWN
HARRY CARR
GEROGE DAVISON
GEORGE DODDS
ERNEST W DURRANT
JOHN E FAKE
ERNEST FORSTER
JACK GLASGOW
ERNEST GOWLAND
JOSPEH GREEN
THOMAS HUDSPITH

ALAN HUTCHINSON
DOUGLAS MAUGHAN
HENRY MIDDLEMAST
ALAN PATTISON
RONALD PARRY
ROBERT REAY
JOHN RICHARDSON
LESLIE ROSS
WALTER A ROSS
WILFRED A SCULLY
MATTHEW SMITH
NORMAN SMITH
HENRY TEMPERLEY
JOHN H WELLS
JACK WISHART
JACK WHITFIELD
LAWRENCE WHITTLE

WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE WORLD WAR
1939 – 1945

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“FIRST THINGS FIRST”