

The complete history of 214 Squadron's B17 Flying Fortress SR382 (BU-B): the last sortie, and the fate of its crew.

Dedicated to the memory of Sgt Sydney. H. Bryant RAFVR, and the crew he served with

By John Cripps (nephew of Sgt S Bryant)



Note the writing THE AVENGER written below the side cockpit window.
Photograph taken at Bergharen, Holland Last Sortie

During the early hours of Thursday the 22nd of June 1944 B17 Flying Fortress SR382 (BU.B) of 214 Sqn RAF was shot down over Holland by a German nightfighter while returning from a raid on Germany. Dutch observers at Bergharen reported the aircraft crashing in flames at 1.15am.

Some hours earlier at their base at Oulton, Norfolk, the crew had attended a pre flight briefing on the forthcoming night's raid on Gelsenkirchen. In the role of bomber support it was 214's duty in their specially adapted American built B17 Fortresses to counter measure the German radar and nightfighter radio defence networks in the hope of reducing losses likely to occur to the main attacking bomber force.

Outside of dropping aluminium foil strips known as "Window" and electronic jamming most 214 crews carried a fluent German speaking radio operator whose primary function was to broadcast false information into German wavelengths and thereby confuse German nightfighter pilots.

Reports of heated exchanges taking place between genuine German ground controllers and their opposite numbers in 214 have subsequently become quite legendary.

Gelsenkirchen because of its oil refineries and nearby war industries in the Ruhr Valley was, at the time, one of the most heavily defended places in Germany. Such were the losses suffered by RAF bomber squadrons during previous night attacks on the town that many crews sarcastically referred to the area as "Happy Valley".

At approximately 23.50hrs on the 21st June, the shortest night of the year, Flying Fortress BU.B lifted from the runway at Oulton and headed east over the North Sea to Holland, then on to the Ruhr Valley. At some time around 01.00 hrs it came under attack by a Messerschmitt 110 piloted by Hauptmann Heinz Struning of NJG1. Although BU.B survived the first attacking pass, a second, two minutes later, proved disastrous, knocking out the inboard starboard engine and rendering the aircraft's controls useless. Instructing the co-pilot to feather the engines the pilot then ordered the rest of the crew to stand-by for an emergency jump, but in the next moment the aircraft was diving out of control for the ground. Somehow by piloting skill, or just plain luck, the pilot managed to pull the aircraft's

nose up for just long enough so that the crew could bale out, while five managed to do so the pilot, co-pilot, navigator and an air gunner did not. Some years later one of the survivors reportedly said that when he baled out "The pilot and co-pilot were struggling with the aircraft's controls hoping to make a forced landing." It has never been clarified why, the assumption is that one or more of the crew were badly wounded in the attack and that their only chance of survival was to attempt a crash landing.

Whatever the intentions of the pilot and co-pilot some moments later the aircraft, in flames, crashed into the ground where it quickly burnt out, by the time German soldiers arrived, some minutes later, four crew lay dead in the wreckage and another lay hidden beneath it.

Two days later on the 24th four of the crew were buried at what was then known as the "English Graveyard", in Uden, Holland, (now [Uden War Cemetery](#)) attended by a military Guard of Honour made up of Luftwaffe personnel. Only on the 28th when the wreckage of BU.B was being removed was the body of a fifth member of crew found under the remains of the fuselage with an open parachute attached. For reasons unknown he was not taken to Uden to be buried along side his fallen comrades but instead was buried in the local civilian cemetery at Bergharen where his body remained until the late 1940's at which time he was exhumed and re-interred at [Jonkerbos War Cemetery](#).

BU.B Crew

Plt/Off John D. Cassan RAFVR PILOT

Known as Johnny to his friends and family he came from Clevedon, Somerset, where he lived with his parents Arthur William Marshall and Ida Francis Cassan. He had originally become a pilot with 214 Sqn RAF in October 1943 at a time when 214 was flying Stirlings Mk's 1 and 3. Killed in the crash of Fortress BU.B, aged 21, John was originally buried as "Unknown Airman". He is remembered on the war memorial inside St Andrew's Church, Clevedon, and Clevedon's Civic Website.

Sgt Sydney H. Bryant RAFVR CO-PILOT/FLIGHT ENGINEER

Born in Rowledge near Farnham, Surrey, he was the youngest son of Arthur William and Elsie May Bryant. Qualified as a Flight Engineer in October 1943 and teamed with John Cassan. Became co-pilot when 214 was re-equipped with American built B17 Flying Fortresses in late January 1944. During the first six months of that year John was instructing him to become a full pilot. Killed in the crash of Fortress BU.B Sgt Bryant, aged 20, is remembered on the war memorial at Gostrey Meadows, Farnham, and also his parents grave.

Flt/Sgt George Orr RAFVR NAVIGATOR

Flt/Sgt Orr was the son of Donald Campbell and Jean McLeod Ralph Orr of Glasgow, Scotland. Killed in the crash of Fortress BU.B aged 21, Flt/Sgt Orr was originally buried as "Unknown Airman". It is not known where in his home town his name is remembered.

(Despite extensive enquiries little else is known except that Flt/Sgt Orr may have been badly wounded in the attack on BU.B which led the pilot to attempt a crash landing. See survivor's letter in Archive 2.)

F/O W Milne RAF SPECIAL OPERATOR

F/O Milne was one of several crew from Fortress BU.B to bail out and be taken prisoner of war, he was repatriated during 1945. It is believed F/O Milne was responsible for the electronic jamming equipment aboard the aircraft.
(No further details are known.)

W/O Douglas R. Jennings RCAF AIR GUNNER

W/O Jennings from Nova Scotia, Canada, was the only crew member from Fortress BU.B to bail out and evade capture. Taken originally to a German run hospital with shrapnel in his leg he managed to escape later disguised as a policeman with the help of the Dutch Resistance and return to the UK. He was later awarded the DFC which was Gazetted November 1944. His

name appears on the RAF Evaders Society, (Canadian Branch) nominal roll. In later years he became a Minister in the Canadian Church. (W/O Jennings died on the 24th November 2002, aged 80) FS Harry Whatton RAF WIRELESS OPERATOR

FS Whatton was responsible for radio communications aboard Fortress BU.B. One of several crew to bail out and be taken prisoner of war, he was repatriated during 1945. (No further details are known.)

Sgt Norman W.S. Abbott RAFVR AIR GUNNER

Sgt Abbott could be said to have nearly survived the crash of Fortress BU.B however, enquiries made in 1946 at Bergharen told a tragic story. It would seem that he left it a little late bailing out for although his parachute deployed the aircraft crashed down upon him. His body, buried under the wreckage, was not discovered for several days and for reasons unknown was not taken to Uden to be buried with his fallen comrades. Instead on the 1st of July he was buried in the local civilian cemetery at Bergharen only to be later exhumed during the late 1940s and re-interred in the war cemetery at Jonkerbos some miles away. Sgt Abbott is said to have come from Feltham, Middlesex. (His age, and details of his family, are unknown.)

Flt/Sgt Alex Sharpe RAFVR AIR GUNNER

Flt/Sgt Sharpe was the son of Thomas and Margaret Sharpe of Loanhead, Midlothian. Killed in the crash of Fortress BU.B aged 23, Alex is remembered on the Loanhead War Memorial.

Sgt Tom S. Sparks RAF AIR GUNNER

Sgt Sparks was one of several crew from Fortress BU.B to bail out and be taken prisoner of war. On repatriation in 1945 he continued his RAF career and was promoted to Flt/Sgt. He was later reported as saying that pilot John Cassan and co-pilot Syd Bryant were wrestling with the controls of the aircraft attempting to make a forced landing at the time he bailed out, giving rise to the theory that there may have been badly wounded on board. (After bailing out Sgt Sparks was given shelter by a Dutch Resistance group, unfortunately it had unknowingly been infiltrated by the Germans. Put in a van to be transported to a "safe house" Sgt Sparks found on reaching its destination that instead of eluding capture he was surrounded by a dozen or so German soldiers all pointing rifles at him.)

Pilot Officer John Douglas Cassan 1944



Pilot Officer John Douglas Cassan's abilities as the pilot of Flying Fortress BU.B (SR382) inspired confidence in all of its crew.

Highly regarded by them for his leadership and humanitarian qualities it is sad to note that the day before his death was his 21st birthday.

From a survivor's recently discovered letter, (2003) written in June 1945, which covers some aspects of BU.B's last flight it would appear typical of John to stay to the end at the controls

Flt/Sgt George Orr's parents



This photograph of Flt/Sgt George Orr's parents was taken at Uden War Cemetery, Holland, during September 1948.

It perhaps conveys, that even four years after the event, what the relatives of those killed in BU.B were still going through.

Between the beginning of World War 2 in 1939 and its end in 1945 Bomber Command alone lost altogether some 65,000 crew members dead. No doubt all, like George Orr, had parents and loved ones at home.

The next thing I was aware of was the fact that the kite was diving to earth like a stone, and everything seemed lost.

I should like to point out here that it was only your son's admirable courage and skill as a bomber-pilot that I am able to write this letter today.

Sometime or other, with all the controls dead, Johnny pulled the kite out of that terrible dive and gave the order to abandon aircraft. The last words I ever heard

his speak were "Abandon aircraft, get out, get out." Right up to the last moment he was thinking of his crew and it came as a very terrible blow when I heard he said "I was it." The only reason I can possibly think of as to why he stuck to the kite was perhaps that one of the boys up front had been hurt and our skipper decided to crashland. I'm fully convinced that this was the case. Generally I know he would have been with us today.

My dear Mrs Cassan, how can I possibly find words to tell you how terribly grieved I am that my beloved skipper is not with me to share the joy of home again being with our loved ones. I love him as only an air-gunner can love his skipper.

We had been through so much together and had grown so deeply attached to each other that I just cannot believe he has gone.

But some day I know we will meet again on the other side and once more we shall again fly together. For the present I have no wish to fly again with another pilot as it would bring back too many memories of my own dear skipper.

There is one thing more I should like to say "Thank you for giving the crew of B. Beer a very fine and a most courageous skipper, to whom today I owe my very life".

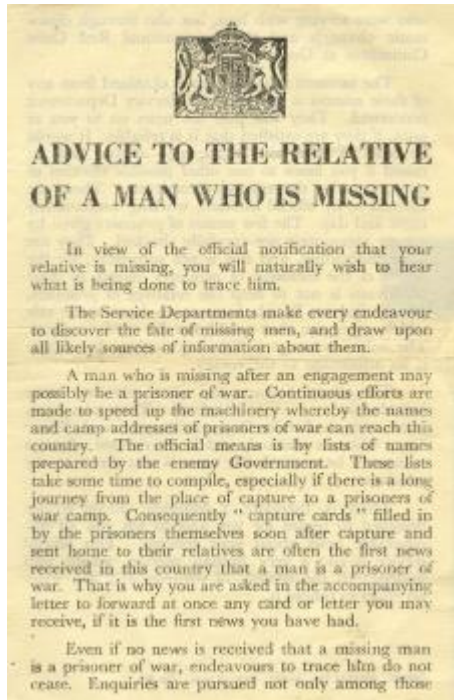
This letter, of three pages, which has only recently come to light, was sent in June 1945 to Pilot Officer Cassan's mother, by survivor Sgt Tom Sparks, and more or less confirms the theory that the pilot and co-pilot of BU.B stayed to the end at the controls of their aircraft because, "one of the boys up front may have been badly wounded".

While generally commenting on events immediately before and during the night of 21st/22nd June 1944, other parts make poignant and detailed reading.

Some of this new information has been included within the text of this website.

(Image and use by kind permission of the Cassan Family)

Leaflet from 1944



This official leaflet giving advice as to what actions to take, or were being taken, after a relative, or loved one, had been posted as "missing from operations" usually followed on after several weeks.

For a while it may have given some hope and concellation to those related to the crew of BU.B, that some, if not all, had survived, however, when the bad news finally arrived details came in a letter from the Red Cross.

(A similar official leaflet, from this time, was later sent to the relatives of those killed giving details of any entitlements.)

W/O Douglas R. Jennings in 1989

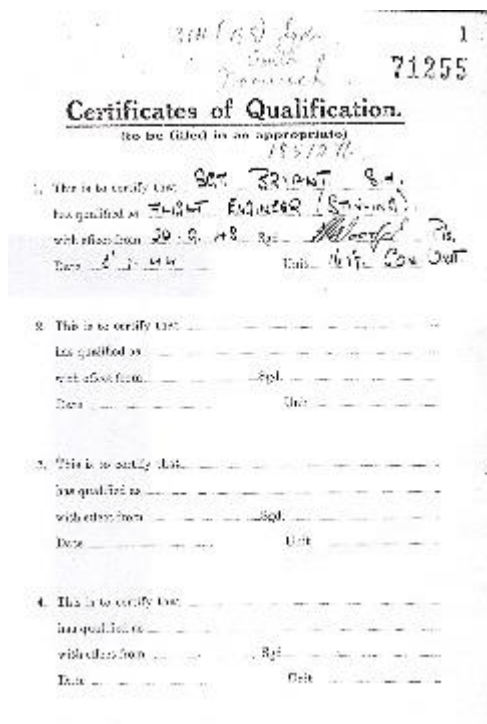


W/O Douglas Jennings RCAF is unique amongst the crew of BU.B. The only member to bale out and escape from capture he subsequently made his way back to the UK with the aid of the Dutch Resistance.

In this photograph from 1989 he is seen at a reunion with former Dutch resistance worker Mientje Manders who, with her father, helped him escape from occupied Holland in 1944.

A Canadian publication "The Evaders" tells how he made it.
(Image courtesy of Jim Moffat)

Flight Engineer/Co-Pilot's Log Book



Flight Engineer/Co-Pilot Sgt Bryant's Log Book is thought to be the only one from BU.B still in existence. Originally considered to have been lost, or destroyed, it was sent to Sgt Bryant's parents by the RAF during 1949 along with some belatedly awarded medals. Although containing mostly one line entries it does however give an insight into 214 Squadron's "operations" between October 1943 and late June 1944. Passed down over the years through Sgt Bryant's family the original now rests in the Document Archives of the Imperial War Museum, where it has been since 1995

BU.B Graves. Uden 1945/46



This photograph of the graves of BU.B crew taken at Uden, Holland, during 1945/46 is the earliest one known to exist.

The two middle grave markers carry the inscription "Unknown Airman" but were subsequently identified as being Plt/Off John Cassan, (Pilot) and Flt/Sgt George Orr, (Navigator).

As travel in Holland immediately after the war was difficult and restricted it is not certain how this photograph came to be taken.

The assumption is that Sgt Bryant's brother-in-law, who was serving with the Royal Engineers in Holland at the time, somehow managed to travel to Uden and take it.

Sgt Abbott



Sgt Abbott's grave at Jonkerbos



How Sgt Norman Abbott came to meet his death is a little odd. According to information gathered from Bergharen in 1946, where BU.B came down, he had successfully baled out but the aircraft subsequently crashed down upon him.

It would seem reasonable to assume that as his parachute deployed the aircraft's slip-stream would have pulled him out of the way. The only conclusion is that BU.B was widely circling as it came down and caught up with him near, or on, the ground.

Of the five crew killed Sgt Abbott is the only one from BU.B to be buried at [Jonkerbos War Cemetery](#).

BU.B Aircrew Medals



A few years after the war medals like these began arriving as official acknowledgement of wartime service.

For most they were the only awards to be received, whether as relatives of a loved one killed, or as a survivor.

It is hard to imagine, some sixty years on, the horrors which WW2 aircrew and their families must have gone through just to receive them.

Medals shown right are:

1939 - 1945 Star, Aircrew Europe Star, War Medal and France and Germany Bar.

AFTERMATH AND ECHOES

After the crew were posted as "missing from operations", on the 22nd of June, for nearly six months the relatives and loved ones of BU.B hoped at the very worst all had been taken prisoner of war. It was not until just before Christmas, December 18th, 1944, that letters from the Red Cross began arriving, containing for some, the saddest of news.

Born exactly two weeks after Sgt Bryant's death his nephew, as already arranged, was christened John after Plt/Off John Cassan during September 1944.

On the 6th November 1944, HB788, 214 Sqn's replacement Flying Fortress for SR382 was also shot down, killing all of its crew.

Ironically this too was coded BU.B

During Christmas Eve 1944 Heinz Struning of NJG1 was shot down. Attempting to bale out of his stricken Messerschmitt 110 Heinz collided with the aircraft's tail plane assembly and was killed.

Originally buried as "Unknown Airman" the remains of Plt/Off John D. Cassan, (Pilot) and Flt/Sgt George Orr, (Navigator) were positively identified during the summer of 1946.

----- "AND WE WERE YOUNG" ----- Addendum

Eight years after Sgt Bryant's death in SR382 his father was taken ill on its anniversary during June 1952, and died a few days later.

Twenty five years on, in June 1977, Sgt Bryant's mother became ill during the thirty third anniversary and died the following day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to the following for their help and, or, supplying information:
Hartelijke dank aan de lieve mensen in Uden, Holland, voor hun voortdurende zorgzaamheid en aardigheid in de afgelopen jaren.

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Mr A. Verbakel of Stichting "Oorlogskerkhof Uden", Holland.

Mr F. Aldworth of Airforce Magazine, Canada.

The Royal British Legion, Clevedon Branch, Somerset.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, London.

The Cassan family, formerly of Clevedon, Somerset.

The Bryant family, formerly of Farnham, Surrey.

The Imperial War Museum, Document Archives, London.



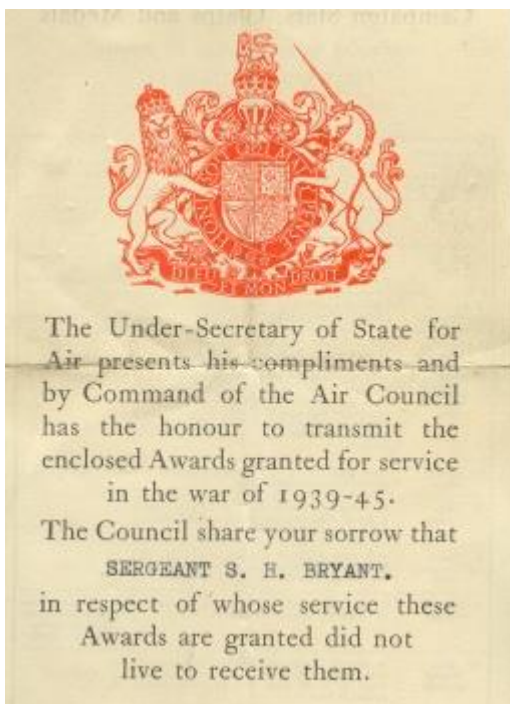
Brevets of the Pilot and Flight Engineer



Named John after P/O John Cassan



Note from Buckingham Palace to the next of kin of those killed



Insert from posthumously awarded Aircrew Medals



Sgt Bryant, (left) with his sister and brother. 1943



Wreckage of BU.B, Bergharen 22/6/44



Aircrew training at Stradishall 1943