

Handley Page 0/400 D5401 No. 214 Squadron Royal Air Force

Handley Page 0/400 D5401. Shot down over Bruges and crash landed between the lines near Nieuport. Aircraft subsequently destroyed by enemy artillery fire,

Date of Loss 16th June 1918.

Crew of 0/400 D5401 consisted of:

Pilot: Capt. Freer

Observer: Corporal Wardrop

Gunlayer: Lt Reginald Binckes

| Date | Mission | Pilot | Observer | Gunlayer |
|--|--|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| 11 th /12 th June 1918 | Bruges Docks | Lt. Freer | Cpl. Wardrop | Cpl. Barbour |
| 12 th /13 th June 1918 | Flew to Mardyck sands. Weather unfavourable mission aborted. | Lt. Freer | Cpl. Wardrop | Lt. R. Binckes |
| 13 th /14 th June 1918 | Ghistelles Aerodrome | Lt. Freer | Cpl. Wardrop | Lt. R. Binckes |
| 15 th /16 th June 1918 | Bruges Docks | Lt. Freer | Cpl. Wardrop | Lt. R. Binckes |

D5401 12/13th June 1918. Corporal Wardrop's logbook describes the short flight on 12th June; ***'Flew to sands in readiness for raid. Weather unfavourable, three machines only carried out raid'***. The other machines, including HP 5401, remain at Mardycke until early the following morning when they fly back to base. This return journey was 'very bumpy' and flown at 4:30am at a low height of 200 feet possibly because of the weather. ***'From sands to Drome. Very bumpy'***

D5401 13th/14th June. HP 5401 with Lt Freer as pilot and Corporal Wardrop as observer and R Binckes as gunlayer. In Wardrop's log book the mission is described as a 'Roving Commission' with Ghistelles Aerodrome also mentioned as a target. That night HP 5401 was the last plane to take off for the raid. It carried a bomb load of 16 x 112lb bombs. The crew took off at 9:30pm and returned at 11:45pm. The flight took 2 hours 15 minutes and climbed to 7000 feet.

Wardrop's log book describes the flight. ***'Last away. Visibility was not good at commencement. Flew into a thick bank of low cloud near Gravelines. After climbing to 6000 we crossed the lines. Flew over Thorout trying to find the exact location of the dumps. Then saw Ghistelles Aero and landing lights come on and Verys lights fired. Took a run N to S over western side of drome. The hangers were on the northern and western side. First three bombs exploded short on the side near road. Managed to get an almost accurate line on hangers so released the remainder in a quick straddle. Turned NW then west. Searchlights appeared after bombs were released and anti aircraft fire inaccurate. (It was just dusk when we attacked). Warm night. Not active on lines.'***

D5401 15th/16th June 1918. The basic facts of Reginald Bincke's mission to Bruges on the night of the 15th-16th June for him and the rest of the crew of D5401 are found in Sturtivant and Page Pg 389 ... **'Badly damaged by AA (Anti- Aircraft fire) during raid on Bruges Docks; FL (Forced Landed) on beach Oostdunkerque Bains, destroyed by enemy shipping, set on fire'** The first part of the mission was the short flight to the beach starting at 9:15 pm climbing to 1000 feet and landing 20 minutes later. The plane was carrying 16 x 112lb bombs; **'Seventh away, climbed 1000 feet, then landed on sands at Mardyke'**. The crews waited one and a half hours on the sands, presumably for it to get dark, as it was just under a week to the longest day on 21st June.

At 10:55pm D5401 took off for Bruges. It was to be Wardrop's 38th mission. They were to climb to 8000 feet and the flight lasted two hours 15 minutes. Corporal Wardrop's flying log book provides full details of the flight. **'Second away. Climbed between Furnes and just east of Gravelines eventually crossed the lines at 7,500. Two searchlights came up at Ghisthelles but managed to fly around them. Saw Ostende-Bruges canal and took a line W to E over centre portion of docks releasing eight bombs. These were observed to fall on the western side of the dock between northern and southern ????? (illegible). An AA (anti-aircraft) shell then exploded by our starboard engine just above us. We then flew NW to SE over docks releasing the remainder. Bursts from these were seen by Lt. Binckes on the eastern side just in a line with those that had exploded on the western side. Turned east then south. Discovered the engine had been hit and would soon stop. The water pipe from radiator on top had been severed. Managed to keep going alright after starboard engine had stopped. We were just SW of Bruges then. Crossed the Hun lines at 500 feet by Dixmunde. Turned north and made for coast. A west wind which was blowing began to make us drift perilously near the lines again. Managed to reach the coast so fired a few Verys lights to enable us to see the sands more clearly. Eventually landed about two miles our side of the lines. As soon as daybreak the Huns began to shell the machine. They soon made a wreck of it. It also caught fire. As soon as the fire died down we went to examine the engines etc. also to see if we could save anything. We had not been there for five minutes when they started firing at us. So we left.'**

Log Book of Corporal W.E. Wardrop No 214 Squadron RAF. IWM Documents 21806 Private Papers of WE Wardrop

Corporal Wardrop's log book summarised the damage that the anti aircraft fire had done to HP D5401. The crew were lucky to survive the trip. **'Warm trip. Visibility was fair. Our star engine was hit three times aerilon control(s?) shot away elevators and planes punctured. This was done by AA over Bruges.'** It is interesting to note that Wardrop leaves a space for Reginald's name in his log book to be filled in later.

Corporal Wardrop's own recollections of that flight on the 15th-16th June 1918 are vividly recorded in the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, **Wardrop W.E. D. an Oral History, Catalogue Number 29.** It was recorded in March 1973.

"On the night of the 16th June we were back over Bruges again when we were caught in an intense AA (anti-aircraft barrage. The propeller and radiator were hit on the starboard engine and we had to throttle back on the other one. Then we headed for home on what I can only describe as a powered glide. With the prevailing wind against us we came down lower and lower. Meanwhile the searchlights held us in their beams whilst Archie gave us a real roasting. Luckily all of us escaped injury when our aircraft eventually crashed in no mans land near Nieupoort. Struggling from the

wrecked machine we quickly took cover in a large shell hole but we were soon approached by soldiers we took to be German, In one of those accidents of war opening fire with a Webley (revolver handgun), I shot one of them. They turned out to be Belgians, sent out from their front line to bring us in. Our luck held again as we were taken prisoner rather than being shot. In the dug out we tried to explain that we were British flyers but could not make them understand. Although we were well treated and provided with beer and sandwiches they kept us there for several hours. Eventually one of the captors said 'Its alright now you will shortly be picked up by your unit'. Whereupon I exclaimed ' You said you could not speak English'. 'A few hours ago I couldn't but now you are cleared I can'. He replied. In a later conversation the Belgian soldier told me he that before the war he had worked at a restaurant in the Strand"

The oral account continues.....*"During the time we had spent in the dug out our Handley Page had been ranged by the German guns and literally blown to smithereens. A sequel to this story is that when we arrived back at the Squadron, I was sent for by the Armaments Officer. He was angry and enquired about the five Lewis guns we had on board, reminding me it was a court martial offence to lose one's gun. I replied 'How was I expected to bring back five Lewis guns from no-man's land? Stick them up my jumper?' Commander Brackley decided that after the two crashes (Wardop had crashed on the night of the 5th/6th June when his HP suddenly fell out of control from an altitude of 200 feet at the end of a mission) I should be given fourteen days leave"*



On the 1st June 1918 No 214 Squadron at Coudekerque were visited by an official photographer. This image shows Left to right. Cpl. Wardrop in Observer's position in front cockpit with Lewis gun, middle unknown, Major Brackley No 214 Sqn. Commanding Officer

*Part of MINISTRY OF INFORMATION FIRST WORLD WAR OFFICIAL COLLECTION, Production date 1918-06-01
Creator Aitken, Thomas Keith (Second Lieutenant) (Photographer) © IWM (Q 12181)*

Further details of the fateful flight are on **Page 14 of *Avenging in the Shadows* by Ron James**. It appears to be notes of a conversation between Ron James and Tiny Wardop. 'D5401 was hit by AA at 10,000 feet above Bruges. The starboard propeller and radiator were hit and the pilot shut the starboard engine down and had to throttle back the port engine. The pilot then glided from Bruges back to the lines. Because they were going so slowly in the glide they were held in the search lights and subject to very intense fire. D5401 was riddled but none of the crew were hit. The plane glided to the lines and crashed on the beach in No Man's Land at Nieuport'.

| Course | Remarks |
|--------|---|
| | <p>wind which was blowing began to make us drift perilously near the lines again. Managed to reach the coast so fired a few Very lights to enable us to see the sands more clearly. Eventually landed about two miles ^{to our} side of Hun lines.</p> <p>As soon as daybreak the Huns began to shell machine. They soon made a wreck of it - it also caught fire. As soon as the fire died down we (Lt Green & I) went to examine engines etc also to see if we could save anything. We had not been there five minutes when they started firing at us, so we left it.</p> <p>(Harm trip) Visibility Fair. ^{Star.} Our engine was hit three times ^{anti} controls shot away, elevators & flaps punctured. This was done by AA over Bruges.</p> |

Log Book of Corporal W.E. Wardrop No 214 Squadron RAF. IWM Documents 21806 Private Papers of WE Wardrop

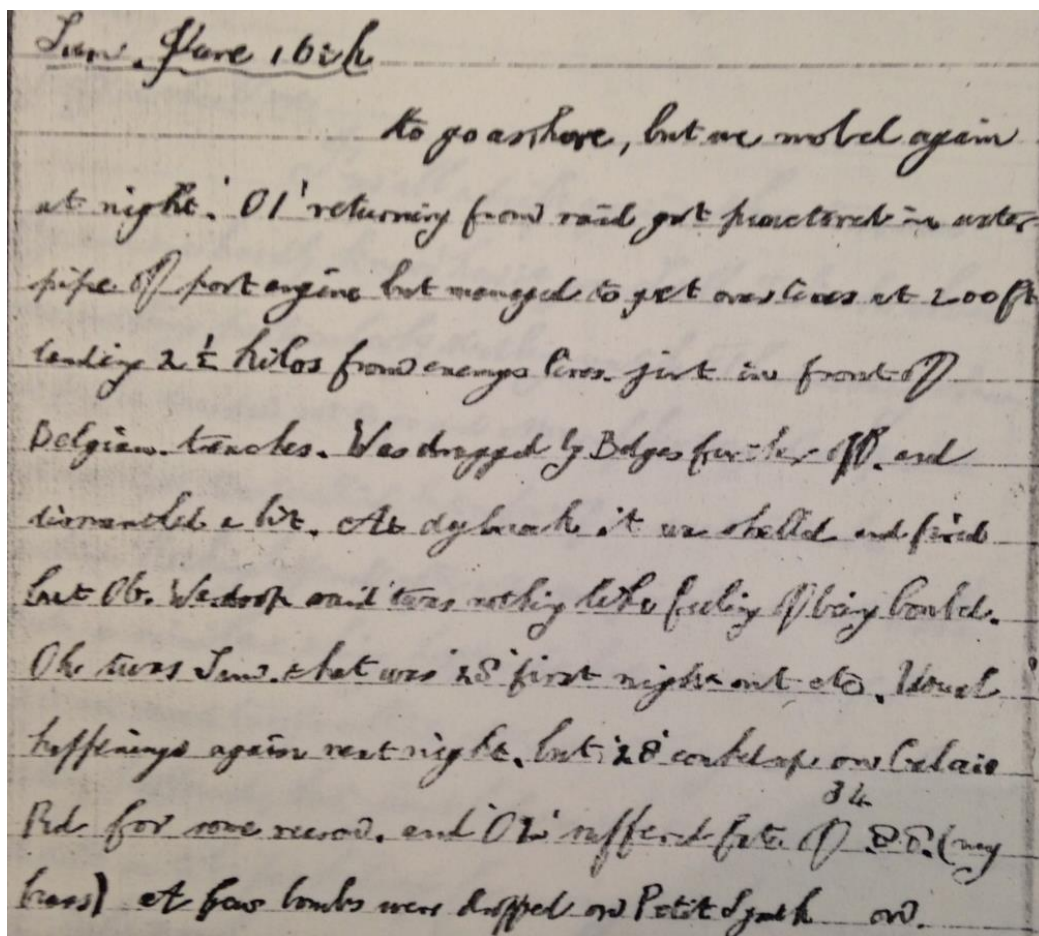
All three crew survived the crash and took cover in shell holes in No Man's Land. They were rescued by Belgian troops and were taken to a dug out. No Belgians could speak English and they thought the bomber crew were Germans. After two hours one of the Belgian soldiers started speaking in English. "Do you come from London?" Wardrop said "Yes". "Do you know the Strand? After that the

atmosphere changed and they were told a car would pick them up at day break. As soon as it got light the Germans shelled the crashed plane and it was totally destroyed.

The car came from the Squadron at day break. All three bomber crew; Reginald, Wardrop and Freer warned the driver not to go past a certain point on the road as the Germans would shell it. The driver was determined that he was going to drive down the road to turn around. The three bomber crew refused to get in the car because of the danger.

The driver ignored them, drove up road to turn around and was promptly shelled. The driver jumped out of car and dived for cover in a ditch. They shouted to him to get back in the car which he did and returned to the crew. The driver was so scared he drove back to Squadron at 60-70 mph. Wardrop had never had such a dangerous car ride in his whole life. Wardrop reported that because of this the driver had lost his nerve and sent back to London.

When they got back to the Squadron they were apparently told off by 214 Armaments Officer for not removing five Lewis guns from the crashed plane. Wardrop claims that they were threatened with a Court Martial for not saving the guns. They had removed all the maps and their service revolvers. As a result of experiencing two serious crash landings in a very short time Wardrop was given 14 days leave by the Commanding Officer.



Sun. June 16th
to go ashore, but we moved again
at night. OI returning from raid got prowl stuck in water
pipe of port engine but managed to get over lines at 200ft,
landing 2 1/2 kilos from enemy lines just in front of
Belgian trenches. Was dragged by Diggers further off and
recovered a bit. At daybreak it was shelled and fired
but OI. Wardrop said there was nothing like feeling of being bombed.
Ole says Sun. that was 28th first night out etc. More
happenings again next night, but 28th combat on Calais
Rd. for some reason, and OI's suffered fate of D.P. (my
guess) at few bombs were dropped on Petit Ditch on.

Cpl Thomas Wilkins's diary entry for July 23rd 1918. Leeds University. Liddle Collection/Air/351/Wilkins, Thomas Oliver

Wardrop, Freer and Reginald's escapades that night were also recorded in Corporal Wilkins diary. Wilkins identifies the different aircraft by the last two digits of their serial numbers. HP 5401 is written by Wilkins as '01'..... ***'Sun June 16th '01' returning from raid got punctured in water pipe of port engine but managed to get over lines at 200 feet, landing 2 ½ kilometres from enemy lines*** (The Belgians had flooded No Mans Land and the sides were separated by this flooded area) ***just in front of the Belgian trenches. Was dragged by Belges further off and dismantled a bit. At daybreak it was shelled and fired.***