

Stirling W7537 lost 4 June 1942 Notes by Richard Maddox

These are notes made by Richard Maddox from the National Archives file.

At enclosure 55 is a letter from Leonard Stanley Hill (the aircraft's Mid Upper Gunner) to the parents of Sergeant Ronald John Finch (who apparently was known as John - at least by Hill).

Hill is writing on 28 June 1945 while at No.4 Medical Rehabilitation Unit at RAF Cosford been liberated from a POW camp and repatriated. In passing he notes that the camp was not far from where the Stirling came down.

He writes that the aircraft was attacked by a night fighter in the target area.

Sergeant Finch had been flying the aircraft and the crew had endured a 'hectic 20 minutes' of flak attacks when he asked the Second Pilot Warrant Officer (William or Bill) Wall to take control of the aircraft to give Finch a breather.

No sooner had control been passed than a night fighter attacked from the rear and probably from below as Sergeant Hill did not see it but the rear gunner Sergeant (James McDade) Brown apparently did.

Finch immediately gave the order to prepare to abandon the aircraft.

Hill started to go forward to see if he could help. At this point the aircraft went into a steep dive throwing Hill onto his back. He estimated that they had lost 2000 feet before Finch recovered the plane.

He then saw Warrant Officer Wall slumped over the controls and believed him either dead or injured. He continued forward to get to the forward gunner but was stopped by Finch who 'winked and smiled' before they shook hands and Hill went back to retrieve his parachute and then proceed to the escape hatch.

He passed both the Flight Engineer (Sergeant Edgar Saunders) and the Navigator on his trip forward and his return and stated they were alive and 'OK'.

Having got his parachute he found Sergeant (Peter Jack Frederick) Knight at the escape hatch and Hill jumped 'without hesitation'.

Sergeant Knight and Sergeant Brown also survived the crash.

Hill also writes that was a regular in the RAF and that he had only flown with Sergeant Finch on three occasions as Hill had finished his first tour in July 1941 before returning for a second tour, having been an instructor until April 1942.

There is a further footnote to this drama.

Sergeant Finch's parents were initially informed by the authorities that their son was alive, wounded and a prisoner of war when in fact he had died in the crash.

In fact it was Sergeant Brown - the rear gunner - who had been captured with a badly broken leg.

This appeared to be due to a misidentification by the German authorities who somehow believed that Sergeant Brown was the aircraft captain.

Brown spent some fifteen weeks in hospital.

According to information elsewhere in the file was 'unable to identify himself' during this period.

His identity only becoming clear when he discharged and transferred to Dulag-Luft prisoner reception centre where Sergeant Peter Jack Frederick Knight and Flight Sergeant Leonard Stanley Hill were still being held.

When this misidentification was raised with the Germans through the International Red Cross the blame was placed on captured airmen who refused 'to talk about their crew or name them' The file has a copy of the original document and its English translation.

Elsewhere in the file is a translation of another German document (enclosure 48A) sent via the IRCC dated 11 October 1944 and forwarded to the British authorities '... that the information given by them originated from a statement of Sgt Finch, so that they have no other source to investigate from...' as well as a copy of a German document and its translation.

The dead from W7537 were buried with military honours at 1400 on 7 June 1942 at district cemetery in Delmenhorst, Wildeshauserst.

A personal observation: Despite any reluctance on Brown's part to divulge information that might be of use to the enemy, it seems strange that he was not identified from his brevet - or indeed the identity discs worn by himself or found on Finch.

There is also an implication in a reply to a letter from Mr Finch (Enclosure 29a, written on 9 April 1943 after he has been notified of his son's death and asks for more information) that although ID disks should be worn at all times, they can become separated in an emergency situation and that some aircrew may dispose of them to increase their chances of not being identified as RAF personnel.

Given Brown's injuries he is unlikely to have disposed of his discs on landing to make good his escape.