



Tempsford Veterans and Relatives Association

Newsletter
Spring 2012



"ON THE WAY TO THE 'SAFE HOUSE'"

SUR LE CHEMIN DE L'ABRI



*-vous affolez pas mes dames. Je voulais simplement vous dire de pas passer par
la route nationale via un barrage et un point où vous confondrez avec les autres terre-
restes qui arrivent en avion...*

Gendarme: "Be easy, ladies and gentlemen! I'm simply saying
don't use the main road—there's a road block, and you
might be mistaken for those blessed saboteurs who
arrive by aeroplane."

From Bob

Welcome to the Spring (when it comes) Newsletter for 2012. I am grateful for the contributions submitted by two of our members, and will not take up too much space with a long introduction to this Newsletter. However, there are a couple of things that are definitely worthy of comment.



Our little Association is no longer so little, as it continues to grow; we now have about 200 people “on the books”. A benefit of the increasing numbers is that we are getting people whose relatives were in the same crew.

As well as relatives of aircrew, we are also proud to have amongst our number the relatives of several agents. In fact, it has just come to light that the father (agent) of one of our members was dropped by the father (aircrew) of another!

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY, 2011, was a day of records and firsts.

The Service on the airfield was attended by a record number of people - estimated at 150 - and a record number of wreaths & tributes were laid.



In the “firsts” we had relatives of four agents present and we were honoured to have a wreath laid on behalf of the Air Force Association of Canada, in memory of the Canadian Casualties.



An Agent From Tempsford

Edgard Potier (1903-1944)

Dominique Edgard Antoine Potier was a Capitaine-Commandant (flight lieutenant) in the Belgian air force at the start of the war. The Germans overran Belgium in May 1940. He and his unit were eventually captured on 20th August. After his release, Potier established an underground movement initially called the Légion Belge in Florenville (Province of Luxembourg), which was later incorporated into the Armée Secrète. On 13th November 1941, Potier covertly left Belgium and made his way down through France, before crossing into Spain and then on to Lisbon. On 26th March 1942, he flew to England with four Belgian airmen.

After his release from the Royal Patriotic School, the MI19 interrogation centre for foreign nationals, Potier volunteered for the Belgian Section of the RAF, but because of his age (39) could not be considered for operational flying, so Potier enlisted in the Belgian Intelligence Service (Sûreté de l'Etat Belge). Airey Neave, in a letter of 7th May 1943 to Captain Delloye, of the Belgian SIS, wrote:

... I have seen Captain Potier, and thought him very suitable for the kind of work suggested, i.e. Night Landing Operations...



Airey Neave worked for MI9, a department of the British Directorate of Military Intelligence. Part of its remit was to recover personnel who found themselves behind enemy lines. At this time, many allied aircrew, on bombing raids to Germany, were being shot down over the Belgian Ardennes. Potier's mission was to organise the recovery of these airmen and shelter, feed and provide them with false identity documents, before moving them to safe houses in and around Reims in Northern France, an area suitable for evacuation by air, using Lysander aircraft.

Potier assumed the operational name "Martin" and went through an intense period of training for an agent in the field. He was instructed in landing strip and flare path techniques by F/O J.A.McCairns (161 Sqn). In another letter to Captain Delloye, dated 20th June 1943, Airey Neave wrote:

... The Air Force Captain has now completed most of his training, and he will also go to Belgium next moon to friends that he has there. He will be accompanied by a French wireless operator I shall be shortly calling on you to discuss the question of cover stories....



His wireless operator was, in fact, a French-Canadian named Conrad Lafleur.

Potier's cover story was to be very similar to his actual life, up to the point of his demobilisation in 1940. Thereafter he was to become an insurance agent known as Jules Nollet; other aliases were M. Labranche, M. Duchesne and Pierre Boltier.

On 15th July 1943, Potier and Lafleur, took off from RAF Tempsford in a Halifax, piloted by Sqn/Ldr Ratcliff. The target was Suxy, in the Belgian Ardennes. Potier and Lafleur jumped blind, i.e. there was no reception party.

With the assistance of friends in the local resistance, helpers were recruited to provide safehouses and transport to the Franco/Belgian border and then on to Reims. The organisation, known as Mission Martin in Belgium and the Possum Line in France, based itself in Fismes (30kms WNW of Reims). It also operated safehouses in Paris and had contact with other escape and resistance groups from which it received or passed on evading airmen.

Of the initial six air operations, three were successful - 11 airmen and one SOE agent were repatriated:

- Brasenose 13-14 Sep 1943 Sqn/Ldr Verity
- Magdalen I 7-8 Nov 1943 Flg/Off McCairns
- Magdalen II 16-17 Nov 1943 Verity and McCairns

The failures were due to wrong back-bearing, no reception party and bad weather. Potier had returned to England on the last Lysander flight (Magdalen II), ostensibly to improve his landing site techniques, but also to familiarise himself with the landing requirements of larger aircraft. Accommodation for the evading airmen was limited. The Lysander was officially only able to carry three passengers, whereas a Hudson could take up to ten.

It was originally intended that Potier and two other MI9 agents should return to France by Lysander on the 15th December, but the operation was cancelled due to bad weather. However, on the night of 20th December, in a Halifax piloted by Lt Hysing-Dahl, he was successfully dropped back into France.

It had been Potier's intention to move his organisation to Amiens, as it was becoming too "well known" in the Reims area. However, on the 28th December, the house, in Reims, from which Conrad Lafleur was transmitting to London, was raided by the Gestapo. He escaped, but it was the start of a sequence of events that eventually lead to the arrest of Potier. He was taken to Fresnes prison in Paris and then returned to Reims, where after being subjected to considerable torture, committed suicide on the 11th January 1944. As more arrests followed, the organisation around Reims collapsed. Paris, Amiens and the remoter parts of the network continued operating for a few more months, but were eventually traced and broken up. Of the 70 helpers arrested in the French sector of Possum, some 60 were deported, of which less than half returned. There are no complete records, but it is estimated some 60-70 airmen had passed through or were being sheltered by Possum up to the time of its demise.

On 18th September 1950, Potier's remains were exhumed from Reims and he was reburied with full military honours in the Pelouse d'Honneur Aérienne, Cimetière Communal de B-1140 Bruxelles-Evère.

Details of Operations

.Operation MANNINGTREE (combined with GAGS, PROPS)

161 Sqn, RAF Tempsford, Halifax, 5th July 1943

The crew: S/L Ratcliff - captain, S/L Livry - navigator, Sgt Hathaway - ?, F/Sgt Hall - w/operator, F/L Corner - engineer, Sgt Morley - rear gunner, Sgt Ritchie - despatcher, Sgt Allum - despatcher(?)

The aircraft passed over Beachy Head at 23:47 at a height of 5000' (1700m) and reached the French coast at Pt. Haut Banc 20 minutes later. The night was clear. Flying in an easterly direction, they passed over Guise and Revin, near Charleville-Mézières, before turning NNE into Belgium aiming for Ciney, where the other two agents were dropped (operation GAGS). The next operation (PROPS) was 40 kms to the SE in the vicinity of St. Hubert, where a number of packages and containers were released. The last operation (MANNINGTREE) was 35 kms south of St. Hubert. The target was Suxy, to be precise the fields to the north of the road running East of Suxy (49° 46' 30" N / 05° 24' 50" E). The aircraft arrived over the area at 01:36, flying at a height of 600' and 4 minutes later Potier and Lafleur jumped blind, i.e. there was no reception party. The Halifax returned to base at 04:20.

.Operation BRASENOSE

161 Sqn., RAF Tangmere, Lysander No. J (Jiminy Cricket), 13th September 1943

Sqn/Ldr Hugh Verity

Pinpoint - Mont de Dhuizel 8 kms NNW of Fismes (Aisne) - 49° 21' 40" N / 03° 37' 45" E

The target was reached as planned, via Grandvillière and Compiègne. It was positively identified by the junction of the river & canal two miles to the north. After some minutes, I spotted a torch flashing dots, the "wait" signal, from a road some two miles south of the target. I went away and returned at ten minute intervals, noting the progress of the flashing light along the wood. Eventually, having waited for one hour and a quarter, I saw a "B" signalled from the field. The field was almost entirely ploughed, but the flarepath was laid on a narrow uphill strip of stubble between two haystacks. Apparently, Martin understood that the ETA was 2300 hrs GMT whereas I was given 21:00 hrs GMT. Three evaders were picked up: Flt/Sgt Fred Gardiner (RAF), Flt/Sgt Herbert Pond (RNZAF) and Pierre Geelen (SOE). The return journey was without incident.

Operation MAGDALEN

161 Sqn, RAF Tangmere, Lysander, 7th November 1943

F/O McCairns

Pinpoint - Le Champ Sainte Marie, 2 kms SW of Selens (Aisne) - 49° 29' 15" N / 03° 11' 10" E

The French coast was completely obscured by cloud and the first pinpoint recognised was Compiègne. At 2330 hrs I set course for the field and passed over it without receiving a signal. Discovered my overshoot and returned to the field - this time I received a feeble signal, acknowledged it and two lamps of the flarepath were lit. As there was a car in the immediate neighbourhood I investigated the field and then landed. The agent told me I had landed off the flarepath; only lamp C was working. The ground was soft and undulating but absolutely safe. One person was dropped off (Georges d'Oultremont MI9) and four airmen were picked up: T/Sgt Herbert Browning, T/Sgt John Desrochers, S/Sgt Ellis Klein and S/Sgt Arthur Whalen (USAAF).

Note: the following remarks by Hugh Verity were found in the handwritten report, but were not included in the official(?) typed report:

"His [Captain Martin's] training was compressed into a very short time, as a supernumerary pupil. As he is a Belgian Air Force officer, and seemed to have absorbed the training, we passed him out on a short course. In operation "Brasenose" he allowed me to land on a narrow strip of stubble between two haystacks, on a field which had been 9/10ths ploughed up. The flarepath was up much too steep a slope.

In operation "Magdalen" he came to the field with only three torches, whereas he should have a minimum of four plus two spares. When one failed he left "C" lit and "B" out, whereas he should have changed them over to give the true landing direction. He failed to signal until McCairns was circling the field, whereas he should signal on first hearing the aircraft. Captain Martin is such a sound and conscientious officer, who is doing such valuable work in helping evaders, that I hope his case will be handled tactfully, so that he will not suffer from any lowering of morale, or think he is in any way in disgrace."

.Operation MAGDALEN II

161 Sqn, RAF Tangmere, Lysander, 16th November 1943

Sqn/Ldr Hugh Verity and F/O McCairns

Pinpoint - Le Champ Sainte Marie, 2 kms SW of Selens (Aisne) - 49° 29' 15" N / 03° 11' 10" E

Verity: two passengers aboard: Lucian Dumais and Ray Labrosse (MI9), who went on to run the very successful Shelburne Escape Line

Verity: rendezvous N.E. of Compiègne was made quite happily with McCairns. I pinpointed at a lit-up factory at Guny on the canal E. of the target and found the target. After my take-off I led McCairns to the field with landing light and navigation lights. The flarepath was difficult to find because Capitaine Martin had paper discs over his torches. There would have been four passengers in each a/c, had Air Ministry not reprimanded Capitaine Martin for sending four on Magdalen I. My view is that four medium sized passengers may safely be carried in a Lysander if no luggage is carried.

McCairns: flew under cloud to rendezvous at Compiègne where I made R/T contact with S/Ldr. Verity. Proceeded to target area, but saw no signal and stayed in the vicinity until S/Ldr. Verity had completed his operation. I found the flare path with the aid of his navigation lights and landed immediately. The ground was excellent but the flarepath was badly lit by several torches.

Verity took on board Sgt 'Val' Johnson (RAF), T/Sgt Harold Maddox and T/Sgt Fred Murray (USAAF). McCairns took on Edgard Potier (MI9), 2nd Lt. Charles Breuer and 2nd Lt. Stanley Chichester (USAAF).

.Operation MAGDALEN (failed, wrong back-bearing)

161 Sqn, RAF Tangmere, Lysander, 16th October 1943

Flg/Off Bathgate

Owing to changing winds the coast was crossed about 30 miles to the port off track. The coast was not identified and Compiègne could not be found. Map reading was extremely difficult as the rivers did not

show up owing to the base, although the moon was quite bright. In actual fact I was in an area which was not on my maps. Consequently the towns that were passed could not be identified.

Operation MAGDALEN (failed - no reception party)

161 Sqn, RAF Tangmere, Lysander, 18th October 1943

Flg/Off McCairns

Pinpoint - Le Champ Sainte Marie, 2 kms SW of Selens (Aisne) - 49° 29' 15" N / 03° 11' 10" E

Arrived at Compiègne by 00:40 and set course for the target. As I did not receive any signal I returned to Compiègne and made a second run. On this run I identified the field and stayed in the vicinity for one hour. At 02:00 I set course for base.

Subsequent messages confirmed that there was no reception.

Operation UNIVERSITY (cancelled - bad weather)

161 Sqn, RAF Tangmere, Lysander, 15th December 1943

G/Capt J.A. McCairns,

Pinpoint- 6 kms NE of Fismes (Aisne) - 49° 20' 45" N / 03° 45' 10" E

Three agents and equipment to be taken to France: Edgard Potier, Jean de Blommaert and Willy Lemâitre (MI9). Three evaders to be brought back: Lt Carlyle Darling (USAAF), W/O Robert Harper and W/O Ian Robb (RAF).

Operation BRASENOSE III (combined with VIENNE and CELANDINE/GARDENIA)

161 Sqn, RAF Tempsford, Halifax "X" LL.118, 20th December, 1943

Pinpoint- Mont de Dhuizel 8 kms NNW of Fismes (Aisne) - 49° 21' 40" N / 03° 37' 45" E

The crew: Lt Hysing-Dahl - captain, Sgt Robertson - 2nd pilot, Sgt Sutton - navigator, Lt Rieber-Mohn - w/operator, Sgt Cally - bomb aimer, Sgt Shatter - engineer, Sgt Forster - rear gunner, Sgt Erland - despatcher

Three passengers aboard: Edgard Potier, Jean de Blommaert and Willy Lemâitre (MI9).

The route took them over Selsey Bill, Cabourg, Loire, Sulley, then the target, Brasenose III, which they arrived over at 04:25 (Mont de Dhuizel, 8 kms NNW of Fismes, 49° 21' 40" N / 03° 37' 45" E). The reception arrangements were good except that the lights were switched off when the aircraft was circling. This made things very difficult, and it was necessary to circle 5 times before the drop could be made, slightly to SW of the reception area at 04:37. The Halifax returned to base at 07:45.

Contact between the Possum Line & London was, of course, by radio. The following is an example of the kind of "correspondence" that occurred:

Operation BRASENOSE - Possum to London on 28th August 1943

CAN YOU ORGANISE THE FOLLOWING OPERATION?

LYSANDER FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER

THE FOLLOWING ARE HOURS .. MINUTES 23.00 GMT

MEDECIN* EXPECTS THE FOLLOWING NUMBER OF PASSENGERS WILL BE ASSEMBLED IN TIME ? 03

IF THE OPERATION CAN TAKE PLACE PLEASE LET US KNOW BY B.B.C.** ON THURSDAY 9 FRIDAY

11***

THE SUN WILL SHINE FOR EVERYONE

REPLY IMMEDIATELY.

* it is not clear if 'MEDECIN' means a doctor or is a pseudonym

** a 'message personnel'

*** messages should be broadcast at 9 o'clock on Thursday & Friday at 11 o'clock

According to Raymond Gallet, part of the reception committee: "On the 11th September, we waited in vain for our message; on the next day, the 12th, during the broadcast at 19:15 hours the electricity went off. One of us went round to a friend, who owned a battery operated receiver. We eventually heard our message at 21:32 hours....."

We immediately set off for our landing strip after collecting our two parachutists and another resistance friend who was helping us mark out the landing strip [*with torches*]. Our group of six left at 22:45 hours. As the German telephone lines had been sabotaged that day, Commandant Potier decided to go cross country to avoid their patrols. at about 23:20 hours, about halfway there, which meant about 3 kms from our strip, we heard a plane flying low in the right direction. Since it was well before the appointed time, our chief did not believe it was our plane; but after a while, as it widened its circuit it flew close to us. M. Potier recognised the special duty Lysander devoted to the air escape networks, and sent him his signal. The pilot saw us and replied, OK; the plane was an hour earlier than scheduled. We later learned that London had omitted to specify GMT or Central European Time which amounts to a two hour time difference. Immediately after this initial contact, M. Potier sent a short message [*by S-Phone?*] to the pilot to leave the area for a while, until we had arrived. This exchange of signals was repeated a few times. At midnight, we were at last in position, and the beacons were lit. I was at post "B", that is about 150 metres from Commandant Potier, which I was only allowed to leave after take-off."

Fred Greyer

Radio Message & Gallet's notes taken from <http://webpace.qmul.ac.uk/fsegreyer/>

TVARA member Fred Greyer is the son of Edgard Potier.



Reginald Eric Wilkinson (Reg) came from London, England. He signed up for the RAF Volunteer Reserve as a pilot in 1941 and completed his training in Alabama courtesy of the 'Arnold Scheme' - the US government's offer to train pilots for the RAF. Reg was commissioned on 24 April 1942 and after additional training was posted to RAF Bomber Command in which he began his operational service with 138 Squadron based at RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire. He was promoted through to Squadron Leader at which time he transferred to 161 Squadron - still at Tempsford.

Both 138 and 161 (Special Duties) Squadrons flew in support of covert operations for the Special Operation Executive (SOE). On the night of 26/27 November 1944 Reg's mission was to drop an agent behind enemy lines. At that time the blind-drop (one without support from the ground) was the deepest penetration into Germany. Reg's crew were Flying Officer Weddell (navigator), Flight Lieutenant Champion (wireless operator/gunner), and Flight Lieutenant Ash(gunner). Their aircraft was a Lockheed Hudson IIIA, serial number T9463, call sign MA-L.

Their agent, Paul Penczok, was a former Wehrmacht soldier of Polish/German extraction who had surrendered to the British on 9 August 1944 near St-Omer in Normandy. When detained Penczok was found in possession of an Allied 'black' propaganda 50 Fünfzig banknote produced in large numbers by the British 'Psychological Warfare Executive'. On one side it appeared to be a normal banknote but on the obverse there were 17 lines of prose deriding the Nazi leaders as thieves and swindlers and inciting the German troops to end the war. Ironically, the RAF Special Duties squadrons dropped these notes over enemy lines. It was likely that the presence of this note lead the British interrogators to believe that Penczok might have been sympathetic to an attempt to recruit him to spy for the Allies. The National Archive files record that Penczok admitted to being a communist who saw no evil in Stalin. It was this, and his desire to attack the Nazi regime, that persuaded is interrogators that Penczok could spy against Germany. Following his recruitment Penczok completed three months of agent training with other so-called 'Bonzos' at the SOE training establishment, Wanborough Manor, near Guildford, Surrey. Penczok was trained in the 'black' arts of a being a secret agent. He was provided with an alias - Paul Wodarski - and cover story. He was also provided with false documentation to allow him to travel and send 'innocent' coded letters to contacts in neutral countries for onward transmission to London. This was his only means of passing intelligence back to his handlers. Penczok's objectives were to re-engage with former associates, establish a sabotage network to disrupt the Wehrmacht's activities through murder, explosions and propaganda.

Penczok was taken to RAF Tempsford on 26 November 1944 and after final kit check and issue of his weapon and 'L' (suicide) tablet at 'Gibraltar Farm' he took off at 2048 in T9463. The aircraft flew via France and Belgium to the drop-zone near Erfurt where the agent parachuted to safety. T9463 began its return journey

probably (following normal practice) via a reciprocal route, but in the early hours of 27 November, when the aircraft was over the front lines near the German - Belgian - Luxembourgian borders, it crashed into a meadow near the village of Brisy in Belgium.

At about 0200 Joseph Remy, a local villager, heard a loud crash and at 0600 he investigated the sound and found T9463 crashed in his meadow just outside the village. Joseph Remy's son, Paul, recounts the following story told to him by his father: T9463 had approached from the east and on impact had gouged a trench into the field. The tail section had broken away and was close by. All four of the crew were dead. The pilot, Reg, was in his seat and his eyes had come out of his head as a consequence of the inertia caused by the impact. Weddell was in his seat alongside the pilot and Ash was in the rear gun turret in the tail section. Champion, however, had bailed out. He was found close by with his parachute trailed out behind his body. It appeared that his parachute had either failed to open correctly or he had jumped when the aircraft was too low.

The crash occurred three weeks before the commencement of the notorious Battle of the Bulge on 16 December. At the time the front-lines were not fixed, but at the time of the crash the meadow into which T9463 crashed was in Allied territory enabling the bodies to be recovered and buried on 2 December in Evere Town cemetery, Brussels. Wing Commander Alan Boxer, 161 Squadron, flew from Tempsford to identify the bodies and be present at the funeral. The crew are now remembered in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission section of the cemetery.

The question is 'What caused T9463 to crash'?

Records show that there were no Luftwaffe claims for that night and ground troops' records for both sides are non-existent. However, a claim from the crew of a USAAF Northrop P-61 of 422 Night Fighter Squadron does exist. The squadron's records note that between 0023 and 0300 an aircraft was patrolling an area close to the front-lines and the Rhine and near to T9463's eventual crash site adjacent to the southern limit of their patrol zone. At an unspecified time between 0023 and 0300 the aircraft engaged what the crew described as a Messerschmitt Bf110 and after firing they observed it descend in flames into low cloud at Angels-3 (3000 feet). The inevitable outcome was not observed.

In 2000 the author, his father and uncle, assisted by local enthusiasts, searched the crash site and recovered small parts of an aircraft together with discharged and unfired ammunition of differing calibres all of Allied manufacture which tends to support the contention that T9463 went down fighting. On the other hand the detritus could have already been in the body of the aircraft and been ejected on impact, or it could have been present as a consequence of ground troops fighting.



Why was T9463 mistaken for a Bf110? The profile of the Bf110 and the Hudson were very similar. Although the Hudson was slightly bigger, both aircraft had twin engines, had twin tails and a rear fixed landing wheel. The confusion would have been especially so in silhouette, at night, and at distances varying between 500 and 800 feet.

Now there is a memorial to the crew of T9463 in a quiet country lane close to the crash site. This was paid for by Paul Remy and erected by the local authority. On 27 November 2011, poignantly the 67th anniversary of the crash, members of the pilot's family, including the author, Paul and other Belgian enthusiasts, visited the crash site and memorial to pay their respects.

Penczok survived the war; he presented himself to the Allies a year after the war ended and, using his pre-arranged 'secret' message, sought payment for his work. He received £16 10/- (£16.50 or €20). Reg and his crew, of course, did not survive but they will not be forgotten.

Steve Wilkinson



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then - Special now - Special always

We help the old to remember, and the young to understand.



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Tempsford Web Sites

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