

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## August 2002

Unable to leave the research without attempting to locate the crash site with absolute certainty, in 2002 I embarked on a final determined effort to satisfy that goal. It began with an attempt to map the route that had been followed by the raid on Trappes and therefore the route taken by LM121 and her crew. By using an ordinary road map of northern France and the details contained on the loss card for LM121, I was able to, inaccurately, draw out the route. The known crash site i.e. 1Km west of Lormaison (also on the loss card) was not on the lines that I had drawn. So, armed with the information I had I went along to the local airport to, initially, see if they had any maps of the area and perhaps correct any errors I had made. Luckily, one of the local flying club managers is an aviation history enthusiast and with the added benefit of modern technology and the co-ordinates on the loss record card, we were able to plot the route with absolute accuracy. It still did not pass over Lormaison, which is some 6 miles north of the route thus discovered. When I later received the details for the ND926 crash it would appear that, at least these two aircraft were somewhat to the north of their designated track by about the same distance. There are a couple of possible reasons for this.

One possibility is that they had both pulled away to the north when attacked by the night fighter. In the case of ND926, which was attacked more than once, this may be the case. In its efforts to evade the night fighter, the bomber may have strayed well off course. For LM121 and her crew, nobody will ever know. From eyewitness accounts, LM121 was a flaming mass; travelling almost due west just before it crashed. It has been impossible to tell if any control was attributable to the pilot by then. ND926 blew up in the air and so the wreckage was scattered across farmland between the two villages of Porcheaux and la Houssoye. These villages lie north and south of an almost parallel track that the two aircraft appear to have followed.

The second option follows on from this point. With both of these aircraft being shutdown in a short space of time to the north of the expected route, they may have both been slightly off course due to wind drift. The weather forecast shows that there may have been some wind over the continent that was blowing them slightly to the north of the route they should have followed. Which ever of these two possibilities is the case, it was now obvious that neither aircraft was on its true course when they met their fates. Although to be 6 miles off was probably not too bad with their next turning point only a short distance away.

Having decided that both aircraft were off track, albeit slightly, we set about plotting exactly where 1Km west of Lormaison would be on the ground. From the road and air maps available it was almost certainly going to be where the A16 from Amiens to Paris passed the village on the western side. Now I felt sure that I would be able to visit and photograph the spot when my wife and I were on our holiday in the region. With just over 1 week to go I was checking on some information that I had acquired from the Australian records in Canberra when I discovered that in the case of Frank Reid, the Australians believed that it was ND926 that had crashed at Lormaison. They even quoted the names of the landowner, a Monsieur Postolle, who was the village mayor at the time and the name of Monsieur Letot who had taken away the

wreckage of the Lancaster. Some more frantic detective work was called for if we were to discover the truth after all.

Back to the Internet, e-mails and telephone to attempt in the short time now available, to sort out the muddle. It was soon clear that some errors had crept in during the passage of time. It was just a few days before I learned that ND926 had blown up in mid air, and was promised a copy of her loss record to confirm this fact. Slightly more confident now, I checked more of the Australian records that revealed the mix up over the crew burials at Beauvais. These were to account for the fact that Frank Reid is buried beside the six crew of ND926 and not with his own crew. It also raised the question of where was the seventh member of this other Lancaster crew. Maybe we would find the answers on our trip.

Armed with all these facts and almost certain we would be heading for the correct spot in France we set out on our holiday. We were taking another rose, called Remembrance, to plant in the cemetery just, in case the previous one had not survived. On arrival in Beauvais, the cemetery was the first port of call, it was a hot day and we needed to get the rose in the ground and watered in. We then planned to return throughout the holiday and water it well, as on the previous occasion this had not been possible. The results of our previous labours were obvious; the original rose had not survived.

It was not until Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> August that we visited the Lormaison area to try to discover and photograph the site where LM121 'C Charlie' had crashed. I took with us all the information I had managed to gather, including the names of the landowner and wreckage remover as supplied in the Australian records. Finding the village was no problem and we drove into the village from the north-east to a crossroad junction in what appeared to be the centre. Here we turned right, being almost westerly, and began to watch the odometer click round in 10<sup>ths</sup> of miles as we left the village. Sure enough, as we came to six 10<sup>ths</sup> we began to cross a motorway bridge. Modern technology and old records had come together to put us in the correct location.

We stopped at the far end of the bridge and got out to look around. There appeared to be some large indentations in the ground on either side of the bridge but they did not look very old, they contained quite recent vegetation and small trees. In fact, the whole area close to the bridge looked quite new. Never the less, I walked back across the bridge to the village end and took a series of panoramic shots of the whole scene. The village was clearly visible across the gently rolling countryside, as it was set atop the next crest. Having completed a circle of shots, in which I hoped the crash site and the farm of Monsieur Postolle were visible, I returned to the car. If the investigation netted nothing else, I felt sure that somewhere in those 8-10 shots the reason for our visit must surely lie. We then drove on a little way further west before returning towards the centre of the village. Now I hoped to find La Mairie (Town Hall) and locate the farm so that we would be able to return another day to ask questions. The village had seemed very quiet and deserted when we first drove through, but hopefully we would find somebody to ask.

It was at this point that we noticed, for the first time, a small cemetery on the right of the road on the very outskirts of the village. Taking this to be the one where the crew had originally been laid to rest following the crash, we pulled over and I left the car and opening the iron gates, went inside. It was only a small walled area and it was immediately obvious that there would not be signs, from almost 60 years ago, of any

disturbance here. Returning to the car, I was suddenly struck by the thought that maybe either Monsieur's Postolle or Letot may be buried here. Monsieur Postolle in particular because I knew he had been the mayor of the village during the war and had owned a farm here. My wife joined me in the cemetery, were we began to search all the headstones and tombstones for either name. It was only a short time before Debbie spotted the name of Monsieur André Postolle on a large black stone against the far wall of the cemetery. According to the plaques displayed on it, he had died on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1972, which was over 30 years ago. Would any family still be around to contact? A further search failed to find any signs of a Monsieur Letot grave. Again we returned to the car, at least we had located one of the two gentlemen mentioned in the records. We prepared to drive away, to find the Town Hall and then return to our hotel. As we did so, a woman was seen approaching from the village and on yet another impulse I turned off the engine and got out to meet her. At this juncture, I should point out that neither my wife nor I speak anything but 'school day' French and that was sometime ago.

We greeted each other with the normal pleasantries and then I began to explain what I was looking for. Sadly, her English was at least as bad as my French was, but we both struggled on. At the name of Postolle, she solemnly beckoned me towards the cemetery gates. I said that I was aware that Monsieur Postolle was buried there, but I was searching for any living relatives, were there any in the village? Again she understood and pointed towards the village.

"Oui"

was the reply.

"Monsieur Bernard..."

and motioned towards 'l'église' (the church), which was visible a short distance away. I began to wonder if his relative might be the vicar. There seemed to be more to it than that, so I asked her to show us where she meant. She willingly joined us in our car and we set off the short distance to the church, here she indicated that we should drive past, so my first thoughts were not correct. At the next road junction she indicated that we drive into, what was obviously, a farmyard. Here we were greeted by a slightly overweight and noisy but obviously not aggressive golden Labrador. Our new found guide got out and ushered us to do the same, leading the way to the door of the house. She rang the bell and when the door was answered she made the initial introductions to a young lady. She turned and called into the house and a man she introduced as Monsieur Bernard Postolle came to the door. I began again in my faltering French to explain about the Lancaster crash and the research I was doing into my Uncle's death. Bernard spoke very little English but with the aid of a letter I had translated into French, his two daughters and the little of each other's language we all knew, it became possible to understand the reason for our visit and why we were seeking this information. Bernard began to explain what he knew.

He told us that he had been seven years old on the night it happened. The bomber was heard being shotdown some distance away. He had joined others outside to watch as it came tumbling from the sky. Finally, it had been seen coming down from an eastern direction, passing just south of the farm over the German fuel dump that had been created in the fields on that side of the farmyard. The bomber eventually crashed and exploded on the gently rising ground some 750 metres further west. Many of the villagers began to rush towards the crash site in a vain attempt to help any survivors. There was a large and active resistance organisation in the area and they hoped to spirit away anybody who may have survived. Sadly, as we now know, there were no survivors, but at the time there must have seemed some hope. The

German garrison, who were billeted throughout the village, using the magnificent Town Hall as their Headquarters, was obviously aware that the villagers might take away any survivors and reacted just as swiftly to stop any of them reaching the point of impact. Armed military then herded all the French people back into the village and searched to make sure they were not hiding a survivor amongst them. Bernard's father, being the mayor of the village, had remonstrated with the German Commanding Officer and was eventually allowed to return, with the German, to the crash site. This was, however, sometime after the bodies of the crew had been removed. The coffins containing the remains had later been buried, by the German military, in the village cemetery.

The story followed very closely that told in the Australian records and it was obvious that we were talking to an eyewitness to the events of 1<sup>st</sup> June 1944. We then asked some questions regarding Monsieur Letot. Who had he been? What part had he played in the proceedings? Why he is not buried in the cemetery?

It transpires that Monsieur Letot was the area 'scrap metal man'. He was instructed by the Germans to recover the wreckage, which they would then send back to Germany for recycling into their own armaments. He had been a resident of Méru and this accounted for the fact that he was not buried in the local cemetery. We then enquired if he had any children whom we might speak to. Unfortunately, although his wife was the area mid-wife, they were unable to have any children of their own. There would be no further enquiries possible in that direction.

Bernard offered to take us out to the field and show us the point where the aircraft had finally come to rest. We would not be able to reach the exact point as the field was planted with maize, but he could show us more exactly. Would we mind waiting just a little while for him to make some telephone calls and then he would drive us out there. Whilst we waited, Dominique Magnier arrived at the house. He is the son-in-law of Bernard, being married to Bernard's daughter Myriam, the lady who had first met us at the door. He was interested to hear about our search and has since provided some information supplied to him by his father.

On the morning after the crash had happened, Monsieur Magnier senior had travelled from his home in Méru to Lormaison to visit the crash site of the aircraft he had seen shot-down during the night. He had taken a camera with him, but was not allowed, by the Germans, to take any photographs. He did, however, manage to pick up a few small articles of debris. During a subsequent house move, these pieces have been lost.

Bernard returned from his telephoning to tell us that his cousin Michel Doutreleau might also have some interesting information for us. We would first go and look at the field and then return to pick up Dominique and drive to Michel's farm in nearby Hénonville. Bernard's other daughter, Florence, was to accompany us out to the fields and assist with the translations, which were becoming slightly easier as time passed. As we drove out of the farm and village back towards the bridge on which we had stood, Bernard explained that there was no evidence at all to see even at the motorway edge. Monsieur Letot had effectively cleared the area in 1944. Then, seven to eight years ago, during the building of the A16, the contractors had unearthed an unexploded bomb, a Merlin engine and various parts of the fuselage! The bomb was successfully made safe by the French military and the wreckage was removed to allow the construction to be continued. He had no idea what had become

of the aircraft pieces, he believed they were almost certainly scrapped. As we approached the bridge, Bernard swung off the road and down the motorway service access road on the left-hand side and stopped. We all got out and he pointed to the centre of the low tree line visible at the horizon. It had been there that the Lancaster had finally and fatally returned to earth.

**BELOW** A photograph of Monsieur Bernard Postolle (on the right) and the author beside the field where LM121 crashed. The tree line mentioned in the text is visible behind the pair. The crash was at the tree line just to the right of M. Postolle. The lower picture shows the Amiens to Paris (A16) behind the trees.



We returned to the farm via the, closed, Town Hall. Once inside the grounds of this impressive building, it was not difficult to imagine the sound of jackbooted Germans

parading around on the gravel forecourt. One almost expected to be challenged in German as we walked around to the front of the building to where, today, the French flag hung proudly where so many years ago the Swastika would have dangled.

**BELOW** A photograph of the imposing Town Hall building in Lormaison



Following this little excursion we returned to the farm just across the road from the Town Hall where we thanked Florence for her assistance with the translations and said: - "Au revoir". We collected Dominique for the next part of this unexpected but extremely interesting, guided tour. We were going to be taken to the village of Hénonville, some 6Kms away to the south-east. This is where Bernard's cousin Michel Doutréleau owned a farm and he was expecting us. It was almost certain that he had some information regarding the events on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> May/1<sup>st</sup> June 1944. One the way, Dominique began to explain about another crash that had happened outside the gates of Michel's farm and about a memorial that had been erected there in honour of the American crew. It had been a Boeing B17 Flying Fortress named 'Maid to please' of the 447<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group based at Rattlesden, Suffolk. It had been shutdown on its very first operation and ended up crashing about 50 metres from the gates to the farm. Four of the crew had died, two more were injured but the remainder survived with few injuries, most being captured by the Germans. With the aid of the farm workers and a resistance group called 'Alsace' one crew member had made his escape across France to Spain. From there he had caught a boat that eventually returned him to England.

As we approached the farm, Bernard pulled off the road and indicated the replica B17 propeller that now stands over the monument which is a plaque inscribed with the names of the crew.

**Below.** The American Memorial outside Michel's farm.



We then got back into the car and were driven the short distance into an impressive walled farmyard containing a huge duck pond, 100's of ducks, a large dovecote and as many pigeons. Michel came out to greet us all, but appeared somewhat guarded as Bernard and Dominique began the explanations. He then turned to me and asked who it was I was enquiring about and what was his relationship to me. I gave the same reasons and quoted from the same letter that I had used when explaining our

visit to the Postolle family. This seemed to satisfy him and we were all ushered into a large room where an enormous wood fire burned in an equally large fireplace. There were two women occupants of the room, but neither of them was introduced to us. We all sat down and began to discuss what each of us knew about the wartime events.

Michel produced some records (in French) that indicated that both LM121 and ND926 had been the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> victims of Fritz Söthe. Michel had also been seven years old on the night it all happened. He said that many raids, both day and night, were over flying this general area. By day there were usually some 1000 American planes and by night between 300 and 500 British bombers flying over. There had been around 300 allied aircraft shot down in the locality from all this aerial activity throughout the war. The aerial armadas became even more concentrated in the period running up to and following D-Day when the majority of raids were to targets in France and in particular the infrastructure in the hinterland of the invasion beaches. Just further to the place we now sat there was a V1 manufacturing site. This had been bombed remorselessly until it had been totally destroyed. The Germans had been firing around 340 a day of these unguided flying bombs at England following the allied landings on the beaches at Normandy.

On the night in question Michel remembered hearing the aircraft coming over and had gone outside when the sound of shooting had been heard. He was unsure how the aircraft had been shot down, but was fairly sure the German aircraft was a Messerschmitt by its engine noise. He remembered the time as being about 0100 French time and the fact that both aircraft were shotdown in such a short space of time, recorded as four minutes in all the available records. This finally confirmed all the timings, with LM121 and ND926 both taking off from Mildenhall just before midnight British time. This would have been just before 2300 French time. They had both taken approximately 2 hours to reach the point when they had come into contact with the nightfighter making the French time approximately 0100. With the German records being adjusted to the British time, the two claims for Fritz Söthe were made at 0150 and 0154 that night.

We mentioned that we had planned to visit a small aviation museum at nearby Warluis; Michel said that this was a good idea as they had many items from the war that may be of interest. Michel said he knew (as he seemed to know everybody in the locality personally) the director and went to telephone him. When he returned, he said that as it was now getting into the late afternoon he had arranged to bring 'his friends from England' to the museum on the Monday. He would meet us at our hotel and escort us around. He was sure we would find some useful items there. So with this arrangement made, it was time to bid farewell to Michel and his family and head back to Lormaison. Bernard drove us back to his farm where his daughter Myriam (Dominique's wife) invited us in for a drink before we returned to the hotel. We were sad when we finally said our goodbyes as we had spent a most enjoyable and interesting, if somewhat tiring (because of the language difficulties), afternoon with such wonderful hosts. We hoped we would meet again.

The following day we were met by Michel who insisted he drove us out to the aircraft museum. A short journey followed during which we passed the memorial to the crash of the R101 airship. This had come down on the outskirts of Beauvais in 1930. We were greeted by the curator, who again spoke no English. He tried extremely hard to make himself understood by talking slowly most of the time. The museum was split into various sections for French, British, American and German exhibits. All aspects

of the war in the region were well documented with some very good photographs of the day to show life under the German occupation. There were many aircraft parts in the British section (none from the crash at Lormaison) and pictures of military burials conducted by the Germans. It was explained that the German Military Commander in the region gave every allied fatality this same honour. Geoff and the crew would have been afforded this ceremony when they had been laid to rest at Lormaison.

Finally, we were shown, what was obviously, a wartime propaganda film about a Free French Halifax squadron attack. Near the end, there were pictures of other aircraft on the 'raid' and these included Lancaster's sporting the LS code of XV Squadron! Another strange coincidence. We set off from the museum and as we drove the short distance back to the hotel, I offered to take Michel to the cemetery and show him the graves. He had never been before and we were pleased that we could show him some of the evidence in our search. As we eventually bade farewell to Michel in the car park of the hotel, we knew we had made many new friends here in France and would be keeping in touch with many of them. After another thoroughly enjoyable afternoon, we were not, however, sorry to return to the hotel. All this translating was hard work and had made the research all the more difficult. We vowed we would take French lessons on our return to England in an effort to do better next time.

And there would be a next time. Michel and Bernard had begun to discuss the possibility of erecting a memorial to what they had begun to call "Notre Lancaster"; our Lancaster. The organisation necessary, across the miles, looked a difficult proposition, but their enthusiasm and sincerity was overwhelming. There would be a ceremony!

Despite the language problem I was sure that we had gained all the information that had been lacking before the trip. Piecing all that we now knew together, it is most likely that ND926 was the first to fall victim. This aircraft had set off first and had fallen furthest west of the two victims. German records give this same indication with the times and relative positions. Having shot down this aircraft, Fritz must have found LM121 almost immediately, by whatever means, and struck his second fatal blow of the night. It is possible that the Germans had saturated this raid with nightfighters because 4 of the six aircraft lost by Bomber Command that night were shot down on this single operation. This single raid had therefore suffered a loss rate of 1.8%, with the whole night's operations coming out at less than 1%. Compared with the wartime average of 4.5% this was not very high. It was, however, disastrous in a number of respects. Mildenhall lost three of the four aircraft shot down on the raid (LL782, another 622 Squadron aircraft also being lost), making a 10% loss rate for that base. The 4<sup>th</sup> was LL936 of 115 Squadron. It robbed the world of many brave young men who had not lived to see the fruits of their labours. Families across the globe had sadly lost one of their relatives and friendships had been broken forever.

On a really personal note, I would have loved to know my namesake. To know whether he could have run that small holding, somewhere on the Isle of Wight. Would all the dreams he had, whilst sitting beneath the spluttering gas lamps in front of the fire in that little cottage at Gunville, have come true?

By completing this research I feel I have been able to answer a lot more than just these questions and come to know the man who I only knew as Uncle Geoff. I'm sure he was the sort of person who could have made any dream come true.