

Chapter 9

Epilogue

Within weeks of returning from our holiday I was contacted by Dominique Magnier. He had been given the task of arranging and co-ordinating a ceremony. He was tasked with ensuring that the Lancaster and crew would be permanently remembered. At that time he was just beginning and asked if I would be prepared to be involved. "Maybe you could get some family interest", he simply asked.

Michel Doutreleau had shown us some pictures of the American Memorial ceremony when we had been in France. From these, it had been possible to see that it was not a small ceremony that was planned. Dominique mentioned that Michel would be the driving force behind what was being put together. He was very mindful of the frailties of man and, although it would be the 60th anniversary of the crash in 2004, was pushing for the ceremony to be arranged for the 31st May 2003. This would be a good weekend in France as it was a holiday when more people would be available and it fell on a Saturday. So there it was a simple task; find family, friends and officials to attend in about 10 months time. Dominique would be the French organiser translator, catalyst and go between who would bring it all together. The first task for him was to get a suitable memorial stone that would be erected in the crew's honour.

For me it was time to put in some very determined detective work. No longer could this just be about my Uncle and my search for what happened to him. He had served and died with a crew of six others and they must all have family, somewhere. Then there were the officials whom I might be able to get to attend. Where did one start with something like this.

The first part was perhaps the easiest. They had served in the RAF, so contacting them first seemed a good idea. Letters to The Air Ministry, the RAF, the RAFA, and the current XV Squadron and for good measure, the Royal British Legion were despatched.

There were three nationalities in the crew so letters went to the 3 Embassies, British, Australian and New Zealand.

But most important of all, were there any relatives still alive? I knew my Dad would love to attend, but was already feeling too frail to make such a journey at the age of 81, so what would others be like? How was I to find them around the globe?

I contacted the Archives of the Australian and New Zealand Air Forces and their National Archives and was pleased to get promising replies with advice on contacting the newspapers. Also a throw away line that '....a lot of Australians do not move around a lot, the relatives may well still live in or near where the records for 1944 gave their addresses'. What a bit of luck, I had found an International Telephone directory on the Internet and could look up names, addresses and numbers from that.

Starting with the more unusual names Dombrain (as I knew it then) and Nystrom I picked my time carefully and picked up the phone. Bingo! The first phone call gets me in touch with, of all people, a guy named Geoff. He was Geoff Dombrain to be

more precise, a cousin of the lost pilot. He was amazed that I had managed to find him and that I knew so much. He said that Peter had a sister and that he would make contact with her and we would stay in touch. It wasn't long before I was in contact with Mrs June Schwarz. She was very enthusiastic and informative about her brother. She had visited the grave sometime before and had relatives in England whom she visited. She was sure they would attend with her if all the arrangements could be brought together. June pointed out that the RAF had got Peter's name wrong. They couldn't, it appears, deal with apostrophe in his name and so he had become Dombrain, It should have been D'Ombraïn and she asked that I put that in the story.

Buoyed up by this success I moved to the next name on the list; Nystrom. This was too easy, with another phone call I had found someone related to him too. There was a large family who needed to be contacted, but most used e-mail so I was soon in contact with many. Much information changed hands, but they were afraid, even at this early stage, that none of them would be able to make the journey. A sad fact, but in the end, their thoughts were with us on the day. I was able to get them copies of a video record my wife made of the whole weekend.

Next came Long and Reid. A different pattern began to appear. There were many more to choose from and I began to get blank replies to my question of "do you have a relative who served with the RAF during the war and was killed in action?" Now there were quite a few nos. Then I got a contact by e-mail from my newspaper and magazine adverts for information. The guy was Peter Reid who said his father was a brother of Frank, the tail gunner. He had been speaking to his Dad and they would very much like to attend. Peter very much wanted to bring his son along too; he thought it would be wonderful educational tour for him. Peter had to visit a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt on business, so they would tie it all together. (He added that he would not tell the Germans what the rest of his European tour was to involve after what the RAF and USAAF had done to the factory and town during the war!)

Then I again struck lucky on the Australian telephones. One more call found Bernie Long, brother of Arthur Stephen Long, the navigator and Geoff's best friend on the crew. He was absolutely gobsmacked to be contacted and couldn't believe what I could tell him from the Australian Archives, much of which he didn't know. He told me that, like others I had spoken to, he had been across to the grave of his brother before, but knew nothing of the crash site. They had a sister who had married another navigator from the squadron. They had another brother, Gordon, another navigator, who served with 115 Squadron. He was lost on New Years Day 1945 over Germany, sadly to friendly fire from an American AA unit. He was hoping to combine a visit to Gordon's grave, accompanied by his sister Audrey and niece, with the ceremony at Lormaison. He told me once that Steve, as he was known, had trained for the air force at some stage with a certain Gough Whitlam who was eventually to become Premier of Australia.

That was all the Australian crew families found and we knew who was attending and who was not. It was still six months till the ceremony and the things were going well. The RAF was going to send 2 Tornado crews over. There was going to be representation from The Australian Air Attaché in Paris and his counter part from the New Zealand Embassy in London. The RAFA Branch in Paris was going to send some representatives and flag bearers. We would have a good official and family representation for the crew. They would not be forgotten. Now to the others.

Whilst all this was going on, I was having no luck contacting what I had thought would be the easiest, family to find, that of Englishman Len Gearing. No results had come back from any of my pleas in magazines and on websites for information. So I contacted the RAF records people who had given me Geoff's records and asked for their help. They agreed to send a letter, which I should write, to the last known address of the family. I was grateful and hopeful that, like the Australians, English people did not move around too much. I waited, there was to be no quick response. Then came the strangest phone call of all. One Sunday morning the telephone rang and a voice said:

"Is that Mr Reynolds, Mr Geoff Reynolds, I believe you're looking for me."

I said:

"That depends on who you might be"

"I'm Bert Gearing."

Was the reply. I nearly fell over.

He explained that the PMA had sent my letter out to the address they had on their records. The people there knew the family had moved many years before and seemed to remember the area they had moved to. They got a telephone directory out and began phoning around, much like I had been doing in Australia. Their memory had served them well and they contacted Bert, They told him they had an official looking letter that they thought he ought to see. He immediately got in his car and, after a round trip of some 40 miles had retrieved the letter. On opening it, he had got on the phone straight away. He and his brother had both been in the RAF at the very end and after the war. They had done quite a lot of research about their brother, but knew few of the facts surrounding the loss. Len had worked for the Ford Motor company in Dagenham before volunteering for the RAF as an engineer. He trained at St Athan in Cornwall before joining the crew. He was a very talented footballer, playing for Dagenham and had played with Alf Ramsey long before he was the England manager and became a Sir. Bert and brother Don, with their wives had visited the grave in Beauvais many times. They were keen to attend for this ceremony.

Whilst bashing the telephone, I tried the same system for the New Zealander Jamieson. This also brought blank replies, but I had another lead from their records. It appeared that Laurence had moved with his parents from Shetland when very young. Maybe there was someone there who knew him. I placed an article in the newspaper there.

A phone call from the Shetland Islands began to fill in the story of the Jamieson family. I was given names and details that eventually, but too late for them to attend, led to Laurence's brother, John in New Zealand and his sister Kathryn in Australia. I was also told of more relatives in this country. They were being contacted and would then contact me to make arrangements to attend. It transpired that 2nd cousins of Laurence lived in England and they made arrangements in the last few weeks before the ceremony to attend. Now all the crew were accounted for. Cousins of Geoff were going to be with me at the ceremony. Sadly, my Father's health prevented his attendance.

Everyone that I had spoken to so far and many of their other family members were very helpful over time with more information about their lost relatives and their families. Without their help I would have had little to write about the other crew members. We have remained friends ever since despite the distances involved. I had found and spoken to more members of my own family than I knew existed. Success.

Now all of us attendees needed a place to stay and congregate before the ceremony. Despite taking French lessons at the local adult education centre, we still weren't up to sorting out all the needs of those who would be attending. I could give travel information based on our prior visits and maps to find places, but that was about the best I could do. Despite very kind offers of accommodation from families in Lormaison, everyone was a little concerned about the language difficulties this might present. Some of the overseas visitors chose to book their own accommodation as it would be part of a European tour or holiday visit to family. Others needed ideas of hotels and transport in the area. I called upon the services of a French speaking friend to book us into a hotel and book a meal for everybody. He also helped me prepare a speech to be delivered at the ceremony outlining why we were all there. It was to be given in French and English and took a great deal of practice. (Eventually, to ensure it was delivered correctly, I cheated and had it written phonetically!)

It was decided that everybody should make their own individual travel arrangements to Beauvais. We should then meet all those who could make it by the day before the ceremony in the Military cemetery of Marissel at 1600 in the afternoon. Then everyone would meet up at the Campanile Hotel where we and others had booked in for a set meal. It would be the first time ever that crew relatives and representatives ever met. My wife and I were intrigued to see how things would progress from there. We were going to video as much as possible and get comments from the assembled group.

My wife and I travelled out early; we had some details to sort out with Dominique and wanted to be sure we knew exactly what was happening. We wanted everything to go well. It had taken a lot of work to get to this stage and it HAD to go well.

We needn't have worried. Dominique had done a wonderful job at his end. Everything was in place and it was all set. Even the weather was looking set to be a lovely warm day. Thank goodness, as it was all in the open air!

On the Friday I met my relatives from the train station and, after freshening up at the hotel we made our way to the cemetery in Beauvais. We were accompanied by Wing Commander Grant Crosland and family and Bert and Don Gearing with their wives. We had some time in the cemetery taking pictures at the allotted time before anyone else appeared. We were eventually joined by Don Reid, his son and grandson who had been travelling across from Germany following their trip to Schweinfurt. Then Peter D'Ombra's sister arrived with her family travelling companions. We took as many pictures as possible and recorded the event for posterity.

Unfortunately and unknown at the time Bernie Long and his sister were delayed because their hire car had broken down. They were also coming in from Belgium having been to visit the grave of their other brother Gordon at the Leopoldsburg War Cemetery, Limburg. We only found this out when we all arrived back at the hotel for the meal. A message was waiting for me there. (Bernie and co. eventually arrived at the ceremony the following day having re-jigged their plans and arrangements to compensate for the car problem.)

Meanwhile, everyone else congregated in the room set aside by the hotel for the meeting and meal. Introductions were made all around and drink and talk flowed freely. My wife and I tried to go round and get a few words from all those who had made it to the dinner. It was an electric atmosphere, and so much talk, it was hard to

hear the replies! All these folk who had never met before gelled in a short space of time; brought together by the sad events of 64 years previous and the act of remembrance together the following day.

In a way we shouldn't have been surprised. At an O.T.U in Oxfordshire in October 1943, many young men were wandering about in a hanger trying to find mates to form a crew. Geoff, Peter, Steve, Laurence and Frank all found each other. As far as I or any other relative can tell they were a happy crew together. And when they moved to the H.C.U., they formed another friendship with Len. Finally at the Squadron they worked with a number of gunners, before Stan joined them on that last operation. They had to get on together. Only team work would get them through. Only an act of fate was to ensure they were together for ever. No wonder then that the family of the crew members should all get on so well.

Saturday 31st May 2003 did indeed dawn bright and clear. In fact a very hot day was eventually in prospect. Most people made their own way to the little graveyard in Lormaison. As the allotted hour of 1430 came along we all took our places on the raised dais or in the invited guest seats facing the west wall. There, covered in a white sheet, stood the stone that the people of Lormaison had erected to the crew of the Lancaster.

Dominique welcomed everybody to the ceremony (in English and French) and then I gave my small speech about the reasons why we were all assembled that day (in French and English). There followed an address by the President of the Lormaison Veterans Association, Roger Sibilleau, about the act of remembrance and the memory of these 7 young men.

A wreath party of the main representatives was then assembled before the monument and it was uncovered for all to see. It was magnificent, black marble with the writing etched out and in gold. Each representative then went forward in turn to lay a wreath at the foot of the stone. After the salute, we returned to the dais.

The Mayor of Lormaison, Monsieur Jean Pierre Lagny, then gave his speech. I had been sent a copy and had prepared (as requested) an English version that I then read to the assembled guests. In his address Monsieur Lagny quoted Sir Winston Churchill when he had said; "I have nothing to offer you other than blood sweat and tears," as he encouraged the people to volunteer to defeat the Nazi scourge in Europe. He spoke of the volunteers from all over the world who came to that call and named all the crew. He spoke of their young age and the fact that they knew the chance of survival was slim. But still, they volunteered and went about their jobs with dedication and determination. Finally he expressed the gratitude and genuine recognition of the sacrifices made by these young men from himself and the people of Lormaison to the relatives present.

The whole cemetery then held a one minute silence.

There followed further speeches from Wing Commander Grant Crosland representing the Royal New Zealand Air Force and Laurence Jamieson in particular. The New Zealand flag was raised to the sound of their national anthem being sung in English and Maori. June Schwarz gave a very moving speech on behalf of her brother and the Australian crew. The Australian flag was raised to the accompaniment of their national anthem. Then Squadron Leader Andy Burton,

representing XV Squadron, the RAF and the English crew, rose and spoke of the international make up of the crew and its similarity with today's XV Squadron makeup which was a very an International outfit. The national anthem was played as the Union flag was raised. Dominique translated all these speeches into French for the assembled dignitaries and villagers.

A bugler then sounded the Last Post before Monsieur Alain Letellier, Consular General of the Canton of Méru and Monsieur Raphaël Le Mahaute, representing the French Government in Oise district, finished the speeches and the strident sounds of the Marseillaise rang out as the French flag was hoisted high.

One white dove of peace was released and then seven more, representing the lost airmen, flew into the sky, circled around and made off to their loft. All the standard bearers then saluted the memorial and departed the immediate area.

With the withdrawal of the standards, the ceremony ended with an invitation from the mayor to join him in a marquee on the lawns behind the Town Hall for a champagne reception. So after the necessary pictures had been taken, the whole throng, numbering some 250 people made our way across the village to the Town Hall. There was much champagne on offer and an exceptional buffet which everybody enjoyed. Villagers came up with stories of the crash, of machine guns from the Lancaster being buried in gardens. The Germans refusal of assistance from the villagers for fear they might smuggle away a survivor. Where there were language difficulties, there was usually someone who could help translate and we all learned a lot about the wartime in occupied Lormaison.

Then Monsieur Alain Ducreux came to me with the pictures of the parts found during the road building in 1997. He presented Bernard Postolle with one of the pieces he had managed to save at that time. It looked like a piece of a spinner, minus all its paint and shined and mounted. (Back home, the pictures were taken to the airfield at East Kirby where the only other working Lancaster in England can be found. The chief engineer there identified the parts in the picture as coming from the starboard wing. He was able to show me the tie down handle under the wing of their aircraft.)

As the crowds drifted away I was offered more champagne by Dominique to drink a toast to a very successful day. I declined because I said I thought I had already had a bit too much. He said not to worry; "most of the Gendarmes are here, there is no one out there to catch you if you have!" Dominique said that Bernard had had a Union flag placed out in the field where the plane crashed and he was happy to accompany anyone out there if they wished. Most of the relatives were pleased to get this opportunity and more photos were taken in the field for everyone's records.

The day finished with the suggestion of a meal at a restaurant. Dominique got his wife Miriam to make a booking for the evening. Those of us who attended had a wonderful time and it was a fitting end to a super tribute to the crew from us all.

Post Script. In 2006 I returned to East Kirby and was privileged to have a taxi run in the Lancaster. It was an emotional experience as I got to occupy the various positions that our crew would have used. Most emotional of all was to sit where Geoff sat and twiddle the knobs on the radio. May their memories live long in our hearts and their sacrifice never be forgotten.

Geoff Reynolds 2008