

Operation

On the evening of 18th April 1944, a Stirling bomber took off from Mepal near Cambridge. It was the crew's 17th mission together, the purpose being to lay mines in Kiel harbour in an attempt to prevent the German Navy from interfering in the D Day invasion. The crew had volunteered for this mission on the promise of early leave.

Having successfully completed the mine laying they set course for England on a flight path over Jutland, but unknown to them, also directly over an enemy night fighter base. They were intercepted and attacked from beneath. Four airmen parachuted down near the Danish town of Gram, but one died under falling wreckage. Of the three survivors two were captured immediately, one with an injured ankle and the third was hidden for three days before being captured. The injured airman was taken to the burnt-out bomber to identify the three dead still inside. The survivors were to meet up later in Stalag Luft 3.

The pastor of the Lutheran Church in Gram negotiated with the German commander, Dr Schuster, for the permission to bury the dead airmen in his churchyard. Eventually permission was given on condition that the burial would take place at 5 am with no one present. A Russian forced labour detail took the bodies out of the plane and prepared the grave with the people of Gram attending the burial in defiance of the Germans. The Germans did not divulge the names of the crew and so headstones could not be marked until after the war.