

Sergeant Wolf Herman Engelhardt: The Special (ABC) Radio Operator

Our uncle Wolf was born on the 9th November 1920 in Leipzig in Germany and was two years older than our father. They were forced to leave school because of the Nazi persecution of Jewish people in the mid-1930s. The family wanted to make a new life in Palestine, but the numbers of immigration visas were severely limited. They were made homeless and stateless. Eventually the two brothers obtained the necessary papers and permits and were able to flee to England in 1939 travelling on Polish passports, their father's nationality. They left behind their parents, Leo and Sophie Engelhardt who had a clothing shop in Erfurt in eastern Germany and their younger brother Issy who was then 12 years old. As the situation worsened in Germany, many Jewish families were deported to Poland. The family was sent to Nowy Sacz in Poland in 1938 where they managed to send some letters to England telling their sons about the terrible conditions in the ghetto there. The letters stopped in 1941 when the Jews in the area including many members of our family were killed in the Holocaust. We have no information about what actually happened or where they met their deaths.

In England, our father Siegfried Engelhardt (he later changed his name to Stephen Ellis) and Wolf found jobs as farm workers. They were regarded as friendly aliens because of their birth in Germany and their father's Polish nationality. Eventually Wolf was able to start a course in gardening and cultivation at the Royal Horticultural School at Wisley in Surrey where his name is recorded in their Roll of Honour. Wolf wanted to emigrate to Israel after the war and grow flowers. In the meantime our father was able to begin working as an engineering apprentice making aircraft parts.

In June 1943 they volunteered for the RAF at Lords cricket ground in London. Wolf was accepted and initially directed toward training as a radio operator / air gunner at a radio training school. Our father was already involved in essential aircraft production and was asked to continue this as a reserved essential occupation. He went onto develop aircraft parts for Barnes Wallis, the famous aircraft designer.

Our father knew nothing of his brother's training, only that Wolf would ask him for help with his technical problems as he moved between training schools. With bomber losses increasing and the development of Airborne Cigar (ABC) as an airborne form of electronic countermeasures, there was a need to recruit German speaking radio operators for special duties. Personnel records held by the RAF indicate that Wolf was made a Sergeant in April 1944; he moved to 11 Base in May and was assigned to 101 Squadron on the 13th June 1944. Interestingly his records contain a note that he was fined 12/6d (several days' pay) on the 19th November 1943. We have no idea why, but we hope that he and his friends enjoyed themselves!

When LM-462 failed to return on the 29th July 1944 from their raid on Stuttgart, the dreaded telegram “we regret to inform you that your brother has failed to return” was received. A year after the plane went missing came confirmation that all the crew had been killed.

From research undertaken recently on RAF papers kept secret for 50 years, the story has now begun to emerge. Our father spoke very little about the family he lost. As a family growing up in England without aunts or uncles or grandparents, we just knew that our parents had been forced to leave their homes and family. It was difficult for both our parents to describe their life in Germany and all that they had lost. We knew very little about our uncle as we grew up, it was just so hard to bring the subject up and perhaps even as children we also knew not to ask.

It was only when we began to have family of our own that questions were asked, and more details began to come. Some information about Wolf needing to be able to speak German in his role as a radio operator was known by our father after the war, but he cannot remember how he had come to know this. He visited Rebréchien after the war in 1948, in 1954 and again in 1977, but did not make contact with people in the village. He has one early photograph of the grave with members of the Allard family. Otherwise all that had happened and Rebréchien seemed a very long way away from our family until the 1990s. It seemed so unfair that someone who had escaped the Holocaust had not then survived the war. The grave in France became so much more important and the more we could find out, came to mean so much to our family who had lost so many relatives.

In 1999, Stephen’s son David visited Rebréchien during a family holiday to Disneyland Paris. They made contact with the Townhall and met Madame Hubler who conveyed the deep respect and continuing interest of the village in the 8 crewmen. An article about the Lancaster had appeared in the Rebréchien yearbook the previous year and David responded with an account about our uncle. One thing led to another, particularly the release of information about 101 Squadron and their role in jamming enemy night fighter radio transmissions. The ease of access to this material on the internet and the use of E mail allowed the build-up of very detailed information amongst the family and researchers who were interested in related topics. In 2000, our father was contacted by Martin Sugarman Archivist for the British Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women — AJEX - Jewish Military Museum, London who was researching the role of many Jewish Special Radio (ABC) Operators who flew with 101 Squadron in this role during the war. Wolf featured in this work that was delivered as a lecture to the Jewish Historical Society in London in 2001 and subsequently published by the Jewish Historical Society of England as a paper in their Studies, Volume 37, p189-224. The text (Confounding the enemy: Jewish RAF Special Operators in radio counter measures with 101 Squadron, (September 1943—May 1945) is available at: <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/ww2/sugar1.html>.^{About links}

David’s brother Ian, the younger son of Stephen Ellis and nephew of Wolf continued this research on behalf of the family making contact with Remco Immerzeel. Ian found Remco’s webpage looking for

people to swap stamps and noted his address in Rebréchien. The email conversation developed into a regular correspondence about the village and the events of July 1944. In July 2003, Ian visited Rebréchien whilst on a business trip to Paris meeting Christian Prudhomme, Mme Hubler and several of the eyewitnesses to the tragic events of 60 years before. Much information was exchanged including small pieces of wreckage from the Lancaster and fragments of the old concrete runway that Ian had brought from Ludford Magna where the bomber had taken off from.