



ALAN FAY BIRLEY

A SUMMARY OF HIS SERVICE

WITH No. 35 SQUADRON

Document prepared by:

35 SQUADRON RESEARCH GROUP

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Alan Fay Birley (118723)¹
(Observer)

¹ Alan, with his son, Michael (August 1942) [Courtesy of Joe Birley]

Operational Service with No. 35 Squadron

Alan Fay Birley (Observer) was posted to No. 35 Squadron (from No. 10 Operational Training Unit) on 18th June 1942.

Prior to this he completed the three stages of his aircrew training:

- i. Basic Training, where he was introduced to the rigours of service life
- ii. Trade Training, where he learnt the skills of his air crew trade
- iii. Operational Training, where he learnt to work as part of a bomber crew.

At the time of posting, the squadron was stationed at RAF Linton-On-Ouse (Yorkshire), equipped with the Handley Page Halifax.

Alan settled into the daily routine of ground training, air tests, air training (such as high-level bombing, fighter affiliation and cross country) and operational sorties.

The squadron's Operations Record Book shows that he participated in the following operational sorties, with DA John as his captain:

1. 21/07/1942 Paris
2. 25/07/1942 Paris
3. 26/07/1942 Hamburg
4. 31/07/1942 Dusseldorf
5. 04/08/1942 Essen

On 12th August 1942, No. 35 Squadron (along with No. 7, 83, 109 and 156 Squadron) was incorporated into the newly formed Pathfinder Force and it moved to RAF Graveley (Huntingdonshire).

The squadron immediately resumed operations and its Record Book shows that Alan participated in the following operational sorties, again with DA John as his captain:

6. 18/08/1942 Flensburg
7. 24/08/1942 Frankfurt
8. 28/08/1942 Nuremberg (Failed to Return)

The loss of Halifax W7676 (28th / 29th September 1942)

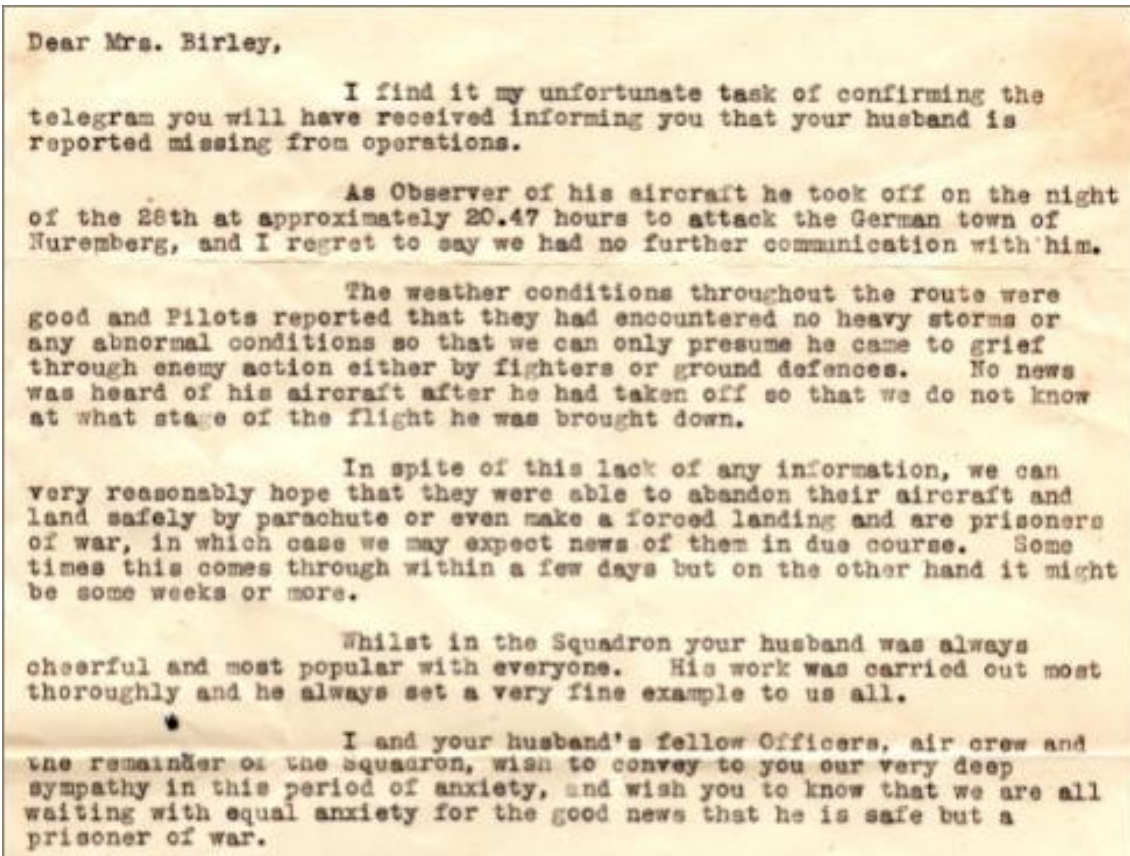
Halifax W7676 was one of eight No. 35 Squadron aircraft detailed to attack Nuremberg on the night of 28th / 29th August 1942.

Its seven-man crew comprised:

- DA John (Pilot)
- AF Birley (Observer)
- KA Higgs (Air Bomber)
- AE Grounsell (Wireless Operator)
- GA Doman (Air Gunner)
- A Priestley (Air Gunner)
- MW Booth (Flight Engineer)

W7676 failed to return and the squadron's Operations Record Book shows "Took off from Graveley to attack Nuremberg; nothing was heard of this aircraft after take-off"

The following day, AF Birley's family received a telegram to advise them that he was missing as a result of air operations on the previous night; this was followed by a letter from the commanding officer, confirming the contents of the telegram



Dear Mrs. Birley,

I find it my unfortunate task of confirming the telegram you will have received informing you that your husband is reported missing from operations.

As Observer of his aircraft he took off on the night of the 28th at approximately 20.47 hours to attack the German town of Nuremberg, and I regret to say we had no further communication with him.

The weather conditions throughout the route were good and Pilots reported that they had encountered no heavy storms or any abnormal conditions so that we can only presume he came to grief through enemy action either by fighters or ground defences. No news was heard of his aircraft after he had taken off so that we do not know at what stage of the flight he was brought down.

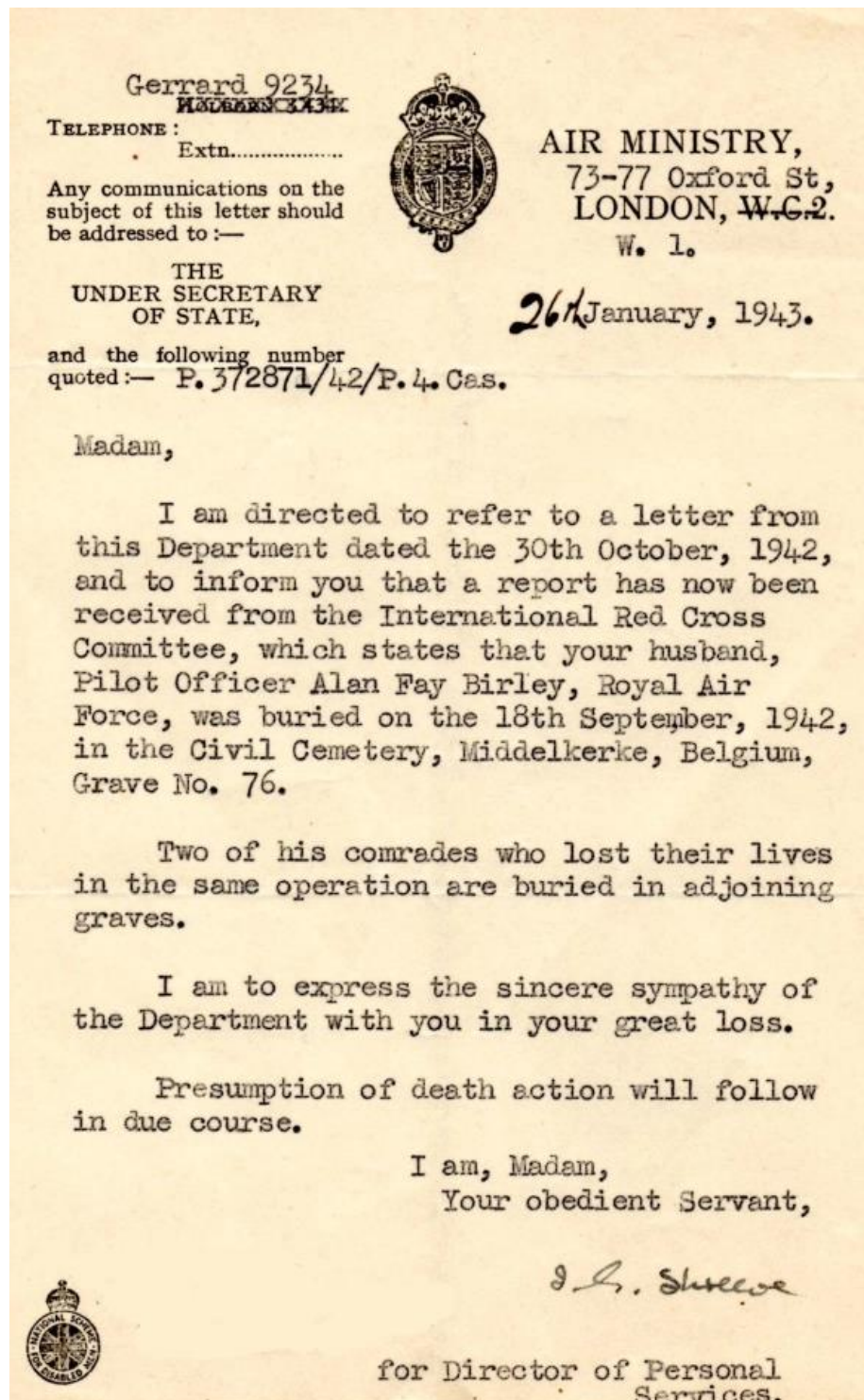
In spite of this lack of any information, we can very reasonably hope that they were able to abandon their aircraft and land safely by parachute or even make a forced landing and are prisoners of war, in which case we may expect news of them in due course. Some times this comes through within a few days but on the other hand it might be some weeks or more.

Whilst in the Squadron your husband was always cheerful and most popular with everyone. His work was carried out most thoroughly and he always set a very fine example to us all.

I and your husband's fellow Officers, air crew and the remainder of the Squadron, wish to convey to you our very deep sympathy in this period of anxiety, and wish you to know that we are all waiting with equal anxiety for the good news that he is safe but a prisoner of war.

Over the coming months, information filtered through regarding the loss of the aircraft (which had been hit by flak and crashed into the sea) and the recovery of the crew.

The following letter to the family provided information on Alan's burial (after his body had been washed ashore at Ostend)



[Courtesy of Joe Birley]

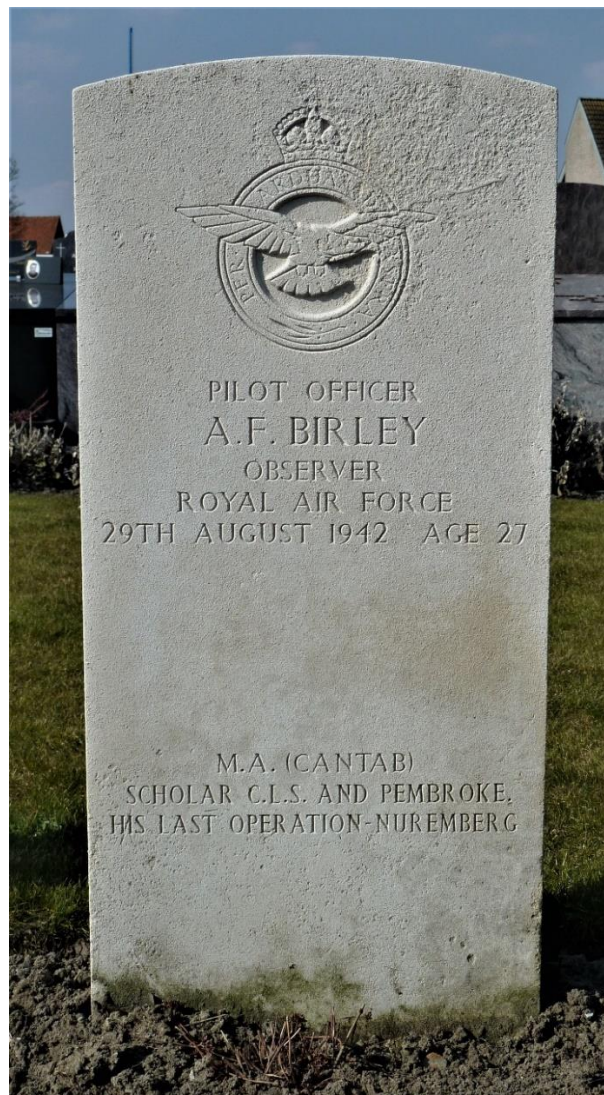
Post War Reburial

After the war, an investigation officer from the Royal Air Force Missing Research and Enquiry Service (MRES) was tasked with locating the remains of all missing airmen.

As part of the process, any remains that were located were exhumed, identified (wherever possible) and concentrated (reinterred) at one of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's (CWGC) Cemeteries in the country that they fell, in accordance with Government policy at the time.

Graves were marked with a simple wooden cross, which was replaced by the familiar CWGC headstone during the 1950's.

Alan was reinterred in MIDDELKERKE COMMUNAL CEMETERY Row B. Grave 18.



[Source: FindaGrave]