

1523141 Sgt Benjamin (Benny) COHEN was born in Liverpool on 9 August 1921, the son of cabinet maker Tullie Cohen and his wife Sarah Herman, who had a big family and lived at 13 Montpelier Terrace, Upper Parliament Street, since 1935. Tullie and Sarah were both immigrants from Central Ukraine and had married at the Central Islington Synagogue in Liverpool in 1915.

In the early part of the war, Benny worked in an armaments factory and was therefore exempt from conscription. However, he always wanted an active role in the war and conspired to have himself dismissed from his job in order to sign up. He volunteered as an air gunner with 166 Squadron in the RAF Volunteer Reserves, which distressed his mother, who pointed out that "there's no back door to an aeroplane!"

The squadron was formed in January 1943 and flew first Wellingtons and then Lancasters in the night-time bombing offensive over Germany. Benny underwent his training in North London, Evanton in North-Eastern Scotland and, finally, at RAF Lindholme, close to Doncaster.

He corresponded regularly with his family, during which he complained of being bored and sent photos of himself and his crew. He was the mid-upper gunner in a Lancaster B Mk III, serial number LM 529 and, as such, was part of a crew of seven: two Scots, two Canadians and three Englishmen. The men were good friends and visited each other's families whilst on leave. By early April 1944, they had been moved to RAF Kirmington near Grimsby (now Humberside Airport). At 10.00pm on the night of 24 April, the crew took off on an operational flight bound for the city of Karlsruhe in South-Western Germany and failed to return. The crew's Wing Commander, FS Fowley, wrote to the families of all seven of the crew on the morning of 25 April, explaining that, although the men were missing, they had not necessarily been killed. He provided all the families with a list of the names and addresses of each man's next-of-kin, allowing them to contact each other independently. He described Benny as "a most proficient member of a good crew".

Enquiries were made with the International Red Cross Committee and with the German authorities and the families could only wait agonisingly in the hope that their sons would be reported captured as prisoners of war. However, it was confirmed that five of the crew had lost their lives on 25 April, although only four could be identified and Benny was not among them. It was not until 4 November that Benny's death was confirmed, along with the remaining members of his crew. His bicycle and other personal effects had already been returned to the family.

It can now be revealed that LM 529 exploded in flight (presumably under enemy fire) and crashed close to Wallers-Trélon (now Wallers-en-Fagne), very close to the French border with Belgium, barely half way to its target. All seven members of the crew are buried in adjacent graves at nearby Avesnes-sur-Helpe, just over 30 miles east of Cambrai and about 18 miles south of Mons. Benny was 22 years old.

Benny's story courtesy of Saul Marks