

10 Squadron

Lewis was involved in an aircraft accident in February 1941. On the night of 15/16 February 1941, Whitley T4234 of 10 Squadron was on an operational flight to attack Sterkrade and took off from Leeming at 18.43hrs. The crew attacked the target from 11,000 feet but on their return to Yorkshire they landed at Dishforth at 23.29hrs. They swung off the runway and the undercarriage collapsed. The crew escaped injury and the aircraft was slightly damaged.

Pilot, Sgt Thomas Walker Towell, 590802. Second Pilot, Sgt Alfred Ronald Robbins, 754051. Observer, Sgt Lewis Zalsberg. Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Sgt George Christie, 971579. Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Sgt R G Jones.

511 Squadron

With his first tour of operations completed, Lewis Zalsberg transferred to Transport Command with 511 Squadron (Liberators) and was employed mainly on the Lyneham-Gibraltar-Cairo West run; he completed 31 flights with his pilot being Flight Lieutenant E.M. Prchal (a Czech), the flights combined a mixture of freight and V.I.P. passengers, including carrying Winston Churchill from Cairo to Tripoli when he visited the Middle East, and later carrying General Sikorski.

The Sikorski Aircrash

General Wladyslaw Sikorski, Premier of the Polish Government in exile and Commander in Chief of the Free Polish Forces from 1939 was the only Polish leader who had sufficient stature and skill to secure the confidence of his people and to achieve the close relations with Churchill and Stalin necessary to maintain a united and effective Polish government with a substantial influence in Allied planning.

The Polish leader after a tour of the Middle East which included his review of the Polish troops in that theatre, was advised to relax for a few days, and on 29th June was invited to the excavations at Luxor and Aswan; however, the invitation was not taken up as a telegram from Churchill the following day was interpreted as a recall to London. General Sikorski had previously asked through the Polish Consul that the R.A.F. pilot (Flight Lieutenant E.M. Prchal) that had flown him out from England be allowed to fly him back as he was greatly impressed with his skill and experience. His request was granted - Prchal and his crew (Squadron Leader W.S. Herring, D.S.O., D.F.M., W/O L. Zalsberg, D.F.M.; Sergeant F.S. Kelly and Flight Sergeants Gerrie, D.F.M., and Hunter) had arrived in Cairo on the 28th June.

Zalsberg and crew were in place for the final act of the tragedy as the Squadron Record Book shows:

1.7.1943 'Liberator AL 523: departed from Cairo West to Gibraltar 0406 hrs. - General Sikorski, his staff and daughter on board (12) passengers, -arrived 1437hrs' (Squadron Record book refers).

4.7.1943 'Liberator AL 523: Took off from Gibraltar and crashed into the sea, the crew (except F/L. Prchal) and the passengers, including General Sikorski were killed.'

The Liberator had taken off at 23.07hrs, and as Prchal had pushed the control forward at 130mph to gather speed to 165mph he tried to pull the column back, but it locked. The aircraft hit the sea and sank within minutes, in five fathoms of water. Prchal, who suffered a fractured ankle, lacerations and shock, was the only survivor. He was picked up within six minutes of the crash. All but three of

the bodies were recovered, those of Zalsberg and Kelly being found the following day. The aircraft was later raised, and the cause of the accident was found to be jamming of the elevator controls shortly after take-off.

Lewis's medals were sold at Christies in 1992.

Description: A Scarce Second War D.F.M. Group of Four to Whitley and Liberator Navigator, Warrant Officer L. Zalsberg, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, Who Was Killed in the General Sikorski Air Crash Disaster, 4.7.1943

a) Distinguished Flying Medal, G.VI.R. (755970. Sgt. L. Zalsberg. R.A.F.)

b) 1939-1945 Star

c) Air Crew Europe Star

d) War Medal, the campaign medals all named Boot's style '755970 W.O. L. Zalsberg.

R.A.F.', *generally good very fine*, with a silver (Egyptian standard marks) cigarette case, believed to have been presented to Zalsberg by General Sikorski, 118mm x 75mm, surmounted by the Polish Air Force flying badge, the gilt interior inscribed and dated 'Cairo 31st. May 1943'; and a comprehensive file of research (3)

Information courtesy of Christies. April 1992