

Lancaster R5728 VN-L, 50 Squadron Royal Air Force

Sergeant Cyril John Stallard, a junior warehouseman of East Maitland, New South Wales enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in early 1941 and completed his training in Canada. He went to England and was attached to the Royal Air Force flying with 25 Operational Training Unit, 420 Squadron RCAF and finally 50 Squadron RAF. He was killed in action as a member of the crew of Lancaster R5728 VN-L during an air battle over Belgium.

Date: 30 July 1942
Time: 03:06
Aircraft: Avro Lancaster Mk I
Squadron: 50 Squadron Royal Air Force
Registration: R5728
Squadron Code: VN-L
Fate: Shot Down
Fatalities: All seven crew members
Location: Braine-le-Comte, Belgium
Departure: RAF Swinderby, Lincolnshire, England
Destination: Saarbrucken, Germany

The Lancaster bomber of 50 Squadron RAF left RAF Swinderby shortly after midnight on 29 July 1942 and was on a bombing mission to Saarbrucken, Germany located near the border with France. In the early stage of the mission, shortly after entering Belgium air space it was attacked by a German night fighter, piloted by Oberleutnant Reinhold Eckardt of VII./NJG 3 from St Trond suffering crippling damage and causing a fire on board.

As the Lancaster burned the bomber dropped its bomb load. Thirty fire-bombs landed at the villages of Graty and Silly in Belgium, fortunately no significant damage was done. The Lancaster flew further east finally exploding above Braine-le-Comte some 3 kilometres to the north-east of Soignies. One of the four engines broke through the roof of a boys' school that served as a shelter for German troops. Eleven soldiers of the Radfahr-Abteilung 23 (belonging to the 23 Infantry Division) were killed and another 24 Germans wounded. Three houses were set on fire.

All seven crew members on board the Lancaster were killed. Three of the crew were Australian.

Crew

- Pilot: J/16685 Sgt Leslie Foster RCAF - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 2.
- Flight Engineer: 1123342 Sgt Douglas John Ware - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 5.
- Observer: 113935 Pilot Officer Robert Hugh Curran - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 7.
- Air Gunner: Aus/404406 Flt Sgt Cameron Duff Kennedy RAAF - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 1.
- Wireless Operator/Air Gunner: Aus/401264 Sgt Allan Wyles RAAF - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 4.

Lancaster R5728 VN-L, 50 Squadron Royal Air Force

- Wireless Operator/Air Gunner: Aus/403451 Sgt Cyril John Stallard RAAF - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 3.
- Air Gunner: 1290940 Sgt Cyril Alfred Bowes - Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery Plot II Row C Grave 6



The bodies of the seven crew were recovered and buried in Braine-le-Comte Communal Cemetery on 1 August 1942, where 5000 Belgians gathered to pay homage to these men of the R.A.F. who gave their lives in the cause of Belgian freedom. Among those present was a member of the Belgian Royal family. The presence of German soldiers and guards could not prevent this spontaneous demonstration of respect and gratitude. Local foundryman Yvon Brancart made headstones of 'crazy mosaic glasswork', bearing each airman's name (where known) and the RAF roundel. At great personal risk – since the Germans made frequent inspections – Brancart hid the headstones in his factory until the town's liberation in early September 1944.

Lancaster R5728 VN-L, 50 Squadron Royal Air Force



On 23 July 1947 the seven graves were exhumed, and work undertaken to accurately identify the grave of each airman. Fortunately, four of the graves were readily identifiable by the airmen's brevets, whilst for two others dental records were used and the seventh grave identified by elimination. The grave of Sergeant Stallard was identified from his dental records – he had perfect teeth. Subsequently permanent headstones were erected over the graves.



F/Sgt DG Kennedy; P/O L Foster; Sgt CJ Stallard; Sgt A Wyles; Sgt DJ Ware; Sgt CA Bowes; P/O RH Curran.

Lancaster R5728 VN-L, 50 Squadron Royal Air Force

In May 1948, after the remains were identified and reinterred, Sgt Stallard's father sent a photograph of his son to Eugene Duquesne who, in keeping with Belgian custom, created an enamel likeness for the markers. In a touching gesture Mr. Duquesne sent Cyril Stallard's father photographs of the airmen's graves showing the headstone created by Brancart and, at its foot, a cross erected by the Germans.



Memorial at Braine-le-Comte erected by Les Insoumis, a local Résistance organisation to the crew of Lancaster R5728 VN-L of 50 Squadron RAF that crashed in the town after being shot down by a German fighter on 30 July 1942.

The text of the tablet reads:

HERE REST THE BODIES OF THE BRAVE FALLEN ON SERVICE IN A FOREIGN LAND – FROM LES INSOUIMIS TO THEIR GLORIOUS COMRADES

In an ironic twist, Oberleutnant Reinhold Eckardt the German Luftwaffe night fighter ace and recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross who shot down Lancaster R5728 VN-L was also killed on 30 July 1942. His parachute caught the tail of his plane after he had bailed out. During his career he was credited with 22 aerial victories, 3 during the day and 19 at night.



Credits: <http://www.inmemories.com/Cemeteries/brainelecomte.htm>
<https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/192597>
<https://www.ww1cemeteries.com/braine-le-comte-communal-cemetery.html>