

Family of World War Two Lancaster bomber reunited with his bracelet 74 years after it rose to surface of concentration camp ash pit

by Dominic Nicholls -The Telegraph

In the late evening of July 28, 1944, an air armada of 494 RAF Lancaster bombers took off from eastern England to attack enemy targets on the continent.

One plane, tail number NE164, launched from an air base in North Killingholme near Grimsby. The target was the industrial area of Stuttgart, but the bomber never made it through.

At 01:32 on the morning of July 29, NE164 was attacked by a German Messerschmitt, piloted by Oberleutnant Gottfried Hanneck of No. 1 Night Fighter Wing.

With the right wing of the aircraft on fire, Flying Officer Harry Jones steered his plane past the small town of Obernai in the Alsace region and at about 01:50 the Lancaster crashed in a forest.

Of the seven crew, F/O Jones died in the crash and Sergeant Idwal Williams, one of the two Gunners, did not survive his parachute jump.

The Wireless Operator Sergeant Donald Hunter, Flight Engineer Sergeant James Drury and Gunner Sergeant Roy Cumberlidge were taken prisoner and survived the war in a camp in Poland.

Navigator F/O William Dinney, a Canadian, hid in a nunnery and was handed over to the Resistance who helped him escape back to Britain.

Sergeant Frederic Harold Habgood, the plane's bomber, was betrayed by a local woman to the Gestapo. On July 31 he was taken to the nearby Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp and immediately hanged. He was 21 years old.



Sgt Freddie Habgood. CREDIT: JULIAN SIMMONDS

Freddie Habgood had trained in Canada throughout 1943. He had relatives in the country, and for his graduation they had given him a gift of a silver bracelet engraved with his name, service number and

RAF wings. On the reverse was one name, Jean, Freddie's beloved cousin. His family assumed it had been stolen by the Nazis after his murder.

In July this year, as she watered the flowers at the concentration camp in France, preserved as a warning to future generations, a local girl saw something glinting in the soil. Although muddy and tarnished, some lettering was still clear and two names were visible. On one side 'Jean', on the other, 'Habgood'.

It had not been looted by the Nazis. It had not been consumed by fire or by earth.

Incongruously, incredibly, for 74 years the ground had kept the secret of Freddie's silver bracelet, and now the soil had offered it up.



Sgt Habgood's silver bracelet, given to him in 1943.

Freddie had been survived by his brother, Ronald, older by 13 months, and younger sister, Madelene. Ronald had two children, Marilyn and Paul, but the family had rarely discussed their loss.

“Growing up, all we knew was that Freddie had been killed during the war,” says Marilyn, “it wasn't until I was quite a bit older that I realised he had actually been executed”.

“It was never really spoken about. Certainly my father didn't want to talk about it.”

The Telegraph accompanied Marilyn and Paul to France to be reunited with the bracelet. Up to that point they say the story of their uncle had been part of the family fabric, but as neither had known Freddie personally, and his death had been so little talked of, there had been no direct emotional connection.

That changed in France.



Paul Habgood, the nephew of of Sgt Freddie Habgood who, after his Lancaster crashed on a raid in 1944, was executed at Natzweiler-Struthof Concentration Camp.

CREDIT: JULIAN SIMMONDS

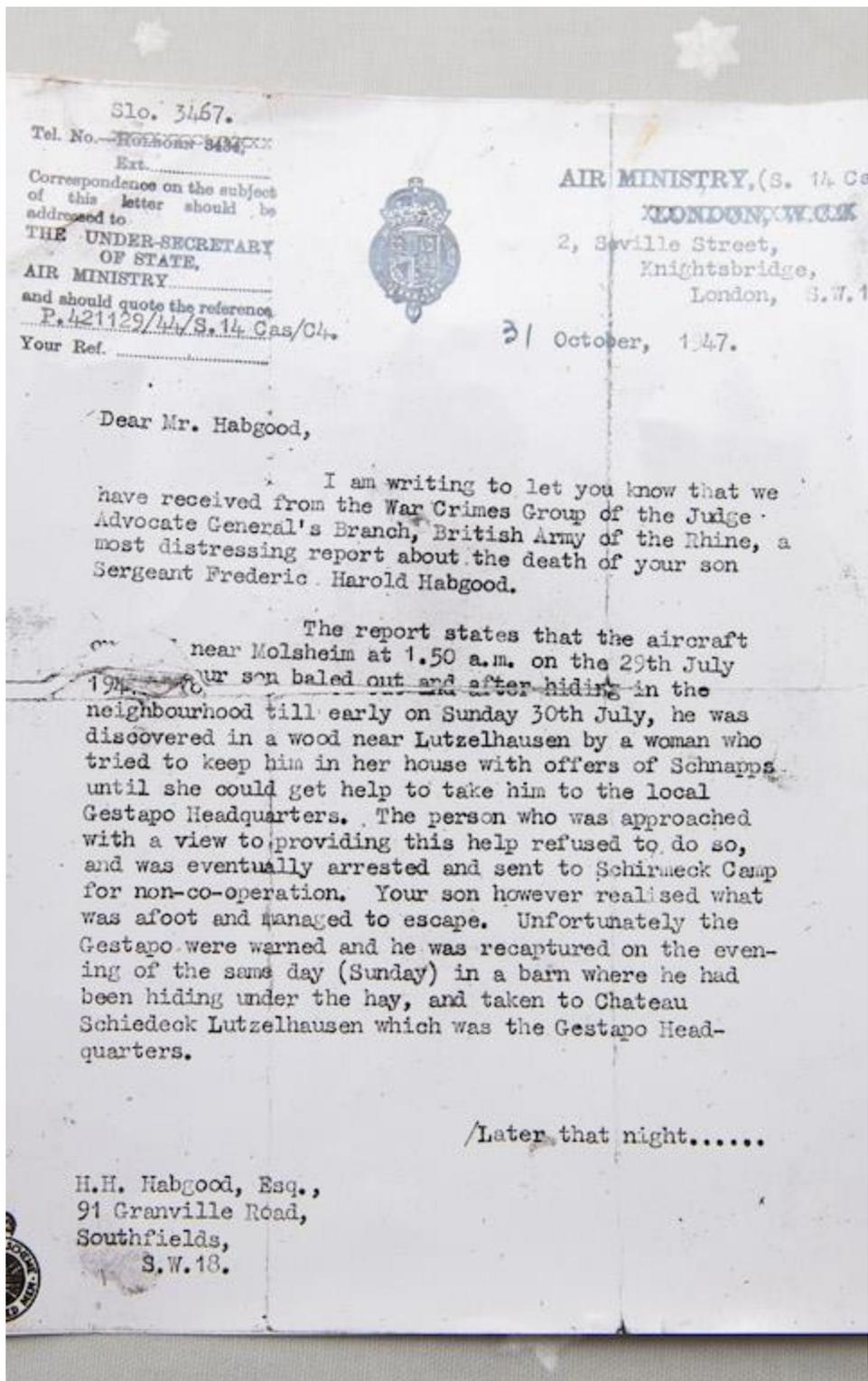
“It feels unreal,” says Paul when he and Marilyn are presented with the bracelet, “it’s incredible it has survived.”

“He probably wore it ever since he was given it back in 1943, right through to when he was shot down.”

Despite the stoicism, Marilyn suggested the family had felt Freddie’s loss more deeply than they had shown.

“I think it was hard for them not knowing exactly what happened to him or whether he was ever laid to rest in a grave of any kind,” she says.

“The trial and subsequent punishment of his executioners would have brought some closure to our dad and his parents.”



*A copy of the letter from the Air Ministry to the family, confirming Freddie's death.
CREDIT: JULIAN SIMMONDS*

A British Military Court, convened in June 1946 in the Zoological Garden at Wuppertal, found five men guilty of Sgt Habgood's murder.

One was given a term of imprisonment, the four others faced death sentences. Two sentences were later commuted to imprisonment and the remaining two men, whose names are known but do not deserve to be remembered, were hanged in October 1946.

Later that night or early on the Monday morning he was removed to Schirneck Camp and placed in Cell 24. On Monday evening he was taken to Natzweiler Concentration Camp where he was executed by hanging immediately on arrival there and his remains were finally cremated.

Of the German criminals charged before a Military Court at Wuppertal Germany in connection with your son's death, four were sentenced to death by hanging, one to seven years imprisonment, another had already been sentenced to death in a previous trial, one committed suicide before the trial, and one has not yet been arrested.

The date of your son's death will be altered for official purposes to 31st July 1944 and an amended certificate of death is enclosed accordingly.

I am deeply sorry to have to communicate this very sad news to you and I want to assure you of our deepest sympathy with you and your wife in the additional distress it must cause.

Yours sincerely,

D. Bent

*Second page of the letter from the Air Ministry confirming Freddie's death.
CREDIT: JULIAN SIMMONDS*

Freddie's younger sister, Madelene, died in early December this year, aged 93. She had expressed a wish that the bracelet be offered to a museum in Britain. "We would like to have it back here as a family. We would like it to go to a museum for everybody to see," Marilyn and Paul agree.

Freddie had written to his parents on July 29, 1943 from Canada, saying how much he had enjoyed his time with his uncle Harry and aunt Gladys, and of how they had given him his silver bracelet.

'My dearest mum and dad,' he wrote, 'I was able to visit aunty Gladys and uncle Harry for a few hours. They gave me a bracelet, with RAF wings and name and number engraved, for a graduation present. I was very sorry to say goodbye and hope that I shall be able to see them again after the war.'



The crematorium in the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp as it looks today, preserved as a warning to future generations.

A year later, to the day, NE 164 was shot down, and Freddie Habgood's voice fell silent.

He speaks again now, and we remember him, through a bracelet emerging from the earth. Light shining from the darkness.