

Robert Liefoghe, Belgian Pilot to the « Bomber Command »

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Robert Liefoghe is born in the North of France, in Curve, on June 26th, 1920, just eighteen months after the end of the World War I. During the German invasion in 1914, a big part of the population ran away - more particularly from the region of Ypres - and numerous Belgian families still live at this moment in France. Most of them will return definitively in the country only several months, even years after the end of the hostilities.

“Where extremes meet”

During the months which follow the end of the first world conflict, the life seems to smile to Robert Liefoghe. On the other hand, during the last months of the World War II, he escapes death by magic. At night from 16 till 17 of March 1945, during its 28th operational assignment, the Lancaster filled with bombs with he flew was touched by a burst of a night fighter. The plane explodes over Schwäbisch Hall (in the northeast of Stuttgart). A few minutes later, hung on its parachute, Flight Lieutenant Liefoghe strikes violently the ground. He is the only survivor.

Ypres - Ostend - Southampton

Thanks to Guy De Win and his “R. A. F. Squadrons Belgian Aircrew Files” we discover that Robert Liefoghe follows the primary education at the municipal school of Ypres from 1926 till 1933 and that in 1934, he studies, always to Ypres, to the technical school St - Joseph.

In 1936, he does a training course at the school of state of Marine in Ostend and is so going to be able to navigate until May, 1940 on the ferries which link Ostend to England. On May 18th, 1940 - While the Blitzkrieg always rages in Belgium and the North of France - the SS “Prince Léopold” landed in the of Southampton harbour in the South of England.

Robert Liefoghe lands with numerous refugees there among whom appear his parents. While these find refuge and work in London, Robert pursues his activity in the Belgian merchant navy from Southampton.

At the end of 1940, he tries to enter in Royal Air Force what is far from being obvious seen that for the British all the (foreign) “aliens” are of potential German spies. Robert is thus going to undergo severe interrogations and will be even interned to the prison of Cardiff. On January 28th 1941, he is however incorporated into the ranks of the Belgian strengths in Great Britain.

About three months later, on May 6th, 1941, he is officially enlisted under N°1432792 as Aircraftman/Pilot/Observer with the rank of Aircraftman 2nd Class in Royal Air Force Volunteer. In January, 1942, he crosses the Atlantic Ocean and stays till the end of 1943 in Canada and in the United States to pursue his training there.

On October 9th, 1942, he receives his “wings” so desired (wings as long desired) and is appointed as Pilot Officer.



P/O Robert J. Liefoghe, novembre 1943. (Eileen & Suzanne Liefoghe)

During D-Day on 1944, there is in No. 83 Operational Training Unit and begins the Operational flying duties on October 30th, 1944 within 170 Squadron, before join from November 8th the 550 Squadron.

“War godmothers”

The conflict continuing, very naturally the Belgians and the servicemen of the other occupied regions feel a profound feeling of nostalgia for the past time spent in family. To compensate for this lack - this idea is not really new - our boys are "adopted" by British "war godmothers" so called "godmothers", and by Belgians, "Marraines".

The servicemen can write them and even spend their rest periods within the families of these ladies. These correspondences are regularly accompanied with small presents.

These contacts (among others?) were set up by *The British Allies "Comforts and Victims of War Fund,"* of whom a certain Mrs. Hastings-Ord, O.B.E. is the founder and the secretary.

The organization takes opportunity of the protection of "VIPs" emanating of the nobility and the clergy as well as a French general and Belgian one: the General de Gaulle and General Chevalier Van Strydonck de Burkel.

" Dear Madam, It is very kind of you to say you will "adopt" has lonely man and write to him. Will you please send to: F/O Robert J. Liefoghe, Queen Hotel, Harrogate, Yorks. "

It is by these words that Eileen J. Humphries, 23 years, becomes in November, 1943 the war godmother of Robert Liefoghe. Eileen has sisters and together they are the "godmothers" of four other Belgians. We can thus suppose that the meetings to Humphreys were hardly led.

Robert meets Miss Eileen Humphries for the first time at the end of 1943, during his return from the United States.

A marriage during the operations

Eileen Humphreys has undoubtedly fast felt a particular sympathy for Robert Liefoghe; she falls in love with him. Both moreover have the same age, 23 years.

The lovers will not wait for the end of the war to get married. On January 6th, 1945, they find themselves in front of the altar of Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church to

Wednesbury, Staffordshire. At this moment, Robert has already made eleven operational assignments in Lancaster.

By his marriage with a non-British, Eileen Humphries is considered as a foreigner ('alien'). She receives a special passport (Aliens Identity Card) and has to every six weeks appear in front of the local authorities!



*January, 6th 1945, Robert Liefoghe & Eileen Humphries get married.
(Eileen & Suzanne Liefoghe)*

During his first operational assignment, a raid on Düren on November 11th, 1944, Robert is second pilot of the F / LT SHAW. In his logbook, we can read as already specified, that he has already made ten other operations before his marriage: Wanne-Eickel (18/19-11-44), Aschaffenburg (21/22-11-44), Freiburg (27/28-11-44), Karlsruhe (4/5-12-44), Merseburg (6/7-12-44), Ludwigshafen (15/16-12-44), Koblenz (22/23-12-44), Köln (Christmas Eve 1944), Mönchengladbach (28/29-12-44) and Nürnberg (2/3-1-45). He thus got married three days after this last mission.

On January 14th 1945, is eight days after its marriage, the F / LT Robert Liefoghe takes off again for a raid on Nürnberg. Follow attacks on Merseburg (14/15-1-45), Zeitz (16/17-1-45) and Hamborn (22/23-1-45). At the end of January, Liefoghe has a big total of 14 missions and accumulated 1.322 hours of flight.

North Killingholme, 550 Squadron et le Lancaster NG 336-BQ-B

Let us return in the time to get acquainted with the squadron of which Robert be a member, bases from where he operates and Lancaster which likes a lot him in heart. 550 Squadron was born November 25th, 1943 within 1 Group and the squadron flies on Lancaster from the bases of Grimsby and North Killingholme.

In March, 1945, North Killingholme (so called 13 Base) shelters squadrons 103, 166 and 550. Various Belgian crews are a part of it. In particular Georges de Menten de Horne (550 Squadron) who during the night of first to 2nd of in January, 1944 is going to be killed in the landing of its Lancaster on the return to a mission over Berlin. [ii]

It is also the case of Florent Van Rollegem, that will become within 103 Squadron the first Belgian pilot confirmed on the Lancaster ED 905 PM. [iii]

The Lancaster NG 336-BQ-B piloted by Liefoghe was built by the firm Amstrong Whitworth and is equipped with four engines Merlin Mk.24 Rolls Royce.

In February, 1945, Liefoghe participates (except one flight), in nine operational assignments aboard his Lancaster BQ-B, in particular during bombardments on Ludwigshafen (1/2-2-45), Wiesbaden (2/3-2-45), Kleve (7/8-2-45), Pölitz (8/9-2-45), Dresden (13/14-2-45), Chemnitz (14/15-2-45), Dortmund (20/21-2-45), Duisburg (21/22-2-45) and Pforzheim (23/24-2-45).

It is also aboard his Lancaster BQ-B that he makes the following five missions in March 1945: Dessau (7/8-3-45), Kassel (8/9-3-45), Essen (11-3-45), Dortmund (12-3-45) and its last dramatic mission on Nurnberg (16/17-3-45). The F / LT LIEFOOGHE thus made thirteen of these 28 operations on board of the NG 336-BQ-B.



Robert Liefoghe in his cockpit. (Eileen & Suzanne Liefoghe)

Dresden

In February, 1945, our Belgian pilot of the Bomber Command thus participated in nine raids and the mission on Dresden at night of February 13th to 14th is not certainly the least turbulent. This night, the R.A.F. sent 800 Lancaster to two successive waves on Dresden. 1.478 tons of bombs "high explosive" and 1.182 incendiary bombs were released on the cultural city. The day following, 311 Americans B-17 still released 771 tons of explosives.

March 16th to 17th, 1945 - The raid on Nurnberg

During this dramatic night from March 16th to 17th 1945, about 300 aircraft take off from England with Nurnberg as destination: 231 Lancaster of 1 Group, and 46 Lancaster and 16 Mosquito of 8 Group. Not less than 24 Lancaster, all of 1 Group, will be victims of attacks made essentially by the German night fighters which will succeed in infiltrating within the groups of bombers. It means that 8,7 % of Lancaster involved in this mission will be eliminated!

According to the information resumed in the Volume 6 of W.R. Chorley, Royal Air Forces Bomber Command Losses of the second World War, the number of Lancaster shot down during the raid on Nurnberg amounts to 32 aircrafts fallen on German territory, a plane fallen in France and one Lancaster disappeared in the North Sea after the takeoff. Lancaster seriously touched after the attack of Nurnberg managed to make an emergency landing in France; all the members of crew were safe.

The raid on Nurnberg will be the last bombardment made on this city by Bomber Command. According to the local report of certain Dr Erich Mulzer, the city was especially struck in the south and southeast side as well as in the historic centre which had already been reduced to ruin by previous bombardments. The central station, as well as the factory of urban gas were the prey of flames, this last one remaining inactive till the end of the hostilities. But graver, once again, numerous victims (estimated at 529) are to regret

On the Battle Order Serial No 43 of 550 Squadron represents 20 Lancaster among whom eighteen participate in the mission under the command of Squadron Leader Caldwell. The F / LT Robert Liefoghe takes off from North Killingholme in the neighbourhoods of 18.30 am. The plane takes fifteen bombs: 1 x 4.000 lb HC, 6 x CP No. 16 in 8 x CP No. 14 (these last ones are incendiary bombs)

Liefoghe is accompanied by five of six members of his traditional crew. Robert Anderson, his "air gunner" since November, 1944, is recently on sick leave further to an infection in ears and was replaced by Sergeant Self. The Lancaster BQ-B NG 336 thus takes off with the following crew:

F/O Robert J. LIEFOOGHE (Pilot)
Sgt Ivor JONES (Flight Engineer)
F/Sgt Albert Edward HIGGINS (Navigator)
P/O Robert Emrys HUGHES ((Air Bomber)
F/S Vincent Campbell DAVIDSON (Wireless Operator/Air Gunner)
Sgt Frederick Edward SELF (Middle Upper Gunner)
Sgt David ANTHONY (Rear Air Gunner)



This photo of the crew of the F / LT Robert Liefoghe (550 Squadron RAF) was taken towards Christmas 1944. Behind G. to Dr: an American, Wireless Operator V.C. Davidson, Navigator A.E. Higgins, Flight Engineer I. Jones, Air Gunner R. Anderson (do not fly on 16.03.1945), Air Gunner Anthony. In the first rank of G. to Dr.: Robert Liefoghe, Bomber E Air. Hughes, an American. (Mrs. Davidson via Eileen and Suzanne Liefoghe)

“Wir mußten unsere Menschen schützen” (We had to protect ours)

It is of what thinks the Lieutenant Helmut Bunje (Nachtjagdgeschwader 6) when he takes off from the base of Hessental near Hamburg, at night of March 16th, 1945.

And Helmut Bunje to clarify: " of the madness, this nasty criminal war begun with our own leaders; we are perfectly conscious of it even today. Besides, the night hunters had the moral obligation to protect until the last moment our population and our cities

against the murderous bombardments of the Allies. These were justified by no means and can be also qualified as "criminals".

From the landing in Normandy, the night hunters realized that the war was lost. But it was not necessary question to desert because some more of cities would have been destroyed and there would have been some more of victims.

The operational mission of March 16th, 1945 will be the last big action of the night fighters of Hessaal. During this night, the whole "geschwader" - with which "Gruppe" is parked to Schwäbisch Hall - operated 23 fighters. The Ju 88 G-6 of Helmut Bunje takes off in 20h25 in the direction of Strasbourg. The pilot reaches at the certain moment together with the other fighters to infiltrate within the stream of planes Lancaster with the dramatic consequences which we can imagine. Between Strasbourg and Nurnberg or more exactly between Strasbourg and Würzburg not less twenty Lancaster is shot down.

Four British bombers crash around of Schwäbisch Hall. Two of these aircraft fell by the Lieutenant Helmut Bunje, the third by Gruppenkommando Helmuth Schulte. [iv]

Bunje tells: " at 21h14, I had a Lancaster in my sight. The plane stole a higher mere nothing, hardly in hundred of metres in front of me and I fired without hesitating with my four artillery of edge. A terrifying explosion followed itself. I had never seen similar thing. We were coated with a halo of a brilliant light. "

Has the Lieutenant Bunje shot down Lancaster BQ-B? The question remains composed even today. It is however certain that the F / LT Robert Liefoghe was expelled from his plane.

Frank Pritchard, his " squadron mate ", explain why according to him Liefoghe will be the only survivor: " he wore the parachute of the pilot and the movement of air provoked by the explosion of the ' cookie ' of 4.000 lb (= 1.816 kg) simply ejected him of the plane. No other member of crew was in the habit of wearing a parachute, in the exception maybe of the machine gunner of tail, but the movement of air would certainly have killed this last one. "

According to only Pritchard three pilots of 550 Squadron survived an ejection of their bomber. Robert Liefoghe is one of them. He landed between Michelbach and Herlebach (in the southeast of Schwäbisch Hall). When he touches the ground, it sprains itself the foot and is incapable to walk even to run...[v]

No possible to run away...

Although Liefoghe suffers enormously and is still under the shock of the explosion, he succeeds in hiding his parachute under a tree shot down in the wood where he landed. He tears away his Belgian badges and buries them in the ground with the silk scarf on which are registered the objectives of his recent operational missions.

The first day lights appear on the horizon. The wood where it landed is not very bushy and it meets in several places of the fragments of its Lancaster. Liefoghe begins a walking towards " nowhere ": with a sprained foot, a torn trousers, without shoes and a stained with blood face, he is imaginary to imagine a long escape

. Finally, Liefoghe is going to knock in the first house which he meets and asks if he can be looked after. The next day, he is placed in prison by the mayor and the police of the village quite close to Sulzdorf. A German officer announces him at first the

death of four of the members of his crew and a bit further he learns that his five team member died. He asks to see them and proposes even to reveal the place where was hidden his parachute. The Germans refuse.

Several days later and after different stopping places, Liefoghe is taken with the other British airmen to the Luft V Stalag (a) of Ludwigsburg. On April 2nd, 1945, in the approach of the allied troops, the camp is abandoned. Begin for him one of these terrible "marches of the death". Fortunately, the Liberation is close and on May 8th, 1945, Liefoghe is repatriated in England.

Eileen Liefoghe, his wife, had been informed on March 18th, 1945 by Squadron Leader Caldwell of 550 Sqn that her husband had not returned of mission of the raid on Nurnberg and was reported missing. On May 9th, 1945, the day after his arrival in England, she will receive from a local policeman of Wednesbury a telegram announcing her return the first good news concerning Robert since March 18th.

“Nikolai-Friedhof (Schwäbisch Hall)” and “War Cemetery”

Other members of Robert Liefoghe's crew did not thus survive the explosion of the Lancaster. On March 19th, 1945, they were buried in Nikolai-Friedhof of Schwäbisch Hall. In the same cemetery, of the fresh ground recover the graves of the German pilot of the Night fighter Fritz Gries and his team members Georg Henrich, Werner Hirsch and Heinrich Eberle.

At two nights previously, after a fight against British bombers, during the landing, planes crashed and the pilots remained stuck in the cockpits of their devices in fire.

After the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission returned six members of crew of the BQ-B to the British Military Cemetery de Dürnbach, a Bavarian village was situated in sixteen kilometres east of the city of Bad Tolz.

Ivor JONES, David ANTHONY, Robert Emrys HUGHES and Sgt Frederick Edward SELF were individually buried (respectively graves 7. K.20 to. 23), while spoils (doubtless because not recognizable) of the Wireless Operator Vincent Campbell DAVIDSON and the navigator Albert Edward HIGGINS was buried in one “grave joint”. [vi]

Robert Anderson, the air gunner which didn't participated to the mission, following an infection in the ear and which was replaced by Sergeant Self lived, according to his daughter, up to his death in 1998 with the conviction that nobody survived to the crash.

It is only some days after the death of his father that she learnt by Eileen Liefoghe that a mail had repeatedly been sent to him (bad address?), regrettably unsuccessfully. After the ceremony funeral of Robert Anderson in 1998, his ashes - according to his wish - were scattered by his son and his daughter near Memorial Stone of 550 Squadron to North Killingholme.

Return in Belgium and in the Belgian Air Force

During the autumn, 1945, Robert Liefoghe undertakes again in Royal Air Forces (refresher courses, flying duties with 525 Squadron). On October 16th, 1946, he resigns and passes to the Heavy Conversion Units to Syerston and Wymeswold, where he meets the other Belgians with whom he returns finally in Belgium. [vii]

December 18th, 1946 begins the Belgian period to Evere within the 169th Wing / 366 Squadron (on May 31st, 1947, he goes to 367 Squadron).

After the change of naming of the unit and the squadron, he is a part from May 1st, 1948 till February 14th, 1952 of the 20th Squadron of the 15th Wing Tpt and Coms and flies on DC-3.

Afterward, he makes transfer towards the Coast and becomes an instructor on Oxford at the School of fighting of Coxyde. (Before flying on Meteor, the twin-engined rough draft of the Air Force, the young pilots receive some hours of flight on Oxford to acclimatize to a twin-engined plane)

Next year, in February, 1953, Liefoghe is moved in the 9th Squadron of the 7th Wing to Chièvres and flies on Meteor.

On December 26th of the same year, he is appointed to the rank of Commander.

On February 22nd, 1954, Robert Liefoghe leaves the 9th Squadron following a medical inaptitude in the flight and is transferred to the Grouping Instruction et Entraînement of the Air Force in Brussels. He is going to spend there eight years before being retreated, on April 1st, 1962.

A bit further, he joins England with his wife and his two children (Suzanne and Pierre). He will still return numerous services as professor of French in a private school to Walsall. He will become the grandfather of the girl Sarah. He dies on July 5th, 1988 to Sutton Colfield.

[i] Georges Liefoghe (Ledeberg on 1890, + Sterrebeek on 1959) is the father of Robert, and his mother, the Frenchwoman Clara Marie Rebere (Lily of Lannoy on 1897, + on 1965).

[ii] Cfr. Jean-Louis Roba, *Two Belgians of four-engined planes* (1): Georges de Menten de Horne, in Contact, jg. 4, nr. 15, in October, 1999, pp. 24-26.

[iii] Frank Pritchard (ex-air gunner 550 Squadron) remembers that the Belgian and English flags had been painted down at the bows by the Lancaster ED 905 PM-X. During its first operational flight (with Van Rollegem as pilot) the device has Duisburg for destination and on May 12th, 1943 - after the other pilots took the command - it arrives at 166 Squadron to Kirmington with AS-X as registration. In June, 1944, the device ends finally in 550 Sqn and flies from North Killingholme with the serial number BQ-F.

Pritchard also remembers having flown with the Belgian upper gunner C.A. Of Laveleys (+ 7/3/45), during a mission done among the crew of Cyrill Jones (RCAF).

According to Josette Demey, ex--W.A.A.F ., Air Gunners Charles J. Falleur and K.H. of Lengerke (+ in 27/28.5.44) was also a part of 550 Sqn.

[iv] According to the aeronautical historian Theo Boiten, Leutnant Helmut Bunje took away eleven victories during his missions in the Night hunting.

[v] Jack Harris (ex-550 Sqn) sent the following comments to Suzanne Walters-Liefoghe, what allows us to imagine what was able to arrive at the crew of Lancaster BQ-B:

“Night fighters were very active that night and using the upward firing cannon, they would creep underneath the bombers and fire from quite close range so that the first burst was usually fatal. If the aircraft was carrying bombs, a burst into the bomb bay would cause the bombs to explode. There was a danger to the night fighter if this happened. Therefore the night fighters usually aimed at the wing between the two

engines on one side. This attack could be equally lethal because the fuel tanks in the wing could explode with the same catastrophic consequences.

Pilots had seat type parachutes - i.e. - they were always strapped to their chutes. The other crew members had "chest type" parachutes - their parachutes were stored close by them in the aircraft and before jumping they had to clip them on two hooks on the chest part of the harness they were wearing. The fact that Robert survived and the other 6 crew members are all buried in the Dürnbach War Cemetery in Germany does tend to support a mid-air explosion."

[vi] Dürnbach War Cemetery: this cemetery was built after the war by the British and the Americans. Here rest essentially the airmen whose aircraft were shot down over Bavaria, Württemberg, Hessen and Thüringen as well as over Austria. Other servicemen died in camps or during marches of the death also rest there.

[vii] On March 16th, 1945, the F / LT Robert Liefoghe adds up a big total of 1.353 Hr 10 Min, among whom 216.45 made during 28 operational missions (of which 85 % are hours of night).

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