

# Air-gunner or secret service agent?

31st of August 1944 – 1st of September 1944

Whilst it was already past midnight on the verge of 31st of August and 1st of September 1944, it is in that very early morning that at a very low altitude a Short Stirling Bomber plane is heading for Gilze Rijen with great speed. Almost instantaneously the German Flak (anti aircraft guns) responds and after a few hits this enormously large plane was so seriously damaged that it crashed. In fire and with a massive blow it crashed on the airport of Gilze Rijen very nearby a fuel and ammunition storage facility at the Bavelse Poort (on the southside of the airport).

By daylight the German soldiers start investigating the crash site. It was discovered that the plane was of the 138th Special Duty Squadron and that the plane had a serial number LK 131.

The plane departed from its home base Tempsford<sup>1</sup> in the UK and as the name of the Squadron suggests was mandated with a special mission from an SOE- operation (Special Operations Executive).

Seven crewmembers did not survive this sad and fatal crash and their names were:

Fl.Lt Wallace	F/O Mc Namara
F/O Thomson	Sgt. Bailey
Sgt. Baxter	Sgt. Bullen
Sgt. Hanson	

This story would have come to a sudden end, be it that every year on the 4th of May during Memorial Day for the victims of the 2nd World War, a salute is brought to their graves and flowers are laid to commemorate them. Secondly in 1986 a small team of Dutch historians from Gilze Rijen visited the PRO office in London and coincidentally came across the flight details of the LK 131 in the war archives. This time however it was disclosed that there were 8 crew members instead of 7. Our surprise turned into curiosity. What had happened to Sgt Bowker? Unfortunately, we do not know the final answer to this question. For planes with these special SOE missions, it was very rare - or never the case - that the true mission was disclosed and recorded. This was probably the case because they could not allow for any information to be leaked on the secret mission and endanger the lives of the crew involved. The most likely scenario is that Sgt Bowker<sup>2</sup> – who was recorded as Air-gunner – had already left the plane before it was hit by German flak. Maybe it was him whom had to execute a special secret mission? If he was a true Air gunner or a secret agent will always be a mystery.

## **Note:**

*This story is drafted by the authors of the Dutch 5-part series 'Five years Airfront'. These series document the Second World War in the municipality of Gilze- Rijen and in particular of the history of the airport of Gilze-Rijen. At that time in the period between 1985-1988 they have done a tremendous amount of research in various archives and in particular archives in London.*

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<sup>1</sup> RAF Tempsford was perhaps the most secret airfield in the Second World War. Home to 138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons, it was tasked with dropping SOE Agents and supplies into occupied Europe, and the retrieval or 'pick up' of personnel returning to England. Source: Wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> Sgt Bowker became a prisoner of war and was held captive in Stalag Luft camp 7 in Upper Silesia