

*Editor's Note: some will have seen the recent ITV Channel 4 Television programme covering the archaeological research of the tunnels at Stalag Luft III which featured, inter alia, in 'The Great Escape' ([www.channel4.com/programmes/digging-the-great-escape/4od](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/digging-the-great-escape/4od)). One of our active Branch members, Bobby Laumans, was in Stalag Luft III at the time, but, luckily as it turned out, drew a high number in the escape plan. Below is his story of how he came to be in the POW camp. It was previously published in Newsletter N°88 in March 2007*

## **MY LAST COMBAT BY CAPTAIN R J L `BOBBY` LAUMANS.**

*Belgian Bobby Laumans was a Tiger in 1941/1942, having arrived in England after the Germans invaded the Low Countries. Then when 74 were preparing to leave for the Middle East Bobby was posted to the newly formed 350 Squadron, one of the Belgian squadrons formed of Belgian personnel. Here in his own words (as recorded for the 74 (F) Sqn Tiger Association) is the story of his final flight with 350.*

I have 48 operations against the enemy flying with the RAFVR, first with 74 (Tiger) Squadron then 350 Belgian Squadron. The reason why I am posted is that 74 Squadron are going to the Middle East and the Belgian government in London wants to keep Belgian pilots already in the UK at hand in view of a possible liberation of Belgium. There are two of us in 74 – Steve Winterbeek and myself. With 350 Squadron we first go to Warmwell and from there to Debden in Essex. Arriving there we find two other squadrons which have done well during the Battle of Britain – Squadron 111 (Treble One) and Squadron 71, the famous Eagle squadron composed of American pilots flying with the RAF....

From Debden we fly nearly every day against the enemy, making sweeps in France and Belgium. We are equipped with the Spitfire Vb (two 20mm cannons and four Browning machine guns). Then we lose our first pilots, especially on 23rd May 1942, in a furious fight in the region of St Omer where Winterbeek is killed and L Peeters bails out. I have a dog fight with a Focke Wulf 190 and I believe I shoot him down. But on viewing the cine film after landing I only get a `FW190 damaged`. On the film one sees many big pieces of aircraft falling off but no witness sees the aircraft crash. The long pursuit of that 190 brings me over Boulogne and I don't have enough fuel left to return to Debden. I land at Tangmere and when I phone 350 the CO tells me that I am already posted missing on the Dispersal Board. I do some more offensive flights in the following days and then comes June 1st 1942.

In his book Spitfire Mk V in Action, Peter Caygill says that the RAF wanted to test the real value of the FW190. On June 1st they sent up several fighter wings, which included squadrons 65, 71, 111 and 350. Unfortunately the Luftwaffe had the same intention and sent up units from I and III/JG26, a redoubtable force composed of very experienced pilots. To quote Peter Caygill: *'The actions that had been fought in the skies over France had shown the FW190 to be a formidable adversary but the level of dominance that it was capable of achieving was underlined during the operations that were carried out on the first two days of June 1942.'*

That day 350 formed into three flights led by the CO, Sqn Ldr D Guillaume. My flight was led by Flt Lt Du Monceau de Bergendal who had Sgt Hansez as No 2, myself as Blue 3 and Sgt Livyns as my No 2. I was a Flying Officer by then. Henry Pickard was also with us. He was later to be shot by the Gestapo in 1944 among the 50 RAF officers shot after the `Great Escape` from Stalag-Luft III. Squadron 65 was flying at 20,000 feet, 111 was at 22,000 feet, 71 at 23,000 feet and 350 Squadron

was top cover at 25,000 feet for eight Hurri bombers attacking a target near Bruges. The op was numbered as Circus 178. Close protection of the Hurricanes was by Spitfire Vbs from Hornchurch and Biggin Hill. The Germans, commanded by Major Gerhard Schopfel, waited until the RAF formation was turning back home and approaching Blankenberg in Belgium. The attack, when it came, was deadly. Several German sections attacked each Spitfire squadron. Being top cover we were the first to be engaged. Rapidly Blue section got separated from the squadron. George Livyens was shot down near Blankenberg, J Hansez a little later. Seeing an FW190 disengaging after an attack against a Spitfire I followed him but he turned inland. Being higher I closed in. As Mike Donnet tells in his book on page 39: *'P/O Spraghe, an American from 71 Eagle Squadron, confirmed a victory for De Monceau. Laumans, Livyens and Hansez were missing. Laumans was last seen pursuing a FW190 over Ostend.'*

That is correct. We were flying eastwards. For information here is an extract of Du Monceau's combat report. *'During Circus 178 the squadron was at 25,000 feet and about twenty FW190s attacked from above. Blue Section was heavily engaged and became separated from the rest of the squadron. Blue One came back alone. Blue 3 (Laumans) and Blue 4 (Livyens) were missing....'* 350 engaged in the vicinity of Ostend on 1.6.42 (1252 hours to 1430 hours). Blue Section leader, Flt Lt Monceau, states that: *'returning from the sweep he saw a Spitfire attacked by a FW190. The Spit pilot bailed out and Blue 3 F/O Laumans gave chase to the attacking FW, flying back in the direction of France, and that was the last seen of him. F/O Laumans is presumed lost due to enemy action.'*

A letter later addressed by `Duke` de Monceau to Colonel Wauter, Head of Staff at 107 Eaton Square, London, described the toughness of the combat: *'During a sweep over Bruges we lost three pilots, not knowing too much what happened to them, only that they are missing. It was the toughest combat I ever fought, the Germans reacting violently.'*

To come back to what happened to me I dived onto that FW190. I fired a burst from astern at the moment when four other 190s joined us. I immediately pulled out by making a 5g turn. That's all you could do without a g-suit at the limit of the grey veil. That was the only manoeuvre where the Spitfire V still had the advantage over the FW. Suddenly there were only four FW190s in the sky around me. Did I hit the first one which I fired at? I can't say but he had gone. But another FW190 passed in front of me and the opportunity was too good. I get myself in position for a shot but I didn't know if I had any ammunition left. Before I had time to fire my aircraft shuddered under the impact of bullets and cannon shells from the other two Germans following me. It was the tactic of sending a decoy in front. In seconds bullets tore into both my wings and I could hear them hitting the armour plating in my back. A few seconds later a cannon shell entered the fuselage from the left, went through the dashboard destroying the instruments and exploded in the petrol tank located between the cockpit and the engine. As there wasn't much fuel left the air-fuel ratio was very explosive. In no time at all my aircraft was burning. There was little time left to bail out. A few moments earlier I had a glimpse at the altimeter and saw 900 feet set at Debden's QFE. I jettisoned the hood, undid my harness and pulled off my helmet. It was too much bother to disconnect the oxygen and RT. I turned the Spitfire upside down and dropped out. But the aircraft was badly trimmed to fly on its back. I got half out of the cockpit when my parachute got stuck at the back and I couldn't reach the stick any more. So I gave the stick a hefty kick creating

a negative g and was projected out of the plane. I pulled the opening handle and fortunately the chute opened normally. No, I was not going to die that day!

Going down towards the relatively calm sea I saw the Focke Wulf, presumably the one that shot me down, making a stall turn and diving towards me. Seeing that great radial engine getting bigger and bigger I thought – here we go, he's going to open fire. But suddenly the pilot pushed the rudder because I saw the plane slide sideways, just missing me, and the pilot turning his head towards me, saluting in the military way. I suppose it was his way of acknowledging the loyalty of the combat and that I had been an adversary hard to shoot down. Now I know with certainty that the pilot was one of the two seen on the photograph. Indeed, thanks to Jean-Louis Roba, a lawyer living in Charleroi, I received the picture of Hauptman P Priller and Lt J Aistleitner. Mr Roba, who has access to German archives, sent me extracts of those two pilots' combat reports. One claims two Spitfires of 350 Squadron shot down and the other, one. Now, 350 in that operation lost three pilots. Times and place correspond on that date. So my opponent was either Priller or Aistleitner. The Austrian died in air combat in 1944 Whilst Priller died of natural causes many years later.

Instants later he was gone and I had now to ditch the best I could. In the squadron we had talked of pilots drowning when the parachute fell over them. I didn't want that to happen to me. There wasn't much time left as I bailed out at 900 feet. So approaching the water I held onto the strings with one hand while unbuckling the harness with the other. When the harness fell off I held on with both hands and when I estimated being twenty or thirty feet from the water I let go. As expected the parachute, not having to support any weight, drifted away in the wind and I was free-falling for a few seconds. I went down quite deeply in the water before I could activate my life jacket. My Mae West brought me to the surface. I was glad to have a good life jacket because with flying boots full of sea water and clothes fully wet it was difficult to swim. But the adventure was not finished, and it was necessary to unfold the dinghy. Nothing was automatic. Previously we never had training in parachute jumping but at least we'd had a demonstration in how to unfold a dinghy. All the same, with water up to the neck and waves breaking over my head it wasn't easy. But I managed it fine and fortunately we had a bottle to blow the dinghy up. And I was very pleased indeed to see it lift slowly out of the water and fill with gas. Climbing aboard was hard work as it was jumping about from one wave to the next. Finally though I was aboard my `cruiser` in one piece.

At first I wasn't too worried. I could see the cliffs of Dover, very white in the sunshine. And I was thinking of Vera Lynn – 'There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover' – we all knew that lovely song of hope. And I thought it's just a matter of time before the air-sea rescue comes and picks me up. I had neither food nor drink on board. Soon time seemed long with nothing happening. In the evening I heard the sound of Merlins and I thought some Spitfires were approaching but the noise remained in the distance. It must have been a rescue launch as they were also equipped with Merlin engines. But the boat didn't come close enough to be seen and so came my first night at sea. What a cruise! On the morning of the second day the white cliffs had gone and I could have been in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I could turn my head 360 degrees and all I saw was water. I wasn't too thirsty. The second day was endless. I was trailing my block of fluorecine at the end of a string, leaving a greenish trail behind me. And it was evident I was drifting east. Then came the second night and with it a depression, strong winds and waves getting higher

and higher. During the night the dinghy was turned over three times. The first time it wasn't too difficult to turn it the right way up and climb back on board. The second time it was harder and the third time, with waves two to three metres high, I managed to turn it the right way up but didn't have the strength anymore to climb on board. I remained in the water clutching the side of the dinghy for hours until the sea had calmed down. Having regained some strength I managed to get back inside the dinghy. By now I was hungry and thirsty but that couldn't be helped. During the third day I saw several seals swim by and slowly, looking east, I began to see the coast. It was Belgium and France. I could see Dunkirk's cranes and to the left a pier. It must have been Nieuport. During the day I drifted closer to the coast and I could see the Coxyde (Koksijde) and De Panne villas. In those days there were no tall buildings like there are now. Then towards evening a small boat from the Kriegsmarine came out to me. At this stage I couldn't care less about the nationality of the rescue boat. All I wanted was drink. The sailors pulled me up on board and once on deck I just collapsed. One of the sailors gave me some water to drink and the small ship took me into Nieuport's harbour. I was taken to the house used by the German naval officer commanding the town. He spoke to me in English not German which surprised me. On his sleeve was the rank of Lt/Cdr. During the war we didn't wear a flying suit and we flew dressed in the RAF's battle dress. He told me that the Luftwaffe in Coxyde had been notified and it was not his place to interrogate me and would I like a meal? Yes please was my answer. So he had some food brought in. As I was eating he kept asking me if I knew London and Southampton and Liverpool. So each time I gave him my name rank and number as by the Geneva Convention. But he kept asking me if I knew such and such a hotel or pub. After a while I said – permit me to ask you a question. He was taken aback by this but allowed me to speak. I asked him why he was asking all the questions about hotels and pubs and was flabbergasted by his answer. *Because I spent five years in the British Merchant Navy as a deck officer and those were the places we used to visit when we were ashore. Furthermore it pleases me so much to speak English again.*

Then the Luftwaffe people arrived to take me to Coxyde airfield. It was breathtaking on the main road passing the Villa Copelia that my parents used to rent in the 30s where I spent my August holidays. The villa is still there now! At the airfield the duty officer who took charge of me noticed that I wasn't well at all and called for the squadron doctor. He found that my body temperature was 39 degrees Celsius and sent me to the sick bay where I remained three days and quickly saw me fit again. I was then taken by car to the railway station at Furnes and there we took a train to Brussels. Two soldiers with guns and a Feldwebel armed with a pistol warned me (in German) that they would use their weapons at any suspicious move. In Brussels I was taken in a military vehicle from the south station to the north station (as it then was) to take a train for Frankfurt.

It was tough driving thorough my old city with no possibility of escaping. In Frankfurt my destination was Dulag-Luft, a selection and interrogation camp. Each prisoner was in solitary confinement in a cell of about six feet by ten feet. There was a cot, a small table, two chairs and in a corner what looked like an old radiator. I was put in such a cell for several hours without food until I had the visit of an officer of the Abwehr. He was speaking in excellent English. First he wanted me to fill in papers which after name and rank also asked to which squadron I belonged and what aircraft I was flying. He said it was for the Red Cross to enable them to quickly warn my family of my whereabouts. Of course I only wrote down my rank and number.

Straight away he told me I was Belgian and flew with 350 Squadron which I denied. But it is hard not to show anything on one's face. After an hour or so during which he kept asking me the same questions he left me – still without food or drink. After a while I noticed that the `old` radiator was getting very hot. Soon the temperature in that small cell was so high I started taking off some clothes. When I was down to my vest the radiator changed to a refrigerator and the temperature rapidly decreased. In fact it was a powerful air conditioner. So I started to dress up again and this went on hours on end until the return of the same Hauptman when the temperature was comfortable. Still the same questions. He asked me if the Major Guillaume was well. Not squadron leader but major which was Guillaume's rank in the Belgian Air Force where we use the same ranks as in the army. In the squadron we used to call him major rather than squadron leader. How did that German know that? And to ask news of `Duke` du Monceau and Captain Boussa the other flight commander. I always replied that I didn't know any of these people and that he was making a mistake as in the RAF there were no majors. After he left there were new temperature changes during the whole night and I didn't sleep much. The morning of the second day I was in a poor state physically and from me still came the same answer: Flying Officer Laumans 67088.....and still the same incredulous smile on his face. I must say that he never shouted or hit me during that time. I was thinking of my pals who had been shot down before me and who were dead. Mainly I thought of Louis Peeters who was a good friend and had been shot down on 23rd May and whom I believed killed.

On the evening of the second day of my interrogation the Hauptman told me that he was certain I was Belgian and a pilot of 350 Squadron although I refused to admit it. *`We know that at 350 you fly on old equipment, that you have no military secret to tell, so we are going to send you to Silesia to Stalag-luft III, the RAF camp where you'll meet your friend Peeters.`* In the poor physical state I was in it just flew out of my mouth, unable to restrain myself - *`what is he alive?`*. He just looked at me with his crooked smile like a poker player. *`Mr Laumans. You've just finally told me the truth. Off you go!`* And so back onto a train with 30 or 40 other prisoners waiting to be shipped. We left for Stalag-luft III in Sagan. Among those POWs was another Belgian, a pre 1940 pilot. His name was Muller. In Sagan began another adventure because for us RAF officers the war wasn't over. We had to fight a different way. There a great number of us worked together on a big scheme that culminated in the Great Escape. I was part of it. But to know all the facts about that you had better read Paul Brickhill's book. As you may know or not know Paul was on 74 Squadron at the same time as I flew with that great unit!

Long live the Tigers....