
The Llangynog Liberator

The year 1989 marked two notable 50th anniversaries - the outbreak of the Second World War, and the first flight of the Consolidated B-24 Liberator. It is to the credit of its design and manufacture that there were any survivors when such an aircraft flew into a Welsh mountain towards the end of the war in Europe.

Secreted deep in rural Northamptonshire was USAAF station No.179 at Harrington. This housed the 801st and 492nd Bomb Groups, known as the 'Carpetbaggers'. The Liberators of these groups flew clandestine missions at night, dropping agents for the OSS, and supplies to resistance fighters all over enemy occupied territory. Even the crews wore civilian clothes on operational flights. These activities required dedicated training, including cross country night flights in aircraft painted completely black, and carrying no squadron insignia. Some 208 airmen lost their lives flying from this airfield. This is the story of one flight.

At 2000 hours on 18th March 1945, B-24 serial 42-95036, took off from Harrington on a routine cross-country training flight. The crew had only recently arrived at the base as a replacement for losses. The captain was 2nd Lieutenant Randolph J. Sheppard, with co-pilot - 2nd Lieutenant Julian W. Bradbury, navigator - Flight Officer John A. Rogers, and bombardier - 2nd Lieutenant Val D. Shaefer. In the crew was a full blooded Red Indian, Private First Class Whitney Wolata, a Pima from Southern Arizona. The others always referred to him as 'Chief', and he took this in good part, having a great sense of humour. He was a waist gunner, but since these special aircraft carried no waist armament - just upper and tail

turret guns in case of night fighters - he and others usually acted as dispatchers of equipment to the waiting 'reception committees' on the ground. The bombardier, in the absence of bombs, acted as an extra navigator as did most of the crew. They flew usually at heights of around 400 feet, or even lower if there were no 'Joes' or 'Josephines' to deliver. Everyone hung out of the windows looking out for landmarks or read road signs, and shouted encouragement to startled nocturnal lovers below.

On this particular night the weather was miserable, with heavy rain and low cloud; the only consolation being, at their altitude, no icing. The pilots could see nothing of the ground after take off, and depended entirely on the navigator's directions for altitude and headings to fly. Rogers was in fact using the Gee Box Navigation System which utilised VHF signals from ground stations. The first leg took them to Cinderford, between Gloucester and Monmouth, where they set course for Shrewsbury.

Later, at 2115 hours, over the village of Llangynog in the Berwyns, inhabitants heard the roar of aircraft engines travelling northwards. In the Liberator, the crew could see nothing through the rain cloud. Suddenly they hit the rising slope near the summit of Disgynfa at 2,100 feet, eliminating the propellers but retaining enough flying speed to bounce onto the top of the mountain some 500 yards further on. The nose section was smashed and torn away, killing Rogers and Shaefer, as was a large portion of the mid-section, where both waist-gunners, Wolata and Corporal Willie Kouser were killed instantly. Bradbury, the co-pilot, cut all the switches as soon as movement stopped, thus averting a fire. Corporal David

V. Blanton, the tail gunner was thrown out of his turret and landed in the centre section, with only slight injuries. He crawled out into the downpour of rain and up onto the wing where he helped Bradbury extricate the rest of the crew.

The pilot was seriously injured with skull and leg fractures. The engineer, Sergeant James R. Green was rescued from the upper turret, and was found to be in reasonable shape. The radio operator, Corporal John F. Mattingly, was in severe pain with a broken pelvis. Parachutes were used as bandages and to shelter the badly injured from the torrential rain.

The co-pilot and tail gunner then set out in opposite directions to seek assistance. Blanton struck off to the east on very boggy terrain. The darkness was lightened only slightly by the first quarter of the moon. He seemed to be getting nowhere, the mountain stretching out before him at almost the same level, so he turned round and headed back for his aircraft. Had he gone a little further he would have gone over the 500 feet cliffs at Graig y Mwn, near Pistyll Rhaeadr.

In the meantime, Bradbury had made his way to the west and found a fence leading to lower ground. He had been a keen hiker, with experience of night walks, and followed the fence down, finally coming out on the narrow Bala road. Here he made a marker of gorse at the roadside.

He saw a chink of light from a cottage below him and descended a steep slope to Llwyn Onn (Ash Grove) where he knocked on the door. He gave Mr. Thomas M. Davies, who was still up tending young lambs, quite a fright. He spoke little English, and Bradbury's Welsh was somewhat lacking, but with some sign language the urgency of the situation was communicated.

The shock of the crash was nothing compared to the ride down the mountain in the dark and the rain on the handlebars of a rickety old bicycle! At Llangynog he was given a ride in a lorry to Penybontfawr, the next village, where Police Constable Matthew Thomas and his family were roused around midnight. The doctor was called to give first aid to Bradbury, who was cut about the head and very badly bruised.

By daybreak PC Thomas had notified the various authorities, and organised a search party. He would not let the co-pilot join them, but sent him off to hospital. The weather was still vile, with rain and mist on the mountains. They climbed up from the marker, which Bradbury had left, and spread out. The search was not going at all well when out of the mist a flare was seen above the crash site. The radio operator had crawled back into the wreckage and found the Very pistol. He struggled out and, just before he became exhausted, managed to fire a flare off. Soon the injured were taken down the mountain strapped onto gates, and were sped off to hospital.

On 23rd March four good men were buried with full military honours at Cambridge American Military Cemetery.

Julian Bradbury retired as a Lieutenant Colonel, but is still involved with the Air Force Academy in Colorado. He loves the mountains, where his ranch is situated, despite his argument with one all those years ago.

Mountain victim F/O John A. Rogers - right.

Mountain victim Lieutenant Val. D. Shaefer - right. Both Lt. Col. J. W. Bradbury

