

THE LLANGYNOG LIBERATOR

From the book "FALLEN EAGLES", a guide to aircraft crashes in North-East & Mid-Wales, by Edward Dolyerush

Secreted deep in rural Northamptonshire was USAAF Station #179 at Harrington. This housed the 801st/492nd Bomb Group, known as the "Carpetbaggers". The Liberators of this Group 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 insignia. Some 208 airmen lost their lives flying from this airfield. This is the story of one such flight.

At 2000 hours on 18 March 1945, B-24, serial #42-95036, took off from Harrington on a routine cross-country flight. The crew had only recently arrived at the Base as a replacement for losses. The captain was 2nd Lt. Randolph J. Sheppard; 2nd Lt. Julian W. Bradbury, copilot; F/O John A. Rogers, navigator; and 2nd Lt. Val D. Schaefer, bombardier. In the crew was a full-blooded red Indian, PFC Whitney Wolata, a Pima from southern Arizona. The others referred to him as "Chief" and he took this in good part having a great sense of humor. 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. Roger's was in fact using the Gee Box Navigation System which utilized VHS signals from ground stations. The first leg took them to Cinderfoot, between Gloucester and Monmouth, where they set course for Shrewsbury.

Later, at 2115 hours over the village of Llangynog in the Berwyns, in-



CRASH SITE OF B-24H
ON LLANGYNOG/BERWYN
RANGE, WALES, UK.

photo-Ed Dolyerush

habitants 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 Schaefer, as was a large portion of the mid-section, where both waist-gunners, Wolata and Cpl. Willie Kouser were killed instantly. Bradbury, the copilot, cut all the switches as soon as movement stopped, thus averting a fire. Cpl. 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, Sgt. James R. Green was rescued from the upper turret and was found to be in reasonable shape. The radio operator, Cpl. 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 around 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 Mathew

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B-24H LIBERATOR
#42-95036
ON DISGYNFA IN THE
BERWYNS, WALES, UK.

photo-J.W. Bradbury

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Thomas and his family were roused around midnight. The doctor who 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 organized a search party. He would not let the co-pilot join them but sent him off to the 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 the hospital.

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

The crew consisted of Lt. Randolph J. Sheppard, pilot; Lt. Julian W. Bradbury, copilot; F/O John A. Rogers, navigator; Lt. Val D. Shaefer, bombardier; Sgt. James R. Green, engineer; Cpl. John F. Mattingly, radio operator; Sgt. William Kouser, w/gunner; Private Whitney Holata, w/gunner and Sgt. David U. Blanton, tail/gunner.

Julian Bradbury retired as a Lt. 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.

Editor's Note: J.W. Bradbury is a member of our Association and is actively involved in the planning and coordinating our reunion in Europe.



J.W. "Brad" & Roberta Bradbury.
photo taken at the Houston Reunion.



At right: Mountain victim, F/O
John A. Rogers (at right).



At left: Mountain victim, Lt.
Val D. Shaefer (at right).

photos-J.W. Bradbury

