

'Failed to Return'

Joe Hall explores the aftermath of Hubert Everard Preston's final flight, when his Hampden bomber was lost over Cologne in April 1941.

At 24 minutes past midnight on April 21st 1941, Hubert Everard 'Bert' Preston's Hampden bomber of 106 Squadron took off from RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire. The target was an area of the German city of Cologne, and the aircraft had been loaded with four 500lb general purpose bombs to help complete the task of causing "maximum devastation".

Bert was the aircraft's wireless operator as well as being an air gunner. With one operational tour with 44 Squadron already under his belt, Bert was hugely experienced in night bombing operations. Only the previous month he'd received the Distinguished Flying Medal from King George VI at Buckingham Palace for his "skill, coolness and devotion to duty involving 180 hours operational flying".

Bert's three crewmates on the April 21st sortie were men he'd flown with only a handful of times before: pilot Ronald Lakin, Canadian navigator Jack Cutmore; and



Hampden with crew at RAF Scampton, October 2nd, 1940.
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Failed to return

gunner William Burrell from London. It was the crew's first flight after returning from a week's leave two days before.

This time away from operations must have been much appreciated. Prior to this sortie, the four men had endured heavy flak over Kiel on April 7th, suffered a failure of their oxygen supply when again attacking Kiel the next night, and were forced to return to base on April 10th after wireless transmitter issues made continuing their trip to Dusseldorf impossible.

Whether Bert had spent his leave back home or with his crewmates is unknown. He was the son of Edward Preston and his second wife Mary (nee Brackenbury) of 28 Melrose Street, Leicester. The youngest child by 10 years, Bert – who had attended Alderman Newton's School – had a strained relationship with his much older father who had been a hosiery designer and designer of warp knitting machines.

Target: Cologne

As the Hampden left Coningsby's runway on that dark morning, it headed south-east and joined six others bound for the same destination. The sortie's estimated

length was five hours, and their Hampden would be expected back at base around 5:30am.

Unlike the mass bomber streams of later in the war, where hundreds of RAF aircraft would fly in formation to and from their target, at this stage of the war Bomber Command could only muster a limited number of medium bombers to send into the darkness above occupied Europe. Each aircraft would make

“ He had endured anti-aircraft fire, night fighters, equipment malfunctions, electrical storms and the loss of friends. ”

their own way to the target as best they could, and drop bombs at low-level before turning for home.

While Bert's target on April 21st was Cologne, cloud cover and the difficulties of navigating at night often saw bombs dropped on any other target of opportunity the crew came across. If none were locatable, it also wasn't uncommon for crews to return

Right: **Hubert Everard 'Bert' Preston in uniform, circa 1940/41.** Photo courtesy of Helen Dwyer.



home with their payload.

Bert's first operational sortie had been with 44 Squadron on April 17th 1940 – almost exactly one year earlier. Then, his aircraft had dropped anti-shipping parachute mines at Great Belt, a strait between the major islands of Zealand and Funen in Denmark. Since that day, he had dropped mines off Langeland Island and in the Kiel canal.

Though often seen as safer to fly, these 'gardening' sorties, as they were known, could be equally dangerous when enemy shipping let loose their anti-aircraft guns. Indeed, the Kiel sortie had seen one of the

returning Hampdens suffer 30 bullet holes and a shell hole in the tail.

On his way to Cologne, Bert may have pondered these past operations – perhaps contrasting his own experience with the relative inexperience of his crew. Cutmore and Burrell had joined the squadron from Combat Training School in January 1941, only three months before, though much of March had been taken up with training the crews and practicing local, cross-country and night flying, plus air gunnery.

Despite being only 22, Bert had a Distinguished Flying Medal to show for his 30 missions with 44



The wireless operator/gunner of a Hampden manning his twin Vickers K guns, 1940. © IWM HU 107827

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Squadron, and had already added to that number since joining 106 Squadron. He had climbed aboard a Hampden bomber – known as ‘flying suitcases’ due to their cramped crew compartments – over 30 times, and made his way in the dark to targets in France, Germany and Holland. He had endured intense anti-aircraft fire, night fighters, equipment malfunctions, electrical storms and the loss of friends; as well as one crash-landing.

One notable day in May 1940, returning from an attack on Givet aerodrome, Bert had looked down to see Dunkirk aflame, ringed with searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, and watched ships off the coast taking the British Expeditionary Force across the narrow sea to safety. Such a wealth of experience doubtless made Bert an old hand in the eyes of those still getting to grips with life on an operational squadron, in spite of his 22 years.

Back at Coningsby, the first of the seven Hampdens headed for Cologne returned almost at once having suffered engine trouble. The next arrived back at 5:26am, with others returning piecemeal until 7:45am when the sixth of the seven aircraft touched down. As the morning wore on there was still no sign of the final Hampden, with the friends of Bert Preston, Ron Lakin, Jack Cutmore and William Burrell doubtless hoping their aircraft had landed at one of the emergency runways nearer the coast. As morning broke and the day wore on with still no sign of Bert’s aircraft, the squadron’s



Left: **The crew of a Hampden bomber leave their aircraft upon returning from a flight.** © IWM CH 256. Right: **The cramped cockpit of the Hampden is indicative of the small space the entire crew had to work in.** © IWM CH 1207

Bert had looked down to see Dunkirk aflame, ringed with searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, and watched ships off the coast taking the British Expeditionary Force across the narrow sea to safety.

Operations Record Book was duly annotated: “Hampden X2986 - Failed to return.”

Missing

That evening, telegrams were sent to the next of kin of the four crewmen. It stated that the men had been reported missing as a result of air operations, and that any further information would be relayed as soon as it was received. A follow-up letter confirming the telegram was written on April 24th, noting that

‘missing’ did not necessarily mean killed or wounded, and that the airmen could be prisoners of war. It ended by saying the enquiries were being made via the Red Cross Society as to the whereabouts of Preston, Lakin, Cutmore and Burrell.

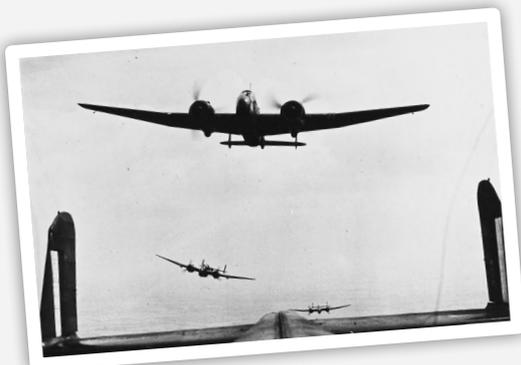
Just over a week later, on May 5th, the results of the Red Cross Society’s search were telegraphed to the relatives of the four men by the Air Ministry. “Deeply regret to inform you,” it began, before going on to say that due to information provided from the Red Cross, the Air Ministry had changed the classification of each airman from ‘missing’ to ‘missing, presumed to have lost his life.’

Another letter was then sent confirming the telegram. It noted that while the Red Cross report quoted official German

documents stating the aircraft’s occupants had all been killed in action, proof of their deaths would not be accepted by the Air Ministry until “additional confirmation is received or a further period of time has elapsed.” The letter said that another letter would be sent “in due course”, before signing-off by extending the department’s sympathies for the family’s bereavement.

On May 17th Bert’s brother telephoned the Air Ministry, and on June 6th his sister sent a letter. Both were told that no more news was forthcoming. However, by September 4th the Air Ministry was in a position to give more details, having by then received an update from the Red Cross. Preston, Cutmore, Lakin and Burrell had indeed been killed when their Hampden crashed at Cologne on April 21st, and the German authorities had afforded the four airmen a funeral on April 24th at the military cemetery in Cologne.

While the Air Ministry had given the basic details to the families of the four airmen, the longing to know exactly what had befallen their loved ones was keenly felt. This is perhaps best observed in a letter Jack Cutmore’s mother



Left: **The view from the rear guns of a Hampden - a familiar sight for Bert Preston.** © IWM CH 714

Alderman Newton's memorial

As well as being commemorated at the CWGC's Rheinberg War Cemetery, Hubert Everard Preston is also remembered on the Alderman Newton's Grammar School plaque, now in the safe keeping of the Leicester City, County & Rutland At Risk War Memorials Project.

This fine bronze memorial, along with a similar one commemorating the school's losses from the First World War, were retrieved from the cellar of what is now St Martin's House in Peacock Lane. For many years this had been the home of Alderman Newton's Grammar School, but was latterly used by the newly-formed Leicester Grammar School before it moved to Great Glen in 2008.

They were left there when in 1979 Alderman Newton's Greencoat School moved to New Parks. Fittingly, however, the At Risk War Memorials Project took them into care at All Saints church in Highcross Street, Leicester, where Alderman Newton is buried and has a fine memorial window.



Marian sent to the Ministry upon receiving confirmation of his death.

"It was a sad blow to us for we were hoping he might be a prisoner of war, not having any details for so long", she wrote.

"I would like to know if there was anything to identify him by... I would also like to know if he was killed instantly or was in hospital,

“ *...my mother is becoming anxious as to where her boy's remains actually lie.* **”**

or if anyone from the Red Cross Society saw him buried." She ends her letter by saying: "I hope I am not bothering you too much, but a mother is always so anxious for her children."

In reality, the original German documents contained far more

detail than the Air Ministry ever provided to the families. These documents showed the final moments of the Hampden, and the grisly aftermath of the crash. The aircraft had been hit by flak over Cologne, and had crashed at 4:10am in a quarry near Knapsack in the south-west of the city. None of the crew had managed to bale out, and fire had destroyed the wreckage to such an extent that the men inside had been – according to the German report – "completely charred and dismembered".

While the documents contradict one another at certain points, the body of Jack Cutmore seems to have been somewhat identifiable as he was given his own grave during the burial of April 24th, while Bert Preston, Ron Lakin, and William Burrell were all buried together across two adjacent graves.

'They never die...'

In 1947, when the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) set about 'concentrating' – or exhuming the war dead buried in various local cemeteries and reburying them in centralised plots – they ensured that Preston, Lakin and Burrell were again interred together, next to their Canadian friend Jack Cutmore, at Rheinberg

War Cemetery.

When writing to the families in April 1947 to inform them of the graves' relocation, the Air Ministry stated that the exact number, plot and row of the grave would be sent in a subsequent communication. Having still not received this information over 18 months later, Bert's sister felt compelled to write to the Air Ministry. Noting that they had heard nothing since the letter of April the previous year, she ended by saying: "I should be pleased if you would look into this matter as soon as possible, as my mother is becoming anxious as to where her boy's remains actually lie."

Just over a week later, Bert's mother received a reply. It was only at this time that she, and the families of Bert's crewmates, may have learned something of the traumatic end of their loved ones. "Information is now received that your son and 2 of his aircrew companions, Pilot Officer Lakin and Sergeant Burrell, are laid to rest in Graves 5 and 6 in Plot I, Row A of Rheinberg British Military Cemetery". The letter ended by saying: "It is to be regretted that it has been found impossible to determine their individual identities, and the 2 graves have been registered collectively in their names."

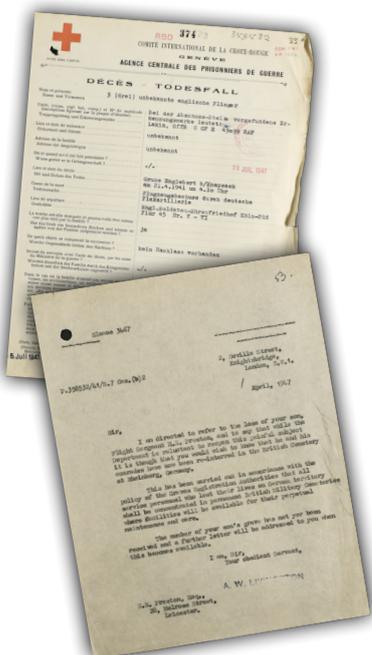
Whether Bert's family ever got to visit his grave is unknown. What we do know, however, is that when the CWGC set about compiling personal inscriptions for the headstones of the war

dead, Bert's mother was given the chance to send a final message to her son. She chose the words:

**THEY NEVER DIE
WHO LIVE IN THE HEARTS
OF THOSE THEY LEAVE BEHIND.
MOTHER.**



Top: Bert Preston's CWGC headstone. Courtesy of Dom Howard. Bottom: Photograph of the temporary cross and grave marker sent to the families of the crew. Courtesy of The National Archives.



Documents from the Red Cross (above) detailing the circumstances of the crash, and the Air Ministry (below) writing to Bert's mother to inform her of his removal to the British cemetery at Rheinberg. © Courtesy of The National Archives.