

I would like to thank Mike Wainwright for the use of most of the information regarding Ronald Houseman - <http://www.members.lycos.co.uk/mwainw4898/>



Sergeant Ronald Houseman was an Air Gunner with 44 Squadron, part of No 5 Group based at Dunholm Lodge in Lincolnshire.

His aircraft on the night of his fated mission was a Lancaster Mark I number ME699-KE-T



Lancaster Mark I

Ronald was one of a crew of 8 who took off at 23.00 hours from Dunholm Lodge on the night of the 4th July 1944 in Lancaster Mark I , Serial Number ME699, Squadron Designation KM-T on a mission to bomb St Leu d'Esserent in France

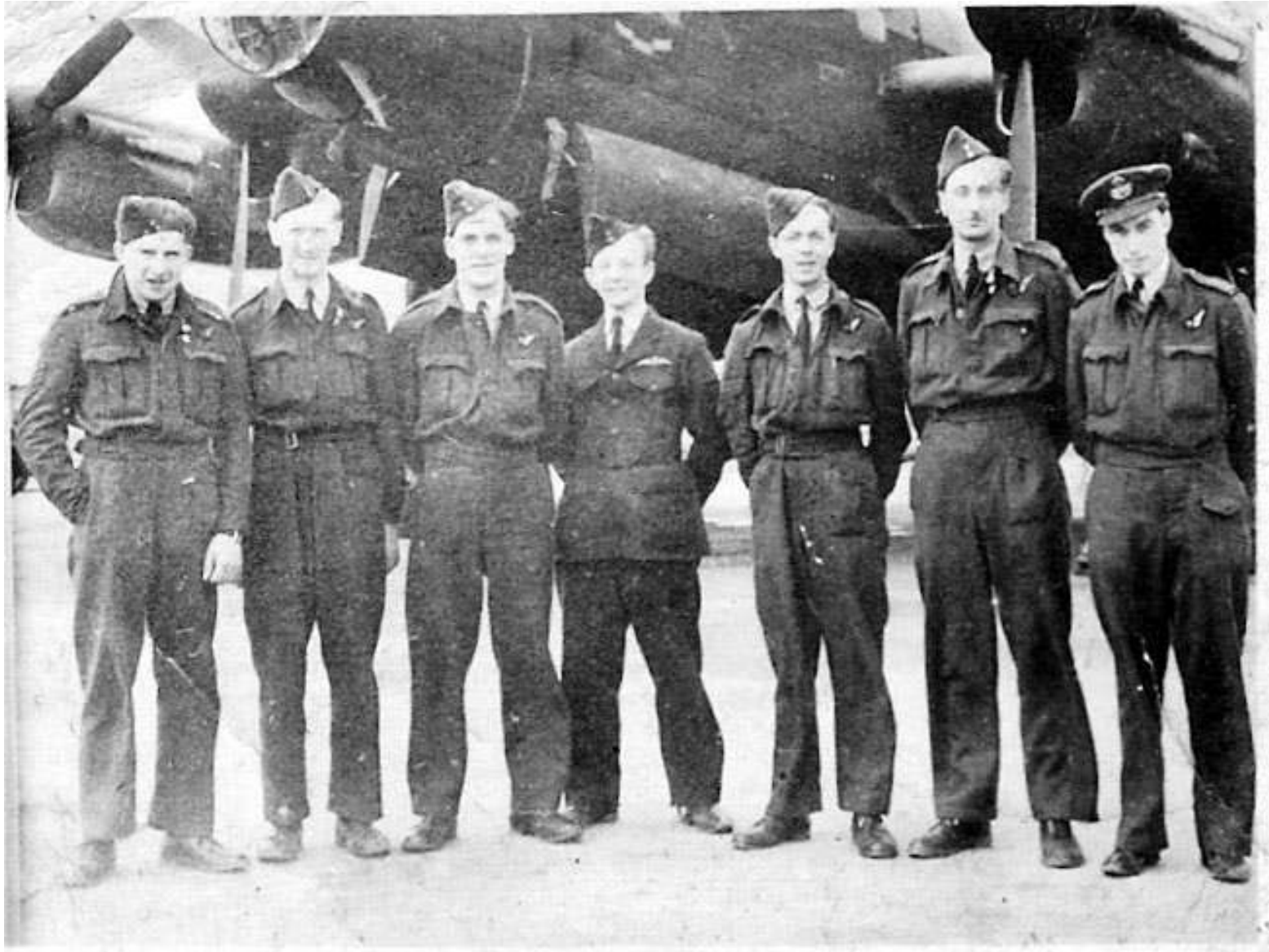
The crew consisted of:

Navigator (2) - FO Harold Braathen, RCAF ( killed )  
Rear Gunner - Sgt Ronald Houseman (Killed)  
Wireless Operator - Sgt Thomas Leslie Jackson (Killed)  
Mid Upper Gunner - Sgt William Wilson Rennie, RCAF (Killed)  
Flight Engineer \_Sgt William Robinson (Evaded capture)  
Bomb Aimer - F Sgt John Edgar Wainwright (Evaded capture)  
Navigator (1) - FO Frank Edward Wareham (Killed)  
Pilot - PO William Archibald Young, RAAF (Killed)

A normal crew size was 7 but on this occasion 2 navigators were on board , Harold Braathen being the extra navigator on this occasion.

The 'bad luck' for Ronald was that he was only on the aircraft as a replacement for the regular crew rear gunner Sgt Robert Routledge who was taken ill that night.

# Regular crew of Lancaster ME699



Left to right: Flight Engineer Sgt William (Bill) Robinson, Wireless Operator Sgt Thomas (Leslie) Jackson, Bomb Aimer F Sgt John (Jack) Wainwright, Pilot Officer William (Bill) Young RAAF, Rear Gunner Sgt Robert (Bob) Routledge ( Not on the ill fated flight ) Mid Upper Gunner Sgt William (Bill) Rennie RCAF and Flying Officer Frank Wareham, Navigator (1)



Navigator (2) - Flying Officer Harold Braathen, RCAF



Rear Gunner - Sgt Ronald Houseman

## Raid on St Leu d'Esserent 4th/5th July 1944

Steve Darlow describes the mission that night in some detail in chapter 10 of his excellent book on the battle against the V1 menace, "Sledgehammers for Tintacks". The raid on the V1 storage and assembly areas in the caves at St Leu d'Esserent on the 4th/5th of July 1944 was the first of several as the RAF attempted to stem the attacks on southern England by the V1 rocket, or Doodlebug as it became known. The details that follow are taken from that book, published by Grub Street.

The Allies had been aware of the potential threat from V1 flying bombs at England since early 1944 and Operation Crossbow was the RAF's mission to counter the threat. By the end of June 1944 the Germans

were launching over 200 of the bombs a day at southern England from various sites scattered across northern France. The RAF carried out many raids on specific launch sites but it became clear that there must be a central assembly and storage area where the bombs were coming from.

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) submitted a report suggesting that the natural limestone caves in St Leu d'Esserent, just north of Paris were being used for this in March 1944, but it wasn't until June that further intelligence pointed to the site and the caves, which had previously been used for growing mushrooms, were targeted.

On the 29th June the Germans launched the 2,000th V1 at England in what was a dangerous campaign to try to wear down the morale of the British population for the continuing fight against the Nazi's.

The first raids on the caves at St Leu d'Esserent were by American daylight forces in late June. These caused minimal damage but further intelligence gleaned in intercepted communications confirmed that the site was a major base for V1's and the site was set as a target for a major raid by the RAF's 5 Group on the night of the 4th/5th July. The diary section at the RAF Bomber Command History site records that 246 aircraft made the main attack, with 19 aircraft from 617 Squadron making a separate initial sortie on the target with specialist bombs.

With clear skies and bright moonlight forecast the raid was planned to provide maximum deception for the main force with diversionary raids on railway junctions at Villeneuve and Orleans in an attempt to draw off the night fighter force. The raid proper on the caves at St Leu d'Esserent was led by the famous Dambusters, 617 Squadron, who would attack with 12,000lb "Tallboy" bombs to try to collapse the caves followed immediately by the main force to bomb the area with 1,000lb bombs.

At 01:30 Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire leading 617 Squadron in a Mustang marked the target for the rest of the squadron. 11 Tallboys were dropped with the remainder of the squadron unable to site the target accurately due to smoke, then the rest of the force attacked almost immediately afterwards.

Thirteen aircraft failed to return from the mission (5.3% - above average losses even then), one of them being Ronald's 44 Squadron Lancaster ,ME699- KM-T. Of the losses that night Bomber Command put eight down to fighters, two to flak and one to flak and fighters. The remaining two were lost to unknown causes. In all seventy-seven men died in the raid with eight more taken as POW's. Nine men evaded capture.

Fourteen more Lancasters were lost in the diversionary raids on Villeneuve and Orleans and seventeen German aircraft were shot down in return on that night.

The regular rear gunner for the crew, Bob Routledge, should have flown that night but was taken ill at the last minute was sent to hospital after a pre-flight medical check and replaced by Ronald Houseman for whom it was also a first mission.

It is believed that ME699- KM-T was the fifth Lancaster downed by German night fighters on the raid on St Leu d'Esserent when it was shot down by a ME 110 night-fighter over Beauvais. The German night fighter claim for KM-T states the time of the kill as 01:49 on the 5th of July 1944, and names the pilot of the aircraft as Unteroffizier Gunter Schlomberg. Schlomberg was with 3./NJG3, a night-fighter unit based in Vechta in northern Germany. German controllers had directed the night-fighters to the channel on detecting the raid coming in and the fighters followed the bomber stream across France and towards their target. At some point after the St Leu bombers attacked their target and turned for home Schlomberg attacked KM-T while it was flying at 2,500m above Beauvais. German records show that Unteroffizier Gunter Schlomberg was killed and Unteroffizier Otto Wagner was wounded when their aircraft crashed near Cruxhaven. near Hamburg, on 11th August 1944. The cause of the crash is not known. Their aircraft when they crashed was Bf110 G-4, D5 + LL, works number 140339.

With ME699 fatally hit by Schlomberg's night fighter shortly after dropping its load of 1,000lb bombs on target, the pilot, PO Bill Young ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft. The hatch at the front of the Lancaster was right below the bomb aimer's position and on such an order the bomb aimers job was to open the hatch and get the hell out, making space for the rest of the crew.

John Wainwright was first out, followed by the flight engineer Sergeant Bill Robinson before the plane plunged to the ground and exploded, killing the other six men on board. The Aircraft came down in a small hamlet called Laversines a couple of kilometres East of Beauvais