



SERGEANT (PILOT) GERALD PATRICK McLOUGHLIN

SERGEANT ERNEST MARROWS

FLIGHT SERGEANT JACK RUSSELL

11TH JUNE 1940

**PARISHIONER GERALD McLOUGHLIN LIVED AT 16 THE
VALE WOODFORD GREEN.**

**THIS CREW WERE BOMBING BRIDGES NEAR VERNON IN
FRANCE, TRYING TO DELAY THE GERMAN ADVANCE ON
PARIS.**

**THEY DIED TOGETHER WHEN THEIR AIRCRAFT CRASHED
IN FLAMES ON THE RAILWAY LINE NEAR ST PIERRE-
D'AUTILS.**

80 YEARS ON – WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.





McLOUGHLIN, GERALD PATRICK	
Rank:	Sergeant (Pilot)
Service Number:	580205
Date of Death:	11/06/1940
Age:	26
Regiment/Service:	Royal Air Force 226 Squadron
Decorations:	None
Grave Reference:	Collective Grave
CWGC Cemetery:	ST PIERRE-D'AUTILS COMMUNAL CEMETERY
Local Memorial:	None Known

Gerald was unusual among the McLoughlin children in that he was born in Brighton on 13th March 1914. His siblings Arthur Cecil and Joan on the other hand appear in British consular birth records for China.

Their father Arthur hailed from Ipswich where his father had settled from Ireland. Being a Shipping Agent, Arthur spent some years in China, and it was the Tientsin District between 1906 and 1911 that he married Prudence Patricia Gillard, and where their first child Arthur Cecil was born on 19th October 1911. Prudence had grown up in Kent, and interestingly her brother also appeared to be working in Peking during the 1920s.

In those days travel to China was quite an undertaking, one route involving a liner to New York, a cross country trip to the west coast, and a further voyage from there.

On 15th August 1914 when Gerald was barely five months old the family undertook just such a trip, sailing on the SS St Louis from Liverpool for New York where they were processed by Immigration on 22nd August. Their destination is shown as Tongshan.

We know Gerald spent his early years out there, but the records show him aged 9 returning to Southampton on the RMS Orbita on 13th May 1924 with his siblings and mother who gave the address of 95 Talbot Road, Bayswater. Presumably this return was to further Gerald's education. The family took further trips to China, but Gerald's name does not appear on the manifests. Unfortunately, no other details of his personal history have emerged.

The shipping records and Electoral Rolls tell us that by 1925 the family home had moved to 42 Highgate Hill in Islington. However the 1933 Kelly's Directory for Woodford contains just two entries for the newly built estate at Salway Hill, and one of those reveals the resident of 16 The Vale to be Mr Arthur McLoughlin. The 1939 Electoral Roll confirms he, Prudence, Arthur Cecil and Gerald were all registered there, but the two boys were listed as absent voters. Bearing in mind Gerald was an active pilot in September 1939, he was away in the Royal Air Force by this time. The 1939 Register confirms that Arthur Cecil was also a member of the RAF, serving with 83 Wing.

226 was a Fairy Battle Bomber Squadron which mobilised and flew sixteen aircraft from RAF Abingdon to Rheims-Champagne during the afternoon of Saturday 2nd September 1940. With others, they made up the RAF Advanced Air Striking Force, Though Gerald is listed among the Squadron personnel, he is not shown as flying an aircraft with this initial deployment. His first entry in the surviving Squadron records occurs on 8th March 1940 when he, Pilot Officer Waddington and Sergeant Hoyle returned to the UK from France to undertake training in the spraying of poison gas.

The Squadron had settled into a routine of training and reconnaissance, with little sight of the enemy, but that changed dramatically on 10th May 1940 when Germany invaded the Low Countries en route to France. The airfield was subjected to bombing attack but sustained no casualties or damage to aircraft. Their first offensive bombing sorties also took place, commencing frantic efforts to halt the rapid German advance and protect Paris. The mission involved four aircraft led by Flight Lieutenant Brian Kerridge and included Gerald McLoughlin. Taking off shortly after 5pm, they found a column of 30-40 German vehicles south west of Luxembourg and began dive bombing at 6.20pm amid a hail of ground fire. Kerridge was shot down in flames, Flying Officer Doug Cameron was also brought down, Sergeant Hubert Barrow escaped with a bullet through his left leg, while Gerald emerged unscathed, having swooped low and bombed the convoy as his gunner Jack Russell strafed troop concentrations with his machine gun.

It would quickly become clear that the Fairy Battle was greatly outclassed by both Luftwaffe fighter aircraft, and ground based anti-aircraft fire. Losses mounted at an unsustainable rate, so all the Battle squadrons were soon restricted to night time

operations, save for dire necessity. "Dire necessity" meant that daylight flying was soon ordered once more.

On 15th May there was a dogfight over the airfield, and anti aircraft fire downed two German aircraft. One German pilot was captured on landing by parachute, and handed over to the French. But the situation was so precarious that 226 Squadron was hastily evacuated to Faux Villecerf on 16th May, when they had just two serviceable aircraft left.

Surviving records show that during May/June 1940, Gerald also flew the following sorties:

20th May - Up at 1.30am. 4 bombs dropped on a large building in town at 2.10am, Gunner fired half a pan of ammunition. No opposition from the ground. Landed 2.50am.

22nd May - Up late evening, but in cloud and rain failed to find a target. Engaged by French searchlights which doused on being given downward recognition signal. Landed 1.30am.

23rd May - Up initially at 6.52pm, but landed again at Auxerre.

24th May - Up again 1.30am, dropping four bombs on the railway line west of Sedan with light anti aircraft munitions bursting to the rear of the aircraft. "Searchlight activity, accurate, but went out when rear gunner fired down beam." Landed 3.35am.

26th May - Up at 12.20am into deteriorating weather, but returned with a petrol leak before reaching target area. Landed 3.00am.

28th May - Up at 12.25pm. Flying in cloud and rain. Dropped sixteen 40lb bombs on German lorry convoy believed north east of Albert, on the Doullens road. Vehicles machine gunned from 1,500ft. Gunner reports target soon obscured by smoke. Landed 2.40pm.

1st June - Up at 1.32am. Four bombs dropped on enemy target area. Ground obscured but thought to be over a town. No anti aircraft or searchlight opposition. Landed 3.45am.

On 11th June, days after the evacuation of Dunkirk, Gerald and his two crewmen Sergeant Ernest Marrows (Observer) and Temporary Sergeant Jack Russell (Wireless Operator/Air Gunner) climbed into Battle P6598 and left Faux Villecerf in order to bomb bridges near Vernon. It was a final last hope attempt to hinder the German onslaught. To use air force terminology, Gerald and the others were subsequently classed as "FTR." Like many others before, they had failed to return and nothing more was seen or heard of them.

The situation for 226 Squadron quickly turned into a rout. On 14th June while located at Artins they were told during the late evening to move immediately to Rennes. Serviceable aircraft would be flown to safety in England, those left behind were

destroyed, with large amounts of equipment and all the records lost. Men began leaving in assorted motor transports during the early hours of 15th, but were later ordered almost non-stop to the Brittany coast, where they were evacuated by sea from Brest to Plymouth at 8.35pm on 16th.

The squadron was declared non-operational, and had to be rebuilt at RAF Sydenham in Northern Ireland. There an Air Ministry enquiry about Gerald was answered perhaps rather bluntly - they could not help, because nobody there now had been around in France, and all the records had been lost when the Squadron was evacuated. Mr McLoughlin was initially informed that his son was missing, revised early in 1941 to a presumption that he had been killed. That was how it remained for many years, VE day in 1945 came and went, but events would then take a more hopeful turn.

The RAF had established a special section, the Missing Research and Enquiry Service, whose role was to discover the fate of aircrew who were missing in action over Europe and beyond. On 31st January 1946 Flying Officer C. W. Dufresne visited a M. Poulin who lived in the village of St Pierre-d'Autils next to the River Seine, about three miles north west of Vernon, and some 25 miles south east of Rouen.

M. Poulin explained that at about midnight on 12th June 1940, an aircraft had crashed in flames on the nearby railway line, and burned out with the crew inside. Initially the remains were buried next to the crash site. F/O Dufresne recorded that M. Poulin was a sculptor and states he has knowledge of anatomy to know "there were three bodies even though they were badly carbonised." They were later reburied in the local communal cemetery near the first world war memorial. The report also states that the grave was very well kept with a cross bearing the words "Ici reposent 3 aviateurs Anglais"; on top of the cross was a steel helmet taken from the plane wreck.

Being on a railway line, all the wreckage had been rapidly cleared by the Germans after their occupation, but not before M. Poulin had "liberated" some bits and pieces from the wreck, including machine guns for the Resistance, and a small metal manufacturing inspection plate. Did he still have that? – no unfortunately not; but he direct F/O Dufresne to the town of Vernon where it was on display in the local museum along with more recovered items including a flare pistol. You can almost visualise the eyes of the Investigating Officer opening a little wider on hearing those words. This little plate and flare pistol which F/O Dufresne sent back to London both displayed serial numbers. With this talk of three airmen, the aircraft must have been either a Blenheim or a Battle.



A few months later in June, a letter was received at the BBC in London from M. Eugene May who also lived in that same village. He recounted that since 1940 he had been tending the grave of three RAF men whose aircraft had crashed, and under the direction of the Germans it was he who transferred the airmen to the churchyard on 17th April 1940 with the help of a grave digger. Since the liberation he had been patiently waiting to speak with the British, but appeared unaware of the visit in January. He was increasingly troubled that families may not know what had happened to their sons, and wondered if the BBC could help? They forwarded the letter to the RAF.

Further correspondence, this time from the Ministry of Supply dated 21st October 1946, confirmed the inspection plate had been fitted "to the centre section front spar of the centre section built into Fairy Battle P6598", just behind where Gerald would have been sitting. The Air Ministry could now account for the missing Gerald McLoughlin and his two crewmen.

The RAF paid another visit to the grave on 13th December 1946 when it was formally opened under the direction of Captain Oxley Boyle of the Army Graves Service, while witnessed by Flying Officer R.W. Rennie of 1 Missing Research and Enquiry Unit. The contents appeared to be various incomplete skeletal remains which showed signs of burning, some scraps of clothing, parachute harness and two ten packets of Woodbine cigarettes. Nothing they saw added to what was already known, so the grave was closed once more and a report compiled. In due course the Imperial War Graves Commission were informed, and assumed responsibility for the plot.

Arthur McLoughlin was advised of these developments in February 1947, but the news caused great distress to Prudence who was in poor health. She could not be satisfied until she had seen the grave, but they could not afford to travel independently, so would need to go as part of an organised group. Other matters

had also irritated Arthur, not least that he had received none of his sons effects, due of course to the hurried evacuation from France. This tumultuous situation also led to questions surrounding the date his son had died. Was it 11th (RAF) or 12th (French locals)? The daily records had long gone, and surviving reports concerning that period had often been made hurriedly or retrospectively from memory. In addition a written error had at one time identified the aircraft as L6598 - a Blenheim which was found to be still flying after the crash date.

While gratified that Gerald had been found, on 27th February 1947 Mr McLoughlin went to the Air Ministry Casualty Bureau at 73-77 Oxford Street, and made his displeasure known to an Officer who described him as "rather sore about things." In one way it is fortunate that Arthur sought the interview, otherwise the Officers account of their conversation would not exist. Then, in 2019 I could not have read his final handwritten throwaway line "They are RC and he wants to arrange for a priest to bless the grave", and realised Gerald was not just another Woodford casualty, but a member of this parish. A crucifix remains on his grave to this day.

Arthur McLoughlin would die at Oldchurch Road Romford during 1951. Prudence then moved to Harrow joining her daughter Joan, who had married Richard Hicks in 1937, and thus the family link to Woodford was severed. Prudence died in 1957, Joan in 2001 and finally Arthur Cecil in 2002.

The manufacturers plate survives in the official crash file at the National Archives.

Today, I understand local belief in France holds that Gerald was shot down by BF109 fighters from Jagdgeschwader 3 (JG 3), which claimed many British aircraft during the Battle of France. If correct, then this raises the possibility that Gerald was shot down during daylight rather than at midnight as the RAF were told after the war. In the absence of RAF records, this contradiction will remain unresolved.

Back in 1940, official RAF photographer Mr S.A. Devon captured a group of non-commissioned aircrew belonging to 226 Squadron at Faux Villecerf airfield after their hasty evacuation during 16th May. There are just two pilots among them; the one sitting first left and the younger one looking down fourth from the right at the back. I wonder, could that young Sergeant with the double winged badge over there be Gerald? Frustratingly, at the time of writing it is not possible to confirm that, even with help from Air Historical Branch at RAF Northolt, and RAF Cranwell.



(Acknowledgement: Imperial War Museum C1700)

I can say that on 17th May 1940 two pilots, Gerald and Pilot Officer David Crooks were flown to Amiens by their flight commander F/Lt Bob Bungey in that Battle shown above (L5468), where they collected two replacement aircraft.

Sadly, the official records also contain one final discrepancy of which Arthur McLoughlin was most likely unaware. The Commonwealth War Grave Commission headstone shows Gerald to be 19 years old. But he was born in 1914, and by June 1940 would have been 26. I have spoken with the CWGC and believe I can prove the correct age by forwarding various documents, which will enable a correction to be made. This would be a very small courtesy to a former parishioner and Woodford casualty, whose story it has been fascinating to unravel 80 years after he last took to the air.



(Acknowledgement: Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

"RIP. Some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England - dad, mum, Cecil, Joan"