

19440911-20190911 COMMEMORATION CRASH HALIFAX GIERLE

Day on day 75 years ago, a British bomber of the Handley-Page type Halifax III crashed in the fields located in the vicinity of the Goorheide in Gierle. Following is the complete story of the event with many thanks to Luc Cox and Luchtvaartgeschiedenis :

"On September 11th 1944, the Royal Air Force launched an attack on the synthetic oil factory in Gelsenkirchen. Remarkably, this mission was flown during the day, as the RAF usually bombarded at night. The Allied air superiority was so strong that the Halifaxes and the Lancasters dared to show themselves over Germany during the day. The flak over the target that day was the heaviest seen by many experienced crews. LK E flown by Douglas Wood received a direct flak burst hit on their port wing just as they released their bombs. The bomber went into an immediate sharp roll and dive to port. After losing about 4000 ft the pilot pulled it out of the dive. The pilot was struggling to control the aircraft because it had lost the port wing tip, port aileron and the port outer engine has fallen off. The plane could only be flown with one engine. The pilot Wood had to use all his strength and agility to keep the Bomber slightly controllable. In an extreme effort, he tried to steer his Halifax as far as possible to the West. The crew knew that Allied ground troops were on the Albert Canal in Belgium. When crossing the Albert canal the pilots may have been in the vicinity of Turnhout which already was a free area, but they were already so low that the bomber did not go much further. Above Gierle the pilot gave its crew command to use the parachute. He himself remained dutifully as long as possible at the commands and bailed out at the very last minute. He came down to a mere two hundred meters from the crash site of his plane, behind the farm of L. Vervoort at the Lilse Baan. Wood was injured, but had great luck. He was so low when he jumped out of the plane, that his parachute had not got the time to open, but luckily his parachute was stuck in the branches of a tree. And then something very special happened to this crew. With the exception of Archer, the tail-gunner who had the misfortune to land with his parachute right next to a truck with German soldiers and was captured, all the other crew members were taken in the hands of the resistance and escaped from being captured by the Germans. The pilot Wood hung in that tree and the youthful Resistance man Boni Mellaerts was already there. There was no time to lose. Boni loosened Woods parachute harness and took him towards village. The six aviators found shelter from several resistance groups and fought on their side for the next two weeks until the liberators finally penetrated into Gierle on September 24th.

Thanks to Paul & Boni Mellaerts for the honour and the invitation to attend this commemoration. Also sincere thanks to Geoffrey Wood, son of the Halifax pilot, for sharing the photographs he gathered over the years regarding his father.

Thanks also to Luchtvaartgeschiedenis and Luc Cox for the use of their historically correct data regarding the crash in the village of Gierle.

(Translation in English by Geoff Wood and Jef Pets)