'The Most Honourable Project'

Christian Koenig reveals some of the details surrounding the recent recovery of Short Stirling Mk.III BK716 from the depths of Lake Markermeer in the Netherlands...

On December 22, 2008, the Dutch lifeboat *Frans Verkade* slipped into the greenish-brown waters of Lake Markermeer from her moorings at Marken in the central Netherlands. Scrambled to assist a vessel in trouble between the nearby Het Paard van Marken lighthouse and Almere just to the east, the volunteers went about their duties. With their task completed, the crew pulled the anchor to head for home – but it took a while for the Markermeer's sediment to release it. When it was finally hauled up, an unidentifiable object was hanging from it. Taking it back to base and realising it was most likely from an aeroplane, the crew approached the Aircraft Recovery Group 1940-1945 (ARG) – a non-governmental organisation based at Fort Veldhuis near Heemskerk. Before long it was discovered that the object was in fact an electric motor from the landing gear of a Short Stirling...



BELOW **The crew: (from left) Sgts Ronald Kennedy and Leonard Richard James Shrubsall, Fg Offs John Michael Campbell, John Frederick Harris, and Harry Gregory Farrington, along with Flt Sgt John Francis James McCaw and Sgt Charles Armstrong Bell** MUNICIPALITY OF ALMERE





ABOVE
Underappreciated... but not forgotten: Often overlooked when compared to the likes of the Lancaster or Halifax, the Short Stirling played a major role in Bomber Command's campaign against Germany, flying some 14,500 sorties, and dropping 27,000 tons of bombs. This study shows a factory-fresh Stirling Mk.III (BF509) in flight KEY COLLECTION

ABOVE LEFT
A Messerschmitt Bf 110 of NJG 1 awaits its next sortie. Leutnant Werner Rapp and Uffz Hans Ortmann were serving with 7./NJG 1 when they shot down BK716 ALL CHRISTIAN KOENIG UNLESS STATED

Over the following 18 months, volunteer ARG historians surveyed the site in the Markermeer, which at around 13ft deep, was created in the 1950s by a land reclamation project. As a result, the bottom of the lake consists of sand and the remains of peat bog, meaning you can hardly see your hand in front of you when in the water. Despite the difficulties, the ARG located several obvious structural components and metal fragments, along with the armoured head and back plate from the pilot's seat, various instruments, and radio equipment, plus two control columns. Other items included the throttle control box, several .30 cal machine guns and ammunition, along with several cylinder heads from the type's Bristol Hercules radial engines. Heart wrenchingly, the ARG also recovered personal artefacts including the likes of torches, quick-release buckles, and scraps of fabric from the crew's parachutes and oxygen masks. While sifting through the silt, divers even discovered a bent mechanical pencil.

Hunting in the dark

On investigation, one of the recovered fuselage sections exhibited a combination of letters and numbers. With an X-ray confirming the first four characters as 'BK71', there were uncertainties about whether the last was a '0' or a '6'. Realising this was most likely the machine's serial number, known losses showed two possible options – Short Stirling Mk.III BK710/OJ-A of 149 (East India) Squadron, which is known to have been shot down by a German night-fighter, or 218 (Gold Coast) Squadron's BK716/HA-J... thought to have been lost to anti-aircraft fire.

According to RAF records, BK710 left RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk at around 2344hrs on May 25, 1943 for a raid against the German city of Düsseldorf. The crew that night consisted of pilot Sgt Jack Henry Uden, flight engineer Sgt Leslie George Hadden, navigator Fg Off Walter Edwin Lawrence Morse, bomb aimer Fg Off Howard Stephen Winchester and wireless operator/air gunner Sgt Frederick Arthur Williams along with two gunners – Sgts Horace Stephen Scott and Charles John Percival. However, the aircraft was lost without trace.



LEFT **Leutnant Werner Rapp was awarded two engraved silver cups for the 'kills' he claimed on March 30, 1943. The trophy on the right relates to BK716. Note the visible NJG 1 emblem CHRISTIAN KOENIG VIA GUNTHER LAUSER**



RIGHT Following the discovery of what was thought to be Stirling BK710 in Lake Markermeer, the village of Marken unveiled this memorial to the seven crew in 2011. It now includes the names of those lost in BK716 on March 30, 1943

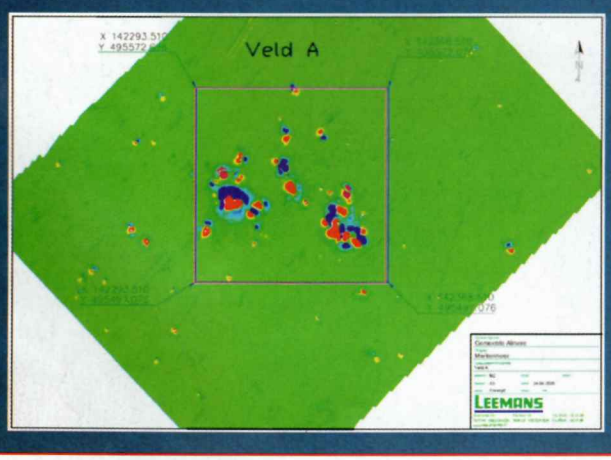


FAR RIGHT An overview of the room dedicated by the Aircraft Recovery Group to the crew of Stirling BK710 at Fort Veldhuis



RIGHT The final resting place of BK716 was located just outside a major shipping channel between the Het Paard van Marken lighthouse and the city of Almere MUNICIPALITY OF ALMERE

BELOW On investigating the wreck site, this side-scan sonar survey revealed a huge debris field spreading across an area of some 5,860 sq yds MUNICIPALITY OF ALMERE



Reviewing claims submitted by Luftwaffe night-fighter pilots in the area around that time indicated BK710 was most likely one of two Stirlings shot down by Uffz Georg Kraft of 12./ Nachtjagdgeschwader 1 (night fighter group – NJG 1) during the early hours of May 26. Piloting a Messerschmitt Bf 110G-4, Kraft took off from Bergen, northern Holland, at 0248hrs and attacked a Stirling 15 miles northwest of Den Helder, before claiming another 15 minutes later approximately 25 miles west of the island of Vlieland. Although the body of Sgt Charles Percival washed ashore several days later, the rest of the crew were never recovered.

Given the nature of night-fighter operations, Kraft's estimated position of these 'kills' could only be taken as approximates. Although his flight path was about 75 miles northwest of the Markermeer, the results of the X-rays made it almost certain that it was BK710.

With surviving relatives





LEFT Having opted for a 'wet' recovery, salvage specialist Leemans utilised this excavator aboard a working platform. Using satellite navigation, the team focused on areas measuring some 807 sq ft, and dredged at three different depths to recover both as much of BK716 as possible, as well as the crew

FAR LEFT Despite being submerged for more than 77 years, the paint on this salvaged propeller looks remarkably intact

informed, a memorial was placed in front of Marken's parish hall, while the ARG dedicated a room to the crew of 'OJ-A' within its museum at Fort Veldhuis.

Pachyderm unearthed

While everything seemed to fit, the discovery of an object underwater soon turned the story on its head. Among the debris, ARG divers detected what appeared to be a wooden elephant – believed to be some sort of talisman. However, this did not fit BK710 but rather BK716.

The name Gold Coast was given to a British colony that would become the independent West African nation of Ghana in 1957. Until then, the country's national flag featured an elephant. Similarly, the RAF's first 'Gold Coast' unit – the indomitable 249 Squadron – also adopted the elephant for its crest.

However, as the second 'Gold Coast' unit, 218 Squadron chose an hour glass with the words 'In time' for its crest – and instead kept the mighty elephant as its mascot.

With today's technology undoubtedly outperforming the standards that existed when a piece of aluminium bearing the serial was initially analysed, the ARG asked for it to be X-rayed again. This resulted in the last digit being properly identified as '6'. So, the story had to be rewritten... it was BK716.

This aircraft was lost on the night of March 29-30, 1943 during a raid against German capital Berlin. However, to fool the Luftwaffe, the bomber stream (comprising 162 Lancasters, 103 Halifaxes and 64 Stirlings) first crossed the North Sea and Denmark before approaching Germany across the Baltic Sea.

scoring 'kills' that night was 7./NJG 1's Lt Werner Rapp and Uffz Hans Ortmann in Bf 110G-4 G9+CR. Taking off from Deelen in Holland at around 0300hrs, Rapp was tasked with patrolling Nachtjagdraum 4 – an area around a funkmeßstellung (radar position) close to Harderwijk in the Netherlands' geographical centre. Christened 'Hase' (rabbit), the site featured two FuSE 65 Würzburg-Riese radars, one FuMG 404 Jagdschloss, one Freya Fahrstuhl, one FuMG 450 Freya A/N & Kuh, two Y-devices and a radar beacon.

Manned by personnel from 14./FlugmeldeLeitKp and III./Luftwaffen-Nachrichten-Regiment 201, operators were able to detect incoming aircraft, before determining their heading, speed, and altitude. Once they had gained a clear picture, they

"Despite the difficulties, the ARG located several obvious structural components and metal fragments"



Further confusion was created with a diversionary strike by 150 Vickers Wellingtons against the cities of Herne and Bochum. While German night fighters claimed six of the Wellingtons, the other bombers reached Berlin without meeting fighter opposition, although several would fall to their guns on their way home. According to RAF Bomber Command losses, 21 aircraft (6% of the attacking force against Berlin) failed to return.

One of the Luftwaffe crews



BOTTOM LEFT One of BK716's Bristol Hercules Mk.VI radial engines had been recovered from Lake Markermeer by the end of the operation's first week

BELOW The wooden elephant that revealed the mix-up between BK710 and BK716. Measuring around 9cm², this was by far one of the most significant items recovered



ABOVE At some 12ft tall, the Stirling's main gear struts (one of which is pictured here with the remains of a tyre [top right] – were designed to give the bomber a higher angle of attack, allowing shorter take-off distances





ABOVE RIGHT A view of the Bristol Hercules' surviving reduction gear. Note the exposed bearings visible in the bevel arrangement at the top of the assembly





RIGHT This pressure indicator – attached to one of the portable 10lit oxygen cylinders the crew would use to move around the aircraft – still has fragments of its original paint visible

TOP MIDDLE RIGHT On much closer inspection, this fuel hose was found to bear an official manufacturing stamp for September 1942

BOTTOM MIDDLE RIGHT The shattered remains of one of the Stirling's cockpit windows

RIGHT One of BK716's wing-mounted fuel tanks shortly after being recovered



would direct the circling fighters to intercept individual targets. The first allocated to Rapp that night was a 57 Squadron Lancaster Mk.I – ED761/DX-Z. Downing the bomber around 0411hrs, Rapp destroyed a Stirling minutes later. This was to be the 12th and final 'kill' claimed by the night-fighters during this raid on the 'Big City'. Official records reveal BK716's crew comprised pilot Fg Off John Frederick Harris, flight engineer Sgt Ronald Kennedy, wireless operator/air gunner Sgt Charles Armstrong Bell, air gunners Fg Off John Michael Campbell, Sgt Leonard Richard James Shrubsall and Flt Sgt John Francis James

the engines to ignite the fuel tanks. Burning fiercely, the Stirling crashed at 0449hrs just southeast of the lighthouse at Marken. Despite the efforts of the Luftwaffe, no survivors or bodies were located. As was common practice across Germany's night-fighter squadrons, Lt Werner Rapp's 'kills' were commemorated with the award of two engraved silver cups.

Looking for options

Any wreck recovery project is hugely expensive. In the Netherlands, city administrations are required to cover up to one third of the cost – something many smaller municipalities would struggle to fund. With the difficult subject of why some crews should be recovered, while others remain at their respective crash sites, the Dutch government recently announced the creation of a national aircraft recovery programme. Formed by the Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations) in 2018, with a budget of around €15 million, this would support up to six salvage operations in 2019-20, and 30 more over the following decade. These would be carried out with the Dutch Ministry of Defense (MoD).

The recovery of BK716 came under the new scheme. With the city of Almere taking over project management, the federal province of Flevoland took care of documentation. Recovery

specialist Leemans Speciaalwerken was contracted to carry out the salvage. Leemans had earned itself a reputation during late summer 2016, with its retrieval of Vickers Wellington Mk.Ic R1322 from the IJsselmeer. On strength with 305 (Ziemi Wielkopolskiej) Squadron and coded SM-F, the aircraft left RAF Syerston, Nottinghamshire, on the night of May 8, 1941 for a strike against Germany's Bremen – only to fall victim to a Bf 110 night-fighter of 4./NJG1 piloted by Uffz Hans Rasper seven miles southwest of Lemmer.

Recovery began in August 2016 when Leemans first constructed a cofferdam around the Wellington's wreck, before pumping out the water to successfully recover significant sections of the type's geodetic structure, parts of the



LEFT One man's scrap is another's gold: Just some of BK716's wreckage reclaimed from Lake Markermeer



engines, the propellers, two .303 Browning machine guns and a quartet of 500lb bombs and the remains of three of the crew, Plt Off Maciej Wojciech Socharzki, Sgt Henryk Franciszek Sikorski and Sgt Stanisław Pisarski.

However, side-scan sonar images of the Stirling's crash site revealed an extensive debris field covering around 5,860 sq yds. For a dry recovery, two cofferdams measuring 197 x 114ft and 98 x 114ft, respectively, would have to be built.

Precision at sea

Leemans suggested a 'wet' recovery. It planned to use a digger on board a 'workship' to carefully excavate upper layers of sediment.

Transferred to a barge, the soil would be transported to another rig to be rinsed and carefully filtered. Given the nature of the wreck, personnel from Leemans and the Koninklijke Luchtmacht (Royal Netherlands Air Force) would permanently monitor the process to ensure items such as ammunition, personal equipment or any remains of the crew were not lost. If remains were located, they would be sent for forensic analysis and, if possible, assigned to a member of the bomber's seven-man crew.

Project manager Lilian W van Mourik explained: "My job has been to ensure that the aircraft and crew are recovered with respect. This is particularly important for the relatives – after all, these men gave their lives for our freedom. In addition to the actual recovery, we want to be able to tell the story of this Short Stirling... the aircraft is a part of Almere's history and our province of Flevoland."

The salvage operation was due to start on March 30, 2020 but was postponed after a thorough risk assessment by the Dutch MoD.

The planned recovery method was deemed too hazardous due to the likelihood of unexpended ammunition in the wreck.

Even though these risks are relatively small, the MoD decided *not* to take them.



LEFT Despite the aircraft's serial being carried on various panels and components, it was often difficult for the team to decipher it – as seen here

With Leemans finally starting work on August 31, 2020, two of the aircraft's wrecked Bristol Hercules engines were quickly retrieved, their serials matching those assigned to BK716.

In the process, several small human bone fragments were also recovered from the wreck.

Lilian said: "Our history is the spiritual legacy for future generations. With the discovery of BK716, we are going to bring out a children's book about the Short Stirling, while an artist will create a monument in honour of the crew. This is the most honourable project I have ever taken part in..." **FP**

"Despite the efforts of the Luftwaffe, no survivors or bodies were located"



LEFT Indispensable expertise: Dutch aviation archaeologist Arie Kappert, a former Koninklijke Luchtmacht major, was instrumental in the recoveries of both R1322 and BK716

BELOW Project manager, Lilian W van Mourik, revealed that BK716's recovery was the most honourable project with which she's been involved