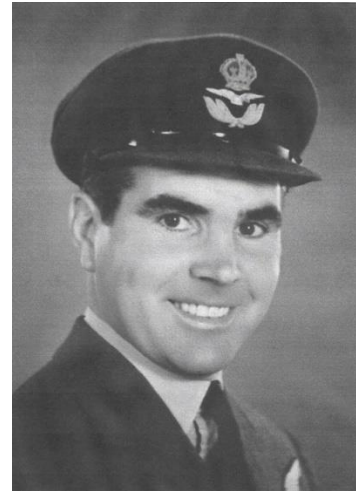


## The Lost Airman of Buchenwald

### Sqn. Ldr. Stanley Booker MBE Legion D'Honneur RAF (Rtd)

In April 2024 Stanley Booker MBE celebrated his 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The story of Stanley's life and particularly his experiences during World War II is nothing short of incredible. Stanley now lives in the peace and tranquillity of Christchurch, and I have the honour of calling him a friend. I can share this amazing story with you through the kind permission of Stanley and his daughter, Pat Vinycomb, who has worked tirelessly helping Stanley research his time in captivity.



Stanley was born in Gillingham, Kent in 1922 and at the age of seventeen joined the RAF. He trained as an Observer and when commissioned, joined 10 Sqn as a navigator, flying Halifax Bombers. During May/June 1944, their missions were to target the railway lines and marshalling yards in France and Germany to impede the resupply of German troops ahead of the D Day landings. On the night of 3rd June 1944, his Halifax MZ 630 was shot down and crashed in flames in St Andre de L'Eure, near Dreux. His pilot and wireless operator were killed, the five other members of the crew escaped by parachute and found refuge with members of the French resistance in Eure.

Stanley was hidden in several farms and a local chateau; he was provided with a civilian suit and a false identity card in the name of "Pierre Le Comte". He and another member of his crew were being routed further down the escape line, when they were betrayed to the Gestapo by a Belgian traitor Jacques Desoubrie.



*Stanley's false identity card*

Stanley was captured on 1<sup>st</sup> July and sustained many brutal interrogations by the SS / Gestapo, but he did not betray the brave members of the resistance who sheltered him. He was interned in Fresnes prison with members of the French Resistance and

captured SOE officers. Stanley was denied prisoner of war status and any contact with the International Red Cross. He was treated as a spy.

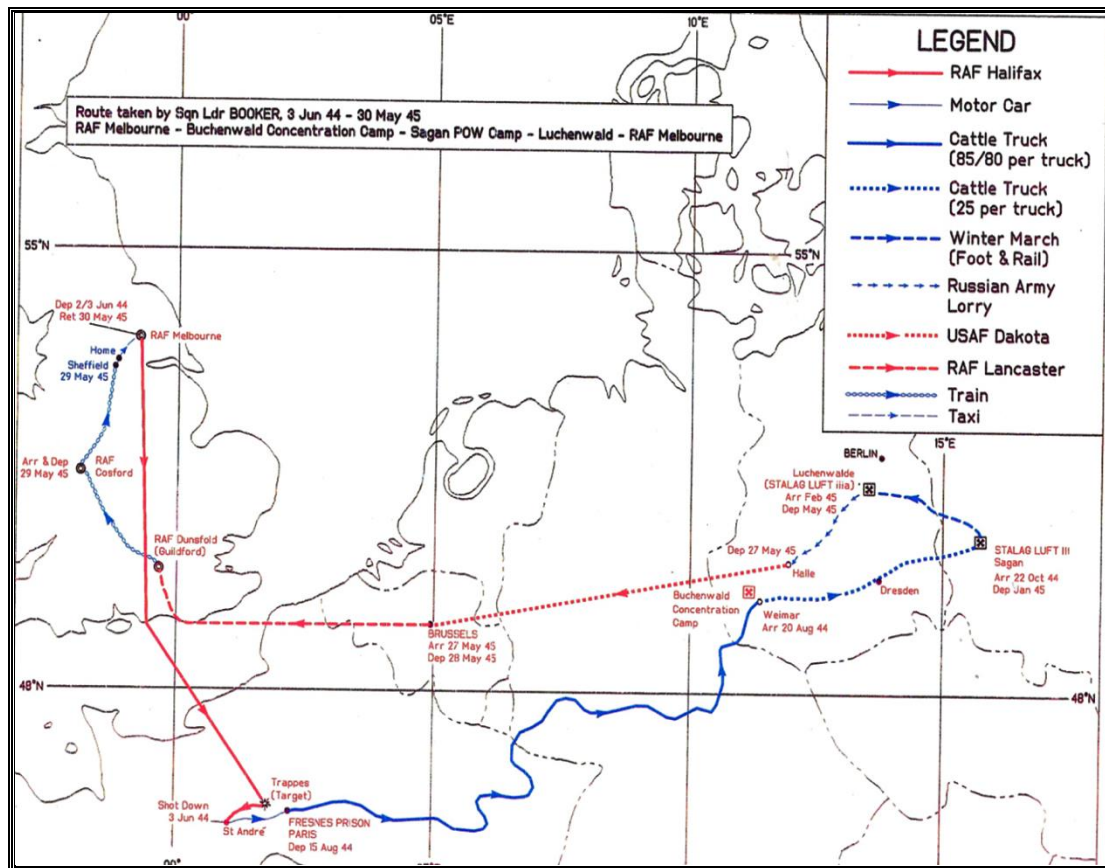
On 15th August, five days before Paris was liberated, all the special inmates of Fresnes were taken to the Gare de L'Est railway station in Paris and packed into filthy cattle trucks. Stanley eventually found that there had been 168 allied airmen imprisoned with him in Fresnes. The frightening and stifling journey took five days; the airmen experienced extreme privation, starvation, and dreadful thirst. Eventually to their despair and bewilderment they found they had arrived at the notorious Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany.

The prisoners were segregated and a small party of aircrew were taken away to a special quarantine area near the crematorium known as the "Little Camp". They were "processed" stripped, shaved and all their clothes and possessions were taken away. They had no shoes and had to sleep on exposed stony ground with no blankets or covering. They experienced atrocities; inhumane treatment; beating and starvation. They were injected with experimental drugs by an SS Doctor and witnessed the worst cruelty imaginable. They were under sentence of death.

Eventually, the Luftwaffe was informed about these airmen and demanded their release. The surviving airmen were transferred in two groups to Stalag Luft 3 in Poland. They were within 2 days of being executed by the SS.

With the approach of the Russian Armies from the East, the POWs were forced to march back into Germany. It was the end of January 1945 with heavy snow and freezing temperatures, conditions were appalling. After a few days, the struggling airmen were taken by train to POW Camps in Germany. Stanley arrived exhausted at Luckenwalde POW camp near Berlin.

Instead of being freed on 22nd April 1945 they became political prisoners of the Soviet Army while they negotiated the release of Soviet prisoners held by the Allies. Finally, Stanley was liberated by the Americans three weeks after VE Day. He was flown back to the UK on 29th May 1945.



*Route Taken by Stanley Booker from 3 June 1944 to 30 May 1945*

Stanley experienced the worst and the best of mankind and remembers the comradeship and steadfastness of his fellow prisoners. The small kindnesses from the tormented and starving inmates incarcerated in Buchenwald Concentration camp who offered a sense of humanity in the depths of despair and helplessness. The bravery of the SOE and allied agents murdered in the crematorium made Stanley determined to seek recognition and justice for these patriotic men.

Stanley went back to flying as a navigator during the Berlin Airlift delivering humanitarian aid to a starving German population. A role reversal which was cathartic and provided insight into the plight of a population which he had previously considered “the enemy”.



*Stanley Booker MBE in 2022*

In 1950 Stanley was recruited to work for British Military Intelligence, initially in Germany. Stanley continued to work in Military Intelligence for the rest of his military career. He was awarded the MBE for his ground-breaking work in intelligence during the Cold War and the French Government awarded him the Legion D'Honneur. Stanley has devoted his retirement to searching for documentary evidence of the betrayal, capture, and detention of the 168 airmen "Lost in Buchenwald". He regularly visited France and Germany and is still in regular contact with the family of the resistance members who helped him when he parachuted into France. Stanley firmly believes that we have to "Remind the Living and Remember the Dead".

*Steve Williams is a former pilot and lifetime aviation enthusiast with a particular interest in the World War 2 airfields of the New Forest and the D-Day landings in Normandy. [nfww2airfields.info](http://nfww2airfields.info)*