

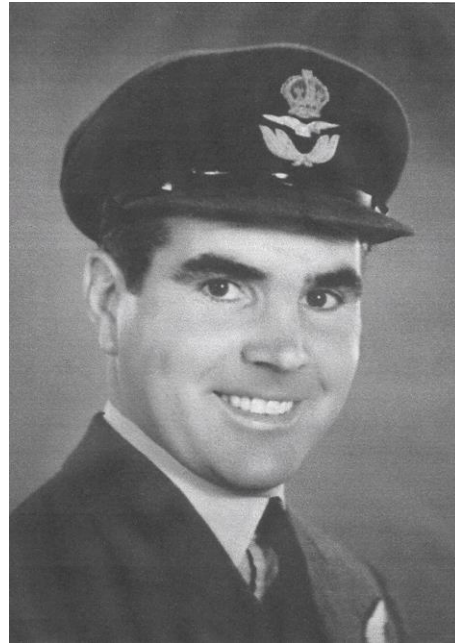


An Extraordinary Air Crew Story

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

Stanley was a navigator in RAF Bomber Command, 10 squadron.

His Halifax was shot down over France on 3rd June 1944. Having been picked up by the resistance, Stanley was betrayed to the Gestapo, interrogated in Paris and survived imprisonment in the notorious Buchenwald Concentration Camp and Stalag Luft 3. He was then held hostage by Russian troops until the end of May 1945. He finally returned home just under twelve months from the day he bailed out of the burning Halifax.



What follows is a synopsis of an extraordinary story about a man and his incredible career in the military and security services, which included his ability to survive against all odds. This is followed by Stanley's own thoughts as he approached his 100th birthday in 2022. Stanley now lives in Christchurch and he celebrated his 101st birthday in April 2023.

Reproduced by kind permission of Stanley Booker MBE and his daughter, Pat Vinycomb.

- Stanley was born in Gillingham, Kent and at the age of 17 joined the RAF as an apprentice. He trained as an Observer in Wales and after his commission, joined RAF 10 Sqn as a navigator flying Halifax Bombers. Their mission to target the railway lines and marshalling yards in France and Germany to impede the resupply of German troops and armaments to the French coast ahead of the D Day landings in May/June 1944.
- On the night of 3rd June 1944 at 1am in the morning, his Halifax MZ 630 was shot down

and crashed in flames in St Andre de L'Eure, near Dreux, in France. His pilot and wireless operator were killed, but the 5 other members of the crew escaped by parachute, and all eventually found refuge with various members of the French resistance in Eure.

- Stanley was hidden by the members of the resistance in several farms and local chateaux; he was provided with a civilian suit and a false identity card in the name of "Pierre Le Comte". Several weeks after D Day he and another member of his crew were being routed further down the escape line towards Paris, when they were betrayed to the Gestapo by a Belgium traitor Jacques Desoubrie.
- Stanley was captured on 1/7/44 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 assembled and under threat of being shot, 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, who had been imprisoned with him in Fresnes. The Allied airmen included RAF crews, USAAF, New Zealand, Australian and Canadian. "Terror Fliegers"
- The frightening and stifling journey took five days; the airmen experienced extreme privation, starvation and dreadful thirst. Several prisoners were killed en-route. 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 RAF, Canadian and US 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, through the assistance of the secret Communist camp underground, the Luftwaffe was informed 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 in Buchenwald by the SS.
- After a few weeks, with approach of the Russian Armies from the East, the POWs were turned out of the prison camp and 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 eventually arrived at Spremberg, where they were split up into three groups to be entrained to other POW Camps in Germany. Stanley and his compatriots arrived exhausted at Luckenwalde POW camp near Berlin and instead of being freed on 22nd April 1945; they became hostages of the Soviet Army.

- They were held as political prisoners whilst the Russians negotiated the release of some Soviet prisoners held by the British and American forces. Finally they were liberated by the Americans – three weeks after VE Day and eventually flown back to the UK on 29th May.
- Back in England they were debriefed by MI9 but no one was interested in the story Stanley had to tell about his “missing year” and the brutality he had experienced. He was denied appropriate medical treatment for the injuries he incurred during interrogation and incarceration by the Gestapo. He was expected to “get on with it” and take some repatriation leave.
- In 1946, Stanley was given permission by the UK government to return to France to search for the graves of his Pilot and Wireless Operator and to thank the members of the resistance who had operated around the village of Illiers L’Eveque in 1944. He eventually found the graves of Flying Officer “Sandy” Murray and Warrant Officer “Taffy” Williams in a deserted village graveyard. Their bodies were formally identified by an RAF pathology team and they were buried by the War Graves Commission in the nearby town of St Andre d’Eure.
- 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 post war for these patriotic men.
- Stanley was a navigator during the Berlin Airlift and involved in delivering humanitarian aid to a starving German population. A role reversal which was cathartic and provided insight into the plight of a population with whom he had considered “the enemy”.
- In 1950 Stanley was recruited to work for British Intelligence in Germany and by coincidence his official chauffeur in Hamburg was an ex Luftwaffe pilot, who had been flying his fighter jet in the same area on the night where Stanley’s Halifax was attacked! Jacks had scored “two hits” on enemy bombers that night!
- The Cold war provided many interesting challenges and “adventures” but the discovery

of George Blake as a Soviet Spy compromised the work of the Military Intelligence mission in Berlin.

- Stanley has devoted his retirement to searching for the truth and he travelled regularly back to France and Germany in his determination to find documentary evidence of his betrayal, capture and detention in Buchenwald. He wanted the British government to recognise that he and the other Allied airmen had been illegally held by the Gestapo, mistreated and denied their rights as Prisoners of War. All the surviving airmen suffered symptoms of physical, emotional and mental trauma until their deaths. Stanley strove to obtain financial compensation and reparations for his fellow prisoners.
- He sought official recognition for the 37 SOE members who were in Buchenwald with him; 31 were murdered by the SS. A memorial is now in place to recognise their bravery and loyalty to Britain.
- In 1965, Stanley was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his specialist work during the Cold war.
- VE Day 2020 Stanley was honoured by a Spitfire Flypast over his home.
- 21st December 2020, Stanley was appointed Chevalier in the Ordre national de la Legion d'Honneur by the President of France.
- In October 2021, the villagers of Illiers l'Eveque in France came together to commemorate their liberation by the Allies in 1944 and to remember the Crew of Stanley's Halifax MZ 630. A plaque to the airmen was unveiled at the War Memorial in the village churchyard. This community event was attended by the Air Attaches of the UK, USA and Canadian Embassies in Paris and enabled the local population to talk about and recognise the role their parents and grandparents had played in the secret resistance networks.
- On Stanley's 100th birthday (2022) a personal letter of congratulations and a bottle of Highgrove champagne from Charles, Prince of Wales, was presented to Stanley by Lt Col Jonny Thompson, Equerry to the now, King Charles 111.
- On 25th April 2023, Stanley celebrated his 101st birthday. An incredible achievement for a man who survived so many wartime and post war challenges.

Stanley's own thoughts as he approached his 100th birthday.

As I approach my 100th birthday, I pause and reflect on the events, experiences and the people who have influenced me during the years that span my long life.

I have experienced the best and worst of mankind; the generosity of a loving wife and family; the comradeship of fellow airmen during combat and imprisonment; the small kindnesses

given by fellow prisoners incarcerated with me in the notorious Buchenwald Concentration camp. The bravery of members of the French resistance who sheltered me after my Halifax Bomber was shot down in June 1944 and my pilot and wireless operator, who were killed as they steadied the burning aircraft, enabling the remaining crew to parachute to safety.

The inspiring leadership of Sqn.Ldr Phil Lamason RNZAF, who motivated 168 captured Allied Airmen to find the inner strength to withstand the horrors and brutality of everyday life in Buchenwald (1944). He was a true hero and role model.

I have been betrayed by two double agents, the Belgium Jean-Jacques Desoubrie, who worked for the Gestapo in Paris (July 1944) and the Cold War Soviet agent George Blake, whose treachery compromised our military intelligence work in Berlin. (1962).

I have known fear, pain and abandonment during Gestapo interrogation and my solitary confinement in Fresnes Prison; this contrasts with my positive experiences during the Berlin Airlift where the Allied Air Forces worked as a coordinated team to supply essential food and humanitarian aid to a starving German population.

The Cold War provided interesting challenges and the Cuban Crisis brought us to the edge of WW3.

In 1965 I was honoured to be awarded my MBE by Her Majesty the Queen and in 2021 the Chevalier de Legion d'Honneur by the Government of France.

My life has been full of contrasts and memories of friends, family and colleagues have sustained me over the years. I have been privileged to live a comfortable retirement where everyday things are valued; good food; clean sheets; warmth; my independence and the peace of my garden.

These days I am supported by an excellent team of Carers and Medical staff who enable me to live in my own home and I am sustained by memories of my late wife, Marjorie whose love and affection provided comfort for 76 years.

Last year (2021) the community of Illiers L'Eveque, in France, held a special commemorative event to remember the Liberation of France; reflect on the historic role of the local resistance families, in sheltering many evading allied airmen and to honour the crew of my Halifax

Bomber MZ630, two members of whom are buried at the nearby cemetery of St Andre d'Eure. My thanks and appreciation goes to M. Jean-Pierre Curato who coordinated the event and brought the local community, French military and representatives from Allied Embassies together in friendship and celebration. This event was an honour and has provided me with a sense of peace.