

The Voice in the Radio

Graham Stubbs

A greasy gray gleam reflecting off the ocean in the distance, announced the pre-dawn sky behind the plane, as it lumbered across the North Sea, returning towards the English coastline. The tail gunner was the only crewmember, who might have been positioned with a clear view of the coming sunrise in the east but his eyes were sightless. Two of the RAF heavy bomber's four engines were disabled, and the pilot and the flight engineer were working desperately to keep the plane in the air. It was the early hours of Tuesday, June 25, 1944, and a little more than two weeks after D-Day; the allies were set to break out of Normandy. The Avro Lancaster, code-named E-B, was returning from a nighttime mission to bomb German Army positions near Les Hayons, in Belgium. Following its bombing run, the plane had encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire, which killed the tail gunner, injured the navigator, and knocked out the two port engines. Now, lagging far behind the rest of the other seven planes in his flight, the pilot, Flying Officer Groblicki, reported, in accented English, to his operations controller "Easy Baker, six thousand feet and still losing altitude, English coast in sight" Once over land in Lincolnshire, they would have less than fifty miles to make it back to Faldingworth aerodrome, their base for the past four months.

The pilot and his crew were all Poles, members of the 300 squadron of the Polish Airforce in Britain. With hundreds of compatriot fliers, they had made their way first to France, after the collapse of Poland in 1939, and then, when the Germans overran France in 1940, to England. The airmen wore the blue uniforms of the RAF, but their badges identified them as being under Polish command. The "300" was one of what were eventually fourteen squadrons of the Polish Airforce in Britain. In 1941, late in the Battle of Britain, Polish flyers had accounted

for ten percent of all the fighter pilots: many of them now flew bombers as part of the allied offensive to retake Europe from the Nazis.

On the Monday evening, the seven-man crew had been ferried out to their aircraft on a flatbed trailer, pulled by a tractor driven by young woman in the uniform of the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force, or WAAF. For the third time in as many days, Flight Sergeant Leon Badowski, the wireless operator, had noticed the two figures standing behind the airfield perimeter fence. An old man, with stubble on his chin had stood propping up a bicycle, and supporting on its saddle, a small boy, whose pale face gazed solemnly at them. Badowski had waved, and after an instant's pause, the little boy had raised his hand and responded.

As the crew had reached their plane, and climbed the steps to board, the boy and his grandfather had waited for the Lancaster's four Rolls Royce Merlin engines to start, watching for the puffs of smoke as the engines roared into life. In the late evening, with the sun setting, they had seen eight of the great aeroplanes take off into the darkening sky; it was midsummer and the night would be short. Robert had lifted his grandson Allen from the saddle, and set him astride the chair cushion, tied with string across his bicycle's cross bar. "Those men are my real heroes." He'd said, "They've left their own country and their families to come and help us beat the Germans." The little boy had nodded knowingly in response. This was not the first time that the Royal Engineers veteran of World War One, had talked about the sacrifices that these aircrews were making every night. Allen had traveled north a few weeks earlier for a stay with his grandparents, away from the risks of bombing in southern England, and it had become a daily ritual for him to come with his granddad to watch the bombers take off at night.

Hoping to make the four-mile journey home before it was pitch dark, Robert had pushed hard on the pedals as they steadily made their way along the country lanes. Until the last second he hadn't been aware of the approaching vehicle, which sped around a corner ahead of them. Under wartime regulations, there were no headlights showing, and Robert had only seen the vehicle as it slewed and plunged into the ditch. The driver of the jeep said later that the setting sun had blinded him. There had been no choice for Robert but to swerve to the opposite side of the road, throwing Allen and himself to the pavement. He had stood up, winded and scared by the near miss, only to see his grandson lying where he had fallen, with blood on his forehead. The little boy had been unconscious when they arrived by ambulance at the General Hospital in Lincoln. The doctors had said it was a severe concussion, and they had wheeled the child on a stretcher to the children's ward.

With the sky becoming lighter and now well inland, the Lancaster's pilot contacted his control tower "Six miles out, 900 feet, still losing altitude, clear me for immediate landing." Nonetheless, it was soon obvious that, do what he might to keep them in the air, they weren't going to make it. Over the intercom he shouted to his crew to prepare for a crash landing; they were just three miles short of the field. On two engines, it was impossible to keep the aircraft level, and the left wing hit the ground first, causing the plane to slew around violently, demolishing the wing and most of the rear of the fuselage. The port engines, hot from the struggle back across the sea, ignited remaining fuel, and the right wing started to burn. The impact killed the bomb aimer and air-gunner outright, and four remaining crewmembers were badly injured and trapped in the cockpit. The young radio operator, knocked unconscious by the crash, was in pain and confused as he started to come around. In his mind he saw a recurring image of their preparation this mission, and he pictured again the two figures behind the fence,

the old man and the little boy with the pale face who seemed to be studying him so intently. Through his headphones, he heard the tower asking, in English, for their position; he was too muddled to be surprised that the radio was still working. In Polish, he muttered over and over, his name, and that the plane was burning. Alerted by a nearby farmer, engines from the civilian fire brigade and from the airfield arrived in time to pull the injured crewmen from the wreckage.

By the time they had been taken to the military wing of the hospital that morning, only two of the airmen were still alive; the pilot and the radioman were both in critical condition with multiple injuries. At ten o'clock, the wireless operator died.

In the children's ward of the same institution, where Robert had waited up though the night, Allen stirred, and started to murmur. The grandfather struggled to make out the words from the little boy, but they made no sense to him. He called to the nurse, and together they watched the boy open his eyes and give a little smile, but neither could tell what he was saying; he would murmur the seemingly nonsense words, which Robert had first heard. When another nurse appeared at a shift change, and heard Allen trying to speak, she looked surprised. "Your little boy speaks Polish?" she asked. "No, there's no way, he has no friends or relatives from there," said Robert. "But yes, I sometimes work on the ward with the Polish airmen, and those words are Polish" she insisted. During the morning, Allen grew stronger, and the foreign words stopped. The next day, when he was released, Allen seemed to be back to normal, and a week later his mother came by train to take him home. He never told anybody about the recurring dream in which he heard the foreign voice.

Following World War 2, the chaos of the Russian occupation of Poland prompted many of the surviving Polish airmen to elect to stay in England, some of them anglicizing their names. After the war, in the public cemetery of the town of Newark, twenty miles from Lincoln, a

special military section was established for the remains of hundreds of Polish airmen who had died in the war flying from British bases. So impressed was Robert with their courage, that he made it known that he wanted to be buried close by the Polish airmen; he knew that he must have seen some of them taking off on missions from which they didn't return alive. Seven years after the war ended, his wishes were carried out.

As a schoolboy, Allen was fascinated by RAF planes, especially the four-engine Lancaster bomber. In his teens, he tinkered at school with radios and he subscribed to a magazine with construction projects, and pages of advertisements for electronic parts and for war-surplus radio equipment, in particular, complete military radios, which he could never afford to buy. The one, for which yearned, was the black metal-cased radio, with a big semicircular dial, described as having been fitted to the world war two Lancaster bombers.

The years passed, and Allen trained for a career in electronics. With the technology as a full time occupation, he lost the urge for radios as a hobby. His work also relocated him to the Lincoln area, and, almost five decades after his wartime visits to his grandparents, Allen had a family of his own and grandchildren. In the window of a shop, which sold old radio parts, he saw, one day, the very same radio, which he'd always wanted as a youth. It had the wonderful slow motion dial, and the magic eye tuning indicator, and the big control knobs, which the wireless operator could handle even with gloves required in the cold of an unheated aeroplane. On a whim, he bought it, complete with a power pack and cables, a headset, and its instruction manual.

For a while the old aircraft radio sat on a shelf, as an object to be admired. Anticipating a weekend when his five-year-old grandson, Andy would be visiting him, Allen took the radio set down to try it out so that he could show it to the young boy. Having studied the manual to make

sure he knew how to hook up the power and the headphones, he set it up with its power pack on a table, and strung a wire through the window for an aerial. After checking and double-checking the connections, he switched on the power. Relieved to see the big dial light up followed by the bright green circle of the tuning indicator he put on the headset and set the band selector for the broadcast waveband. He was disappointed that all he could hear was a mixture of static and a loud droning sound; he tried changing the waveband selector, but he heard the same noise on all the bands. Fiddling with the radio's other controls didn't help. He was about to give up, when it sunk in that what he was hearing was something he's heard long before. A chill went down his spine, as he realized that the sound was the muffled roar of the Merlin engines of a World War 2 bomber, just like he'd heard as a child when he went with his granddad to watch the bombers taking off. He felt his head spinning, when through the static and over the engine roar, he heard a man speaking. In his dreams, as a child, he'd heard that same voice saying over and over again the foreign words, and the same foreign sounding name, "Leon Badowski". From his mother, he knew about the accident, which happened shortly after his fifth birthday. She'd said that he'd awoken mumbling words in a foreign language, and they thought it was Polish. As he listened to the radio he knew, with absolute certainty, although he couldn't explain how it was happening, that it was the same voice and the same words.

Allen remembered the interest that his grandfather, took in the Polish airmen, and that Robert was buried close to the Polish war graves. When the grandson Andy came to visit, Allen drove to Newark and first took him with him to a flower shop where he made two purchases. It was a bright sunny day when, with a package under one arm, and with the little boy's hand in his, Allen walked to the cemetery. At his grandfather's headstone, he took a vase with daffodils from his package, and placing them within the granite rectangle, he paused to remember the old

man who had carried him, as a little boy, on the bicycle crossbar. Then he looked across at the area, fifty yards away, set apart and bounded by a carefully manicured hedge, where hundreds of white marble headstones, were arranged in rows with military precision. Taking the child's hand again, he walked over to the military graves, and starting at one corner, they walked together up and down the rows. It took a long while, but there at last, Allen saw what he was looking for. FLT/SGT LEON BADOWSKI, died JUNE 25, 1944. From his package he took a second vase with flowers, placed it next to the head stone and stood back.

They were still at the gravesite when the little boy first noticed the sound. "Granddad, granddad, what's that noise, granddad?" asked Andy. It seemed to Allen that a shadow passed over them for an instant, as though a bird had flown overhead; the air seemed, for a minute, to be cooler. Then Allen, too, heard the distinctive rumbling sound of the four piston engines of a wartime bomber. While they stood there listening, the sound grew more distant, and finally faded completely away.

As grandfather and grandson turned and walked away from the gravesite, they didn't notice the elderly man bending over the grave markers in the far corner of the military section. Mr. Green was how the man's neighbors knew him now; former Flying Officer Groblicki had also noticed the fleeting shadow and pulled his coat tighter around himself, as he felt the momentary chill. He, too, recognized the familiar sound of the old plane. He looked at the calendar on his watch, as he had already done at least a dozen times that day. With the painful mixed emotions of the sole survivor of a tragedy, he reflected that it was fifty years to the day since the crash, which had killed all six of his fellow crewmen.

Returning home, Allen switched on the old radio once again, and this time as it warmed up, the set sprang to life with English and European stations on the broadcast band, and the dots and dashes of Morse code on the short wave bands. He put the headphones over his grandson's ears, and watched with satisfaction as the boy listened intently and turned the dials. And then, as the boy turned his head towards him, he saw, for an instant, not his grandson's face, but the smiling face of a young Polish airman at the controls of a radio, just like this one, half a century before.