



Flying Officer Léonard Revilliod, RAFVR and CzRAF 100.

With 2018 being not only the 100th anniversary of the formation of the RAF, but also the 100th anniversary of the founding of the state of Czechoslovakia, on 28 October 1918, and also the 100th anniversary of the Czechoslovak Air Force, the Free Czechoslovak Air Force Associates Ltd, an organisation dedicated to remember the Czechoslovak men and women who served in the RAF during WW2, decided to commemorate these anniversaries in our own special way - Project CzRAF 100.

In the United Kingdom, are to be found the graves of 240 Czechoslovak RAF airmen and 1 Czechoslovak WAAF who lost their lives during their WW2 RAF service, in 79 cemeteries located around the country. A further 149 Czechoslovak airmen, who have no known grave, are commemorated at the RAF Memorial at Runnymede.

Our Project CzRAF 100 was that we would commemorate each of these 240 graves by placing a red, white and blue carnation bouquet - the Czech national colours - with a traditional Czech tricolour ribbon at each headstone. To achieve this level of coverage for those 240 graves - this has never been done before in the UK - meant that we would have to reach out to not only to Czech RAF descendants in the UK but also to organisations and local communities where those cemeteries are located. One of the remotest of those cemeteries is the Soroby Burial Ground on the Isle of Tíree where Flying Officer Léonard Revilliod is buried.

So who was Léonard Revilliod?

The name Léonard Revilliod is distinctly not Czech, but Léonard has a unique Czechoslovak connection in that his grandfather was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first President of the newly formed State of Czechoslovakia, and hence why he is included within our project.

Léonard was actually a Swiss citizen, but his mother, Olga Garrigue Masaryk, was the daughter of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who resigned from office, at the age of 85 in 14 December 1935 on the grounds of old age and poor health. Tomáš Masaryk was amongst the first political leaders in Europe to voice concern about the rise to power of Hitler in Germany.

Shortly after her father became President, Olga met the eminent Swiss physician Dr Henri Revilliod, they married and lived in Geneva. Léonard, their second son, was born 26 July 1922 at Montreux, Switzerland, his brother Hubert having been born a year earlier. Both sons were sent to the Collège Calvin a prestigious public school in Geneva for their secondary education, with Hubert commencing his final year when war was declared in September 1939. When Germany invaded France on 10 May 1940, their rapid advance caused concern to Olga, as Czechoslovakia was now a Reich Protectorate. She contacted Philipp Etter, the President of the Swiss Council, the Federal Government of Switzerland, to ensure that her sons would be regarded as Swiss citizens in the event of a German invasion of Switzerland. The President advised her that if Hitler invaded Switzerland, he could not guarantee anything. On the advice of her elder brother, Jan Masaryk, now Foreign Minister for the Czechoslovak Government-in-Exile, in London, Olga quickly left Geneva by train on 19 May 1940 and managed to travel through a chaotic war-torn France to reach England.

Léonard, passed his entrance exams to Edinburgh University where he studied Economics, International Law and Political Science and graduated in June 1942. Now aged 20, he wanted to join the RAF. Being a Swiss citizen he contacted the Swiss Embassy in London regarding this intention. They refused to give him permission on the grounds of Swiss neutrality and advised him that if he did join the RAF and survived the war that he would face charges and be brought to justice if he returned to Switzerland.

Despite this disturbing news, it did not deter Léonard; he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve and initially underwent his basic RAF training. He was selected for pilot training and posted to 26 EFTS [Elementary Flying Training School] at Theale, where he passed his basic flying training course on 23 October 1942. He was then posted to Canada for further training; initially to 33 EFTS at Caronport, completing on 20 March 1943, then to 32 SFTS [Service Flying Training School] at Moose Jaw, graduating on 15 May 1943 and then to 31 GRS [General Reconnaissance School] at Charlottetown completing the training in September 1943. Léonard was then posted to Nassau, Bahamas for operational training, on course 17, with 111 OUT, which he completed on 19 March 1944.

He returned to Britain in the rank of Pilot Officer, and anticipated being posted to 311 Sqn (Czechoslovak) RAF. However he was posted to 1674 HCU [Heavy Conversion Unit] at Longtown, Northern Ireland where he trained to fly four-engined Halifax aircraft. He successfully completed his training on 30 June 1944 and again anticipated a posting to 311 Sqn.

Instead he was posted to 518 Sqn, a RAF meteorological squadron, based at the Isle of Tíree, in western Scotland and equipped with four-engined Halifax Mk V aircraft, of which one of its crew would be a meteorological observer. Their role was to fly reconnaissance flights, usually 8 to 10 hours duration, some 700 miles out into the North Atlantic and north-west to Iceland during which the meteorological observer would take readings, at pre-set locations and altitude; measurements such as temperature and barometric pressure, these readings were vital weather forecasting aids in planning the strategic air offensive over enemy and enemy occupied territory. In June 1944, D-Day – the Allied invasion of Europe – was postponed for 24 hours, as a slight improvement in an incoming weather front, had been observed by a 518 Sqn aircraft.

Léonard's role, in the aircrafts eight man crew, was co-pilot flying these patrols but, in correspondence to his family, it was evident that he was frustrated and deeply disappointed at what he saw as a non-active role. On three separate occasions he requested to be posted to a Czechoslovak RAF squadron where he considered that he could have a more active participation in the Allied war effort. Unfortunately however before his requested posting was approved he was killed in a tragic flying accident; he was 22 years old.

On 16 August 1944 Léonard, now at the rank of Flying Officer and with 136 flying hours to his record, was co-pilot of Halifax 'S', serial number LL296, for a flight test prior to an operational patrol, ironically he was standing-in for the usual co-pilot of that crew who was sick. The Halifax took-off at 13:04 and was Captained by P/O Turner and had achieved 554 flying hours experience. His was an experienced crew of several nationalities consisting of 4 Britons, 2 Australians a Canadian and Léonard. Another 518 Sqn Halifax 'M', serial number LL186, had taken-off from RAF Tíree at 13.04 also for an air test prior to a night operational patrol. Captained by P/O K W Organ, a very experienced pilot which had 685 flying hours experience, and a newly assembled crew, comprising of 6 Britons and 2 Canadians. Weather conditions at that time were that the cloud base was down to 300 feet with a visibility of about 7 miles and a 10 mph south-westerly wind.

A miscommunication by Flying Control, RAF Tíree, resulted in both aircraft entering the airspace, over the airfield, at the same time. There had been no radio contact with Halifax 'M' for 10 minutes and when contact was received, the aircraft position given was assumed to be a mistake. Halifax 'S' had been given permission to land and was flying along the line of the runway at an altitude of 400 feet. At 13:25 pm, about half a mile from the end of the runway Halifax 'M' broke through the patchy clouds heading directly towards Halifax 'S'. P/O K W Organ desperately attempted evasive action by throwing 'M' violently to starboard. But was too late and a head-on collision was unavoidable; its starboard wing hit the port wing of Halifax 'S', causing both aircraft to burst into flames and partially disintegrate prior to crashing to the ground, LL296 by Island House and the surrounding Loch An Eilean and LL186 at Crossapol beach. On impact, both aircraft were immersed in flames with aircraft debris being scattered over a large area. All aboard being killed.

Initially all 16 airmen were buried at Soroby Burial ground on 30 August 1944, but after the war nine were reinterred to other burial grounds at the request of the airmen's families, Léonard is one of those who remained.

We take this opportunity to thank the Isle of Tíree community for their help with our Project CzRAF 100 and for the remembrance of Flying Officer Léonard Revilliod.

By Tom Dolzeal