

The Tragedy of HMS LST 420

In November 1944, two airmen from the city were reported in the Peterborough Advertiser as having been killed on 7th November but no further news of the circumstances of their deaths was published at the time. One was Aircraftman 2nd Class, William Percy Gill, Base Signals Radar Unit, RAFVR. A/C Gill, of 15, Marholm Road, Walton, Peterborough, was reported missing at sea on 7th November. Aged 38, he was formerly the manager of the Gas Company's show-rooms in Westgate. He was married with one son aged 11, and is commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial,

The second man was Leading Aircraftman, Horace Lightfoot, Base Signals Radar Unit, RAFVR, of 'Racedale,' St. Botolph's Lane, Orton Longueville, Peterborough, he was also reported lost at sea on that date. Before joining the RAF three years previously, he had been a gardener-porter at the Isolation Hospital, Fengate, Peterborough. He was the husband of Alice Lightfoot, and the son of Mr. Edward and Mrs. Helen Lightfoot. Aged 38 when he died, L/Ac Lightfoot is buried in Ostend New Communal Cemetery, Ostend, Belgium.



A Landing Ship Tank of the same type as LST 420

The date, 7th November, the identity of the unit, 'Base Signals Radar Unit,' and the fact that L/Ac Lightfoot was buried at Ostend, gives us sufficient clues to identify the ship on which they were sailing when they were killed. HMS LST (Landing Ship 'Tank') 420, was built at Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A. The ship was launched on 5th December, 1942, and went straight into service with the Royal Navy. The RAF Base Signals Radar Unit (B.S.R.U.) was called forward for service on the Continent after spending eighteen months in England training, and carrying out the training of other radar units. They embarked with their equipment and vehicles on HMS LST 420 on the morning of the 7th November, 1944, and set out for Ostend.

The weather at this time had been atrocious, and the ship had waited for a number of days hoping that conditions would improve. When they did eventually sail the weather began to deteriorate steadily and by the time they were off Ostend, a storm had arisen and a heavy sea was running. Due to these conditions, the Captain decided it was not safe enough to attempt a landing and ordered the ship to return to England. It was on this return voyage at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and

still in sight of the Belgian coast that the ship struck a mine amidships, was blown in two, and sank in a very short space of time.

In addition to the damaging effect of the mine, the galley fires that were on in preparation of an evening meal for the ship's compliment, set fire to the petrol running out of the damaged vehicle's fuel tanks, and the whole stern section of the ship was rapidly enveloped in flames. The heavy seas made it impossible for all but the larger vessels in the vicinity to go to the rescue, and out of 263 officers and men on board, only 32 were saved.

There were many examples of bravery taking place during the sinking and the stories of many would never be told. Several of those who had found some measure of safety on life rafts, abandoned them to swim out to their comrades who were drowning, but then found that they were unable to get back due to the heavy seas. The beaches upon which many of the bodies were washed up were still mined, and the task of retrieving them was fraught with danger.

This sinking, in which 13 officers and 218 other ranks lost their lives, is thought to have been the worst disaster suffered by RAF Signals during the whole European war.

- Crew - Lieutenant-Commander Douglas Everett, and 54 other members of the crew of *LST-420* were lost that night. (4 are buried in Belgium, 1 was washed ashore in England and was taken home for burial by his family. The other members of the crew are commemorated on the Naval Memorials at Plymouth, Chatham and the Royal New Zealand Naval Memorial).
- Royal Air Force – At least 232 members of the Royal Air Force and 5 members of the Royal Canadian Air Force died in the sinking, they were 14 officers, 3 warrant officers, 31 flight sergeants and sergeants and 189 junior ranks. The dead are buried mainly at Ostend and Blankenberge but as far north as Kiel in Germany. Those without graves are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial. The majority were members of "No.1 BSRU".
- Other passengers – it is possible that 12 members of No. 335 Provost Company, "Corps of Military Police" Royal Military Police, 5 members of No. 111 General Hospital, Royal Army Medical Corps, 9 members of Royal Army Service Corps and several other British Army personnel were also lost aboard *LST-420*.

At least 292 persons were killed, with the total loss of life probably being over 320. The dead were washed ashore as far north as the north German coast, on the beaches of the Netherlands, Belgium, England and as far south as Calais, France.



Ostend Communal Cemetery



Runnymede Memorial

Below, One page of the Graves Registration Report for the Ostend New Communal Cemetery, Belgium, cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. We can see the entry for Horace Lightfoot third from the top. Out of seventeen names here, all, apart from one serving with the Royal Navy, is a member of the RAF who died in the LST 420 sinking on 7.11.44.

(48008) WT.P.2259/2808 20,000 3/53 A.&E.W.LTD. GP.685

LY.

Graves Registration Report Form. ORIGINAL

COUNTRY: **Belgium**
 COMMUNE: **BELGIUM.** REPORT No.: SCHEDULE No.: **2.**

PLACE OF BURIAL: **OSTENDE NEW COMMUNAL CEMETERY, BELGIUM.**

Land belongs to

Certified complete and correct.

The following are buried here:—

Signature *E. B. ...* Date **30 NOV 1954**

P.R.G.	No. and Rank	Initials, Name and Honours	Unit	Date of Death	For works use
IX.2.19.	1506254 L.A.C.	E. WALLER	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.20.	949289 Sgt.	W. PIKINGTON	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.21.	1467078 L.A.C.	H. LIGHTFOOT	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.22.	1529364 L.A.C.	W.S. WHATT	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.23.	1806617 L.A.C.	R.A. DUFF	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.24.	976388 Sgt.	J. CURRAN	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.25.	D/SB/JX.837 ORA. S.M.T.	F. VERMOOTE (Belgian)	Belgian Royal Navy H.M.S. "Royal Edmund"	3. 1.46.	H.O. 31.12.54. CROSS.
IX.2.26.	113798 Flt./Lt.	S. GREENOP	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.27.	1681472 L.A.C.	E. VARDEY	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.28.	1406561 L.A.C.	J.H. PRICE	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.29.	1545865 L.A.C.	A.W. TAMS	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.30.	107734 F/O.	E.F. CLEARY	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.31.	1422131 L.A.C.	C.F. HUGHES	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.32.	950408 L.A.C.	E.J. HULME	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.33.	637456 L.A.C.	E.J. TATE	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.34.	1783116 L.A.C.	J.T. GATES	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.
IX.2.35.	1097674 L.A.C.	J.B. CONLON	Royal Air Force	7.11.44.	C.H.

Below, Schedule "A" looks like a document recording the burials in Ostend New Communal Cemetery, and records the words the families requested be carved on the headstones. We can see Horace Lightfoot's details and the epitaph "At the going down of the sun and in the morning I will remember him". Poignant changes being the removal of the word 'we' to be replaced by 'I', and 'them' being replaced by 'him'. Note again that all these men were killed in the same incident.

		Form H/2
Contract No:-		Page No:2
Name & Address of firm:-		Name of Burial Place:-
		OOSTENDE NEW COMM. CTY., BELGIUM NO.1

<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.14 11 1488831 Aircraftman 2nd Cl. D.I. Hughes Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 (Cross)</p>	<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.19 16 1506254 Ldg. Aircraftman E. Waller Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 36 (Cross) Always a beautiful memory Of one we love so dear. Winnie and children</p>
<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.15 12 1503090 Aircraftman 1st Cl. R. Shingler Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 22 (Cross) At the going down Of the sun And in the morning We will remember him</p>	<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.20 17 949289 Sergeant W. Pilkington Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 25 (Cross) Tho' we never said good-bye, My memories of you Will never die. Barbara</p>
<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.16 13 1240020 Corporal R.R. Cocks Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 24 (Cross) In memory of you, darling, Who gave your life That we might live. "Till we meet again"</p>	<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.21 18 1467078 Ldg. Aircraftman H. Lightfoot Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 38 (Cross) At the going down Of the sun And in the morning I will remember him</p>
<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.17 14 1410535 Ldg. Aircraftman J.C. Davies Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 21 (Cross) Though death divides, Fond memories cling. Mam, dad, Dorothy and Gwen.</p>	<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.22 19 1529364 Ldg. Aircraftman W.S. Whatt Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 22 (Cross) For one and all He did his best. God grant him now Eternal rest</p>
<p>1076/1/A/8 9.2.18 15 14592982 Private L.W.G. Caisley Royal Army Medical Corps 7th November 1944 Age 36 (Cross) Until we meet again, Good-night, precious. Wife Marian And daughter Lesley</p>	<p>1192/1/A/8 9.2.23 20 1806617 Ldg. Aircraftman R.A. Duff Royal Air Force 7th November 1944 Age 21 (Cross) A memory is kept Of a loved one We'll never forget. Mum, brother John and Joe</p>

Below, A contemporary document recording some of the names on the Runnymede Memorial, at Cooper's Hill. We can see the entry for Aircraftman 2nd Class, William Percy Gill, Base Signals Radar Unit, RAFVR, in the bottom left hand corner. His name is on Panel 243.

AIR FORCES MEMORIAL, COOPER'S HILL			20.
1944	1944	1944	
ROYAL AIR FORCE	ROYAL AIR FORCE	ROYAL CANADIAN	
LEADING		AIR FORCE	
1st AIRCRAFTMAN	OF NEWFOUNDLAND	FLIGHT LIEUTENANT	
Slater W. J. ✓	FLYING OFFICER	Culcheth W. E. ✓	
Smales L. ✓	Reid F. J. ✓	Cullen K. E. ✓	
Spears A. E. ✓		Gohl J. G. ✓	
Spence E. P. ✓	FLIGHT SERGEANT	Golub M. ✓	
Stott H. ✓	Tibbo C. R. ✓	Hanson J. R., D.F.C. ✓	
Sykes P. G. ✓		Harman R. L. ✓	
Thompson J. F. ✓	SERGEANT	Huppert S. B. ✓	
Walker W. H. ✓	Northcott D. G. 243	* Janney W. H. ✓	
Wardrobe P. ✓		Kemper F. A. J. ✓	
Watson F. C. ✓	WOMEN'S AUXILIARY	Laidlaw D. D. ✓	
Webdale J. ✓	AIR FORCE	Loving L. R. B., D.F.C. ✓	
Weinberg A. ✓	SECTION OFFICER	McAleese T. ✓	
Wilkins S. F. ✓	Inayat-Khan N., G.C. ✓	Macallister H. D. F. ✓	
Witheyman C. ✓	Rowden D. H. ✓	McAvity H. K. ✓	
Young J. J. ✓ 242	Unternahrer Y. E. M. ✓	McLeod R. D. ✓	
AIRCRAFTMAN 1ST CLASS	ROYAL CANADIAN	Mavaut P. R. M., D.F.C. ✓	
Adams T. ✓	AIR FORCE	* Miron A. E. ✓	
Alderson A. S. ✓	WING COMMANDER	Mitchell J. M., D.F.C. ✓	
Butler W. C. ✓	Gray C. ✓	Murray J. R. ✓	
Cole R. F. ✓	SQUADRON LEADER	Nathan G. ✓	
Crofts A. ✓	Alexander R. W., D.F.C. ✓	Northern E., D.F.C. ✓	
Ellis J. ✓	Barrett C. K. ✓	O'Neil H. D. ✓	
Ferguson J. H. ✓	Carter F. E. ✓	Osborn R. H. ✓	
Gibbs W. H. ✓	Cowan E. W. ✓	Perry R. R. ✓	
Gilder A. K. ✓	Davis J. T. J., D.F.C. ✓	Perry S. W. W. ✓	
Grahame J. ✓	Farrell D. W. ✓	Reid P. T. ✓	
Griffiths D. E. ✓	Gibson M. W. ✓	Ridgway R. H. ✓	
Hancock J. I. T. ✓	Kerr J. B. ✓ 243	Rieger H. W. ✓	
Haywood H. E. ✓	Lindo H. L., D.F.C. ✓	Robinson V. T. ✓	
Irons E. V. ✓	McRobie I. M. ✓	Russell H. 244	
Jones I. E. ✓	Moseley-Williams W. R., D.F.C. ✓	Saville J. W. ✓	
Leach H. G. ✓		Scharff W. K. ✓	
McKean G. ✓		Shaw T. R. ✓	
Martin C. C. G. ✓		Shewfelt H. A. ✓	
Roberts E. L. D. ✓		Slaughter M. E. ✓	
Robinson G. ✓		Smith G. A. ✓	
Rolt T. C. ✓		Sutton W. R. R. ✓	
Skeggs E. J. ✓ 243		Taylor C. H. ✓	
Thomas W. H. ✓	FLIGHT LIEUTENANT	Trickett D. H. ✓	
Thompson F. W. S. ✓	Acer J. F. ✓	Valk J. C. ✓	
Tickle D. W. ✓	Adams A. A. ✓	Wallace D. ✓	
Winton A. M. ✓	Ashbury E. L. ✓	Weis J. W. ✓	
Wood A. ✓	Baillargeon J. L. ✓	Wiley B. K. ✓	
Wright T. ✓	Beattie E. W. ✓	Williams J. F. H., D.F.C. ✓	
Young W. G. ✓	Berrigan L. T., D.F.C. ✓		
AIRCRAFTMAN 2ND CLASS	Bow H. H. ✓	FLYING OFFICER	
Gill W. P. ✓	Brown C. W. ✓	Adams D. A. ✓	
Leech J. ✓	Brown W. H., D.F.C. ✓	Akey R. W. ✓	
Lyth E. ✓	Calhoun M. B., D.F.C. ✓	Alexander I. S. ✓	
Parkes G. R. ✓	Church E. R. ✓	Allen E., D.F.C. ✓	
Regent R. E. H. ✓	Clark A. T., D.F.C. ✓	Anderson W. F. ✓	
Rodger J. A. ✓	Clasper R. ✓	Andrews N. T. ✓	
Rourke E. ✓	Cornwell G. F. ✓	Arner L. A. ✓	
Smith R. T. ✓	Croll I. B. ✓ 244	Bailey N. 244	
Williams W. S. ✓	Cronyn P. H., D.F.C. ✓	Bailey T. R., D.F.C. ✓	
	Croucher G. ✓	Banning J. E. V., D.F.C. ✓	
		Barker H. ✓	
# Now known to be buried ST. CHARLES DE PERCY WAR CTY., FRANCE (IV : D : 10)			
* Now known to be buried RHEINBERG WAR CTY. GERMANY (XIII : F : 19/23 COL2)			
* NOW BURIED IN ST. CHARLES DE PERCY WAR CEMETERY, FRANCE			