

JIM AUTON MBE



THE SECRET BETRAYAL OF BRITAIN'S WARTIME ALLIES

THE APPEASEMENT OF STALIN AND
ITS POST-WAR CONSEQUENCES



The
Secret Betrayal of
Britain's Wartime Allies

“How, after the fall of Warsaw, any responsible statesman could trust any Russian Communist further than he could kick him, passes the comprehension of ordinary men”.

(MRAF Sir John Slessor, Commander of the airmen who flew to Warsaw during the 1944 uprising).

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Britain's Wartime Allies**

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its post-war consequences

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To the memory of brave men and women of wartime underground resistance forces and their forgotten compatriots who served in the British Armed Forces.

Publisher's Note.

This book is based on the personal experiences of the author, his fellow combatants and his colleagues. Where the publishers are unable to find historical evidence to support certain sections of the author's work notes are provided to indicate the fact.

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CHAPTER ONE

Although the massive slaughter of the Second World War was barely over, we already faced the threat of another deadly conflict. The long Cold War had begun.

Getting out of the car, I turned up the collar of my thick overcoat against the biting chill of autumn and shoved my hands deep into my pockets. I knew that our airmen's graves lay in the far corner of Poland's vast war cemetery and, as I skirted around the multitude of Russian and Polish soldiers' graves, my feelings turned from sadness to bitterness. I said to Zak, my Polish companion, 'What a bloody awful waste of lives!' He sorrowfully shook his head and muttered, 'And was it all worth it? Our people are scarcely any better off now under Russian occupation than we were under the Germans. In fact, we had more food then.'

It was late afternoon and I hoped the light would not fade before I managed to locate the particular graves that I wanted to record with my little pocket camera. On reaching the air force section, I walked quickly along the rows of graves, photographing the headstones of friends who had flown to Poland with me from our wartime base in Italy. Kneeling to press a little wooden remembrance cross into the grave of Squadron Leader Liversidge, my former flight commander, I found the ground was like concrete. No doubt the Poles did their best to maintain the site properly but, as grass and flowers did not grow well in the harsh Polish climate, the war graves looked rather shabby and forlorn compared with those in the west. Zak watched me planting the cross and said, 'Our Polish veterans have marked his crash site with a plaque in Krakow. I can show you where it is tomorrow, if you like.' I explained that I was committed to a business visit to the Huta Baildon steelworks in Katowice and said, 'Show me when I come to Krakow again. I will make sure I am not so busy next time.'

As we searched along the rows of headstones, I saw that a couple of elderly women in drab peasant-style clothes and well-worn leather boots were sweeping fallen leaves off the gravel pathways with birch brooms. I offered them some Polish money and said, 'Take good care of these graves for me; these men were my friends.' The women looked startled. I spoke in German because I knew that Poles of their age in southern Poland understood that language. Now, at the height of the Cold War, every Pole was deeply suspicious of strangers. I saw the anxiety in the women's eyes and hastened to assure them that I was not trying to trick them. 'I am not a communist. I was one of the English airmen who flew to Warsaw during the 1944 Uprising.' As I switched into my primitive Polish, they nodded, 'Da, powstanie.' Every Pole knew about our pathetic efforts to support the tragic Warsaw Uprising in 1944. The women grasped my hands and kissed my fingers before taking the Polish money and stuffing it away under their voluminous skirts. They immediately stopped work on the paths and began vigorously to clear dead leaves off the airmen's graves while I tried to take photographs without getting the women in the pictures. Zak called out to me, 'Is this one of yours? I don't think he is on our list of Warsaw casualties.' I noted the name Leo on the gravestone and the date, 20 August 1944. I said, 'I don't remember him. I will try to find out something about him in London when I get back.' By the time I had photographed the graves of men from my old squadron, I was feeling increasingly resentful and depressed. I said to Zak, 'I am worried about the trouble with Russia. I think it will not be long before the shooting starts again and next time it will be a damn sight worse than before.'

As we trudged back to the cemetery gates, I saw a few shabbily dressed old people placing glass jars containing flickering candle stubs on private graves of Polish pilots. A couple of nuns, busily polishing a large tomb, stopped work and hid when they saw us approaching. We got into my car and I said to Zak, 'I don't know about you, but I hate graveyards and I'm bloody frozen stiff.' He said, 'What we need are a couple of vodkas.' Zak had been a sixteen-year-old wartime partisan. In his spare time he now recorded the sites of shot-down Royal Air Force planes and the

names of casualties. In addition to my lucrative sales activities in capitalist countries, I had recently started visiting countries behind the mysterious Iron Curtain. Although ostensibly engaged solely on promoting East-West trade, I secretly undertook other activities such as research into our wartime air force actions over the lands that became Soviet satellites at the end of the war.

The name Leo puzzled me. I thought I knew the identity of every airman shot down over Poland. I would certainly not have forgotten such an uncommon name. I painstakingly searched through official records and discovered that he was killed during an air attack while he was a prisoner of war at the notorious Auschwitz death camp. I was determined to learn more. I had not previously known of British prisoners at Auschwitz. If I failed to get further details in England, I might seek Polish permission to research the extensive German documents at Auschwitz. I knew that the Poles had preserved the concentration camp in its hideous wartime condition as a grim reminder of Nazi atrocities.

Further research revealed that Leo had been an air gunner in a crew of sergeants, whose Halifax bomber of Number 35 Squadron RAF took off from Linton-on-Ouse in mid-August 1942. It was the squadron's first flight as Pathfinders (target markers). The authorities chose Flensburg as the intended target, because they mistakenly assumed that inexperienced crews might locate it easily in the dark. However, very few, if any, aircraft dropped their bombs anywhere near the target and Leo's crew actually dropped theirs twenty-five miles away in Denmark. Automatic photographs taken by several other crews showed that their bombs fell at distances varying from seven to twenty-one miles from the target and later reconnaissance photographs revealed that Flensburg was undamaged. Leo's plane did not return to its base and, in due course, the International Red Cross reported that the crew were prisoners of war in Germany.

The abortive raid on Flensburg was typical of Britain's bomber activity at that stage of the war. The British authorities were fully aware that bomber crews were seldom able to find their targets and bomb accurately in the dark, but there were 'good reasons' for repeatedly sending men on perilous flights simply to make holes

in the ground. For the past year the Germans had been relentlessly beating back the Red Army and Stalin was continually goading Churchill, our war leader, to open a second front in the west instead of 'leaving the Russian troops to do all the fighting'. Churchill was well aware that the western Allies were incapable of launching a successful ground offensive on the European continent at that time, so to counter Stalin's jibes he repeatedly claimed that bombers of the Royal Air Force were indeed taking the pressure off the Red Army by 'mercilessly pounding the Germans every night'. The British authorities feared that Stalin might give up the fight, capitulate to the Germans and allow them to transfer their full force to the west. Stalin, therefore, had to be appeased and encouraged to fight on at all costs, so the sacrifice of bomber crews who had no hope of locating their targets in the dark was a callous expedient. It would be many months before our night-bomber force became an effective weapon of war instead of a mere propaganda tool.

In April 1942 a shocking example of wasted airmen and planes had occurred when twelve Lancaster bombers were sent in daylight to make a low-level attack on the MAN diesel engine factory at Augsburg in southern Germany. Seven of the twelve bombers were shot down and all the others were damaged. Seventeen bombs hit the target, but five failed to explode and disruption of the factory's production of submarine engines was minimal. Our official propaganda-mongers acclaimed the raid as a great achievement but, in truth, it was nothing more than a ghastly and expensive blunder. We airmen were, of course, unaware of the truth. We blindly obeyed orders from our superiors no matter how dangerous or ridiculous some of those orders seemed to be. By the time the United States Army Air Forces began their belated strategic bombing offensive from British bases, the Royal Air Force had switched from suicidal daylight attacks to night bombing. Disregarding British warnings, the Americans embarked upon a campaign of daytime bombing. They assumed that their heavily-armed Liberator and Flying Fortress bombers, flying in tight formations, would be able to battle their way through enemy opposition. They were mistaken and their casualty rate was enormous until eventually their Mustang fighters, fitted with

overload tanks and British Rolls-Royce Merlin engines, were able to escort the bombers to their targets.

Continuing my investigations of Sergeant Leo, I unearthed some surprising facts. During an air raid, he was in a working party alongside foreign slave workers in the German Buna Werke (synthetic rubber works) adjacent to the Auschwitz death camp. Although the Poles had repeatedly urged the western allies to bomb the death camp and destroy the crematoria, their pleas were rejected because such actions were not regarded as legitimate acts of war. However, on 20 August 1944, over one hundred bombers of the United States Fifteenth Air Force attacked the nearby factory. All the bombers flew from bases in the Foggia region of Italy where my own squadron was located. Some of the planes actually came from the Amendola airstrip that we shared with the Americans. During the raid a few prisoners were killed by bombs inadvertently dropped on the death camp. Other innocent prisoners, like Leo, were killed by bombs dropped on the targeted factory. The attacking airmen could not have guessed that in bombing the Auschwitz factory they were slaughtering Allied prisoners of war and innocent slave workers from the death camp. After the war, some of the Auschwitz survivors were allowed to settle in England and I mentioned Leo's name to women who were in the camp at the time of his death. Although none could recall a man with his name, they all remembered how British airmen risked being shot by armed guards for throwing bread over the electrified wire into the compound of the half-starved women. One woman showed me a flying badge obtained from a British airman at Auschwitz. She never knew his name. From the day when I first discovered Leo's grave in Poland, it took me many months of painstaking research to uncover the circumstances that led to his death. Incidentally, Leo was a sergeant when he was shot down and the air force promoted him twice while he was a prisoner of war, so he was a warrant officer when he died. I wonder what happened to his 'back pay'. I recall that my own overdue pay mysteriously disappeared while I lay wounded in a British military hospital for three months.

Leo and his friends were shot down on 18 August 1942 and on the following day the disastrous landing of around 6,000 Canadian

and British troops took place on the French coast at Dieppe. The troops were put ashore at an entirely unsuitable location in the face of fierce enemy opposition and most of them were either killed or captured within the first few hours. Canadian troops suffered the greatest losses and German flak shot down scores of our planes. After the war some commentators assumed that the Dieppe debacle was due to the ignorance and incompetence of the military planners. A more likely explanation is that it was, like the futile Royal Air Force raids of the time, a deliberate and deadly propaganda exercise intended to pacify Stalin. The worst examples of blundering incompetence were yet to come at places like Arnhem. At the time the British public were unaware of the extent of the Dieppe fiasco, but the Canadian sergeant pilots at my flying school knew of it and that may have accounted for their truculent attitude towards the authorities. Saluting of officers had been discontinued on the air base, but I often saw how the Canadians tricked the officers. When they saw an officer approaching, they braced themselves and raised their right arms smartly. The officer's automatic reaction was to salute, but the Canadian airmen merely readjusted their caps or scratched their ears. They then adopted a mock-bewildered expression as though unable to understand why the officer had saluted them. The Canadians' truculent attitude and intolerance of unnecessary 'bullshit' soon spread to other aircrew personnel.

After visiting the Huta Baildon steelworks I drove to Warsaw, booked into the dilapidated Grand Hotel and telephoned Metalexport, the state trading corporation, to arrange business discussions for the following day. Then, having nothing else to do, I wandered through the war-torn streets of the city into the ancient Stare Miasto area that the poverty-stricken Poles had lovingly rebuilt with the aid of ancient maps, paintings and photographs. In the old town square I admired the restored buildings and remembered that, in 1944, the square had been one of the drop zones where, in the darkness, our planes had released parachute containers of supplies for the underground resistance army. As I stood reminiscing about my wartime flights and wondering if I should risk using my camera, I became aware of a man watching

me intently. I knew that the communist secret police kept foreigners under surveillance and I naturally tried to avoid their attention. It was a chilly afternoon, so I slunk into the nearby smoke-filled Krokodil bar and settled down with a glass of miod (honey wine) – the speciality of the house. I soon noticed that the man whom I had tried to avoid outside had followed me into the bar and was obviously looking for me. He sat down at the same table, leaned across to me and said something in Polish that I could not understand. I replied in my primitive Polish, ‘Sorry, I not understand.’ He asked, ‘Deutsch?’ I replied in German that I understood German but that I was English. He beamed, ‘*Gut. Sprechen wir Deutsch.*’ He explained that he had noticed me examining wall plaques commemorating people the Germans had gunned down in the streets as reprisals whenever Polish resistance forces killed Warsaw’s hated occupiers. He had only met one English airman before and that was during the war. He was keen to learn about my flights in support of the 1944 Uprising, but I wanted him to tell me about the English airman. From his coat pocket, he fished out a Cross of Valour that he had won during the uprising and told me, ‘The Englishman got this too. He was a lieutenant in the Armia Krajowa (underground army).’ ‘What was his name and what did he look like?’ I asked. He replied, ‘I only saw him a couple of times, so I cannot remember him very well. I think he was rather arrogant, not very tall and with a snub-nosed face. I believe he was wounded in the leg, but not killed. I heard men say his name. It sounded like Vard, but I do not know how to spell it.’ I was intrigued. I would have to search my records for a Ward. I could not recall anyone of that name who might have survived being shot down over Warsaw. I asked, ‘Have you any friends – other veterans – who might know something about the airman called Ward?’ He replied, ‘If you want to meet some of my friends, I will bring them here tomorrow. I am sure they will like to meet you too. We will wait for you outside the Krokodil at three o’clock.’ I said, ‘Don’t stay outside in the cold. Wait inside and let me pay the bill. This place is not expensive by English standards.’ I knew that Metalexport stopped work at two o’clock, so I would be

free in plenty of time for the rendezvous after a quick snack at the Grand Hotel.

My new Polish friends were waiting on the pavement near the Krokodil when I arrived. There were four of them. Unfortunately, none of them knew much about Ward, but they had all been in Warsaw's Old Town when our planes arrived. I invited the men to come with me into the bar where I ordered a bottle of the delicious honey wine and they taught me '*Dod na*', the Polish encouragement to drink up. They mentioned that, as war veterans' organizations were banned by the communist government, they had formed a rambler's club, which was the same thing in disguise and they invited me to their next meeting. The chance encounter with the man whom I had tried to avoid in case he was a secret policeman was to lead to many years of close friendship with hundreds of war veterans behind the Iron Curtain. During the height of the Cold War, citizens behind the Iron Curtain came under immediate suspicion by the police if found to be associating unofficially with western foreigners. Consequently, my meetings with my new-found friends had to be 'cloak and dagger' affairs conducted in private houses or in the sort of small bars not usually frequented by foreigners like me.

CHAPTER TWO

In the drab surroundings behind the Iron Curtain I was conspicuous in my expensive western clothes, so I attempted to merge into the background by disguising myself in cheap Polish clothes. I will return to the subject of my disguise later, but meanwhile I want to continue with the history of Ward, the British airman. I was particularly interested in him because he had been fighting against the German occupiers of Warsaw while I was flying through a hail of gunfire, seeking a suitable place in the burning city to drop my load of guns and ammunition for the Polish underground army. John Ward, the son of a Birmingham metalworker, was nineteen years old when he joined the Royal Air Force in 1937. Eight months after the start of the Second World War, he was flying as a wireless operator/air gunner in single-engined Fairey Battle bombers of Number 226 Squadron, RAF. The slow Fairey Battles were widely regarded as flying coffins because so many of them were shot down on every daytime bombing raid. On 10 May 1940, plane K9183 took off from the squadron's temporary airfield at Reims in France. Ward's fellow crew members were Flying Officer Cameron, an Australian pilot, and Sergeant Hart, the observer, whose duties included navigation and bomb-aiming. Their target was a bridge near Diekirch in Luxembourg. At the time Ward was an aircraftman first class (one rank from the bottom) and his pay was about two pounds per week. Flying Officer Cameron was attempting an extremely low-level attack on the bridge when his plane was brought down by machine-gun fire. German troops rushed towards the crashed plane and Ward, who was not too seriously injured, shouted a warning that there were bombs on board. The Germans hesitated long enough for Ward to burn some documents and set fire to the plane. He then admitted that there were actually no bombs on the plane and the Germans, looking irate over being

fooled, took the airmen into custody. An ambulance conveyed the crew to a hospital where the pilot died during an operation on his injured arm, part of which had been shot off. Ward and the sergeant observer received treatment for their injuries in military hospitals at Trier and Oberursel. It was six months before they eventually reached a prison camp.

During Ward's time in hospitals, he began learning German in preparation for an escape attempt. After spending a few weeks at Stalag Luft I (Barth), he was sent to a labour camp in Upper Silesia where he became an interpreter with a prisoners' working party. While planning to escape he obtained civilian clothes, maps and a compass by bartering goods with local people. In April 1941 when, incidentally, I was just starting my training as a pupil pilot, Ward was in charge of a group of about twenty prisoners clearing trees in woods near Lissa, Germany. He was wearing civilian clothes under his uniform and, at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, he slipped away from the working party, unobserved by the two German guards. After running a couple of miles through woodland, he hid his uniform under a pile of leaves and proceeded eastwards at night, avoiding built-up areas and hiding in the woods in the daytime.

After three days he reached Gostyn where, under cover of darkness, he entered the railway yards with the intention of climbing into a freight car going east. By the dim light of a match, he was trying to read the destination label on the side of a wagon when two railway policemen pounced on him and demanded his identity documents. As he was unable to produce any documents, he was arrested and taken to the local police station where he was searched and his prisoner of war tag was discovered. Under interrogation he told the truth about his escape and asked to be returned to the labour camp. The police told him that a senior official would deal with him the following day and that he would probably be shot. He was locked in a small cell at the back of the building, where he was to remain overnight. The only window was criss-crossed with strands of barbed wire. During the night he broke the barbed wire by bending it back and forth until he made a hole big enough to climb through into a yard. To his dismay, he saw that