



ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

Western Air Command

Vancouver, B.C., July 16th, 1945

Mr. L.L. Hammond
32 Winkworth Road
Banstead, Surrey
England

Dear Mr. Hammond:

I know that the hand of sorrow has rested heavily upon you in the loss of your son, Sgt. James Leonard Gordon Hammond, R.A.F., which occurred on the 1st of June, 1945, in the mountains of British Columbia, Canada.

In no more practical way can I express my sincere sympathy to you than by giving you in detail the facts of this fateful occurrence.

First, with respect to No. 5 Operational Training Unit, at which your son was taking his training. This is a unit divided into two parts, located on two aerodromes at the mouth of the Fraser River Valley, the only flat area in the vicinity of Vancouver. In fact, practically the whole of the Province of British Columbia is mountainous terrain. The choice of this area for training was dictated by war conditions -- namely, an area of moderate temperatures, winter and summer, wherein hangar and runway facilities existed for the operation of larger types of aircraft. Throughout Canada, generally speaking, the runways on aerodromes were of insufficient length for Liberator aircraft, and the existing type of hangar for the Joint Air Training Plan was too small to accommodate Liberators. Also, the severe winters precluded work outside, and required hangars of adequate size.

The nature of the work of the unit was such as to require relatively long distance triangular flights, which took the aircraft either over the mountains or over the Pacific, but under conditions with which it was deemed personnel of their qualifications could cope.

At 4.30 p.m. on May 31st, 1945, your son and the balance of his crew were briefed in a Navigation exercise which was to take them to Penticton as a first turning point, thence to Revelstoke, and back to base, a total distance of 509 miles.

The weather forecast in the area of their station was as follows:

"Considerable low strata cumulus cloud from 7 to 10/10ths (10/10ths representing complete cloud coverage, and 7/10ths a fraction thereof); with cloud base at 3,000 feet, and tops of cloud 8,000 feet."

Weather briefing also included the following forecast for the route they were to fly:

"7 to 10/10ths thin mass of alto cumulus, and also stratus clouds, base 8,000 to 10,000 feet, and tops 16,000 to 18,000 feet. Cloud to be expected to be in layers. No frontal cloud and no difficulty expected to be found flying between layers. Winds at operational height 25 miles per hour (at 300 degrees.). Freezing level at 10,000 feet, namely, the height at which light rime icing in clouds above this level would be found; temperature at 15,000 feet minus 10 degrees Centigrade. Base on return to remain as at take-off."

From weather encountered by other aircraft on this exercise, the forecast proved to be accurate.

They were instructed to set course above their aerodrome at 4,000 feet, as this was the estimated base of the cloud. Immediately thereafter, they were to climb on track at 162 miles per hour indicated airspeed, with their rate of climb to be in excess of 500 feet per minute. They were instructed to use their radio compass on the climb, thus assuring themselves of being on course.

With respect to radio communications, they were instructed to keep in contact with base periodically, and if unable to contact base within 10 minutes, to go on to the Operational Training Unit guard frequency. If unable to contact base on the Operational Training Unit guard frequency, they were instructed to change to the Western Air Command guard frequency and pass messages on this channel. If, after ten minutes, they were unable to make contact on this channel, they were to return to base.

Before leaving, the crew were warned to check the aircraft thoroughly, including load, as this was their first trip with a fully loaded Liberator. If any wireless telegraph or electrical trouble was encountered, the captain was briefed to return to base. He was also briefed to let down by Contact Flight Rules. If not possible to do this, he was to let down on the radio range.

They were informed that the mountain heights of their climb to 14,000 feet (their operational height) were: Mount Cheam - 6925 feet - 11 minutes on course; Silver Tip Mountain - 8550 feet - approximately 14 minutes on course.

At 9.06 a.m. on the 1st of June the aircraft took off and climbed to 4,000 feet above the aerodrome at Abbotsford, and set course as directed. In confirmation of this, the aircraft sent a message in code which, interpreted in Plain Language, means: "I departed 1600 hours GMT from Abbotsford." Thirty-four minutes later a request was received at base for a practice fix, i.e., a position. They were instructed by base as follows: "Message received. Transmit call sign and dashes." This last signal was not acknowledged by the aircraft, and was repeated to them by another aircraft flying in the same exercise. We therefore are now of the opinion that the aircraft struck the mountain between the time the base signal was sent out and the estimated few minutes in which an acknowledgment should have been made.

Repeated efforts were immediately made to contact the aircraft, but without result, whereupon the Air Search organization was alerted, and

an endeavour was made to obtain information regarding the aircraft. All radio range stations and other Liberators flying on the same exercise called to the aircraft on several frequencies, but without result.

The actual flying conditions as experienced by the aircraft on the same exercise were as follows:

"Cloud encountered on climb from 4,000 to 8,000 feet. Several layers were met above that about 1,000 feet thick. Smooth air, no bumpiness; slight rime ice at 12,000. Above this, the weather was clear except for the odd cloud top. All turning points were visible."

When the aircraft failed to radio into base at the first turning point of Penticton, it was evident that something serious had happened or that they were lost. This was confirmed when the aircraft became overdue and could no longer be airborne as it would have been completely out of petrol.

By this time certain of the higher mountain peaks were showing above the clouds, all of which, over a considerable area, were immediately searched by air. The valleys were completely filled with cloud. Weather, for search, continued unfavourable for two weeks.

However, a large scale ground search was organized and put into effect.

By deduction from the signal received and the one not acknowledged, we were of the opinion that they might have struck a mountain shortly after entering the mountain area; and therefore concentrated search in a relatively small, but nevertheless extensive, area.

The search continued day and night from June 1st, 1945, to June 16th, 1945. At night aircraft were stationed above the area to keep radio watch and watch for visual distress signals from the missing aircraft. A portable high powered radio unit was set up on a mountain in the area to keep a listening watch on the distress frequency and to keep communications open to Command Operations. During the search 372 sorties were made and nearly 700,000 air miles flown over the mountains and through the valleys when weather permitted.

Land search was hampered by low clouds and continuous rain. However, some 17 search parties were put into the mountains to investigate the reports of flares, smoke, visual signals, signal cartridges and certain other fallacious radio signals, all of which proved to have no connection with the aircraft. In all, nearly 200 men were engaged in the ground search over difficult and often dangerous terrain, and more than 50 aeroplanes were used.

The weather continued unfavourable for air or ground search until June 16th. During this period, however, every opportunity was taken of temporary breaks in the weather, and fifty or more valleys and peaks were thoroughly searched. I myself and several other senior officers of my staff personally spent many hours threading the valleys and searching the peaks, under conditions of cloud and visibility which almost precluded flying. Ours, however, was a minor part of the search.

Late in the afternoon of June 16th, for the first time in this period, the clouds lifted above the peaks of the Cheam Range, and wreckage was sighted by a search aircraft on the rocky slope of Mount Welch, 7,000

feet above sea level, in a most inaccessible position. Early next morning, a small party of experienced mountain climbers, led by the Command Search Rescue Officer, Squadron Leader Lee, started off in an attempt to reach the wreckage. The trip was made over difficult trails, using truck, jeep, Bren carrier and pack horse, to an advance camp some eight miles from the base of Mount Welch. From there on, all supplies had to be carried by the party. The second night a camp was made on the snow slide some 3,000 feet below the site of the wreck. An attempt was made to climb to the crash next day, but heavy fog and falling rock made the undertaking exceedingly hazardous. Considerable wreckage was found on the snow slide up the mountain, and positive evidence that it was Liberator 241 was found. On Wednesday, June 20th, Squadron Leader Lee and one member of his party succeeded in reaching the wreck. Photographs and evidence of identification were brought back to Western Air Command Headquarters late the following night.

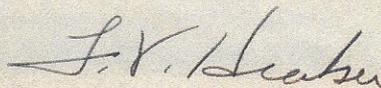
On Monday, June 25th, the same party, together with Flight Lieutenant Gilbert, Anglican Padre, proceeded to the scene of the crash. The bodies were taken from the wreck and placed in a rock grave built at 6,600 feet elevation in the saddle between Mount Welch and Mount Still. A simple cross bearing their names was placed at the head of the cairn. Flight Lieutenant Gilbert conducted a simple but impressive burial service. The cross was beautified with wild mountain flowers which the party had gathered and made into a wreath. A salute to fallen comrades was fired. The rock grave or cairn, as you will see from the photographs enclosed in Flight Lieutenant Gilbert's letter, represented a magnificent and reverent effort on the part of Squadron Leader Lee and his party, including Flight Lieutenant Gilbert, to give suitable burial to your son and his comrades who perished on this mountain height.

There is one other element with which I would like to deal, which under the sad circumstances is probably the most important to you, namely, that your son and his comrades were killed instantaneously, and therefore did not suffer. There is no question of doubt whatsoever about this, as the impact occurred into solid rock at nothing less than a speed over 160 miles per hour.

I am also sure that your son and his companions felt no trepidation whatsoever, nor even any discomfort; truly (I cannot help but feel) a great source of solace to you and the other loved ones concerned.

Our feeling in the matter, which includes all of their comrades, can only be judged by the effort that was made in the tremendous search. We felt very keenly that this should have happened to an R.A.F. crew entrusted to us for their training and safety. Why the crash occurred, we will never know, and can but accept its occurrence with sorrow and sympathy for you and other members of your family, and the families of the other crew members involved.

Yours most sincerely,



(F.V. Heakes) Air Vice-Marshal
Air Officer Commanding
Western Air Command, Vancouver, B.C.