

World War II bomber crash near Waldenbuch



Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту (right) stands in front of a plaque commemorating a bomber crash near Waldenbuch, where his great-uncle was killed in 1945. Robert Stapleford (yellow cap) is the son of one of two survivors of the mission. Wolfgang Härtel (center) brought all those involved together for a memorial service. Foto: Stefanie Schlecht/

The desire for peace is more relevant than ever

memorial service for the crew members of a bomber that crashed near Waldenbuch 77 years ago has Canadians and Germans reflecting on the horrors of war, reconciliation and international understanding. And Ukraine suddenly seems very close.

by Eddie Langner

WALDENBUCH. The tears of his grandmother brought Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту to Waldenbuch - the place where his great-uncle Fernand Leo Jolicoeur lost his life on January 28, 1945. Now, 77 years later, the Canadian himself has tears in his eyes as he stands here on a forest path in front of a memorial plaque recalling the story of his ancestor. His great-uncle crashed in a Lancaster bomber just a few hundred meters from here at the end of World War II. Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту is not the only one shedding tears. Standing next to the 56-year-old Canadian is his compatriot Robert Stapleford. His father, Robert Laird Stapleford, was one of two survivors of the crash. The story of his father's rescue has brought the 69-year-old here with his wife Ruth (68) on this chilly autumn Sunday: to commemorate a war that turned Germans and Canadians into enemies - and to remind them of the importance of working for peace. The man who organized this commemoration and brought everyone together is Wolfgang Härtel. In his function as Waldenbuch's local historian, the 78-year-old, together with Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту, has worked out and documented the historical background to the crash. Since last year, a memorial plaque commemorates the event. Gendreau-Héту had already come to Waldenbuch for a memorial service in the summer of 2021.

But that was not the end of the story. "In the beginning, our main focus was on the five people who died in the crash," says Wolfgang Härtel. "But there were also two survivors - and that's what we're focusing on now," says Härtel, explaining how the joint research led him and Gendreau-Héту to Stapleford and his son. The survivor's descendant, supported by a cousin, had conducted his own research and had become aware of Härtel and Gendreau-Héту's research through a newspaper article published in Canada. 69-year-old Härtel therefore approached the two to tell them what he knew about the crash.

A pistol - in case the Gestapo comes

Stapleford's report shed new light on the story: "My father told me they flew normally at first and then all hell broke loose in the plane. His comrade next to him was killed, he took several hits and was finally torn out of the plane," he recalls of his father, who has since died. Of course, he was lucky not to be mauled by one of the propellers. While the badly damaged bomber flew a few more kilometers in the direction of Waldenbuch, the Canadian, severely wounded, landed with his parachute on a field in the Fildern. "Now comes the part that is very important for me: He lies there, badly wounded in the middle of the night and in the freezing cold. Then an elderly couple discovers his parachute and



The plaque at the crash site

takes him to their home overnight. According to Stapleford's father, the couple hid him in a cellar and the next morning took him in a wheelbarrow to a hospital in Esslingen, where they left him at the entrance, rang the doorbell and made off. A doctor then received him and offered to operate on him. He also pressed a pistol into his hand. "If the Gestapo comes, shoot yourself with it," were the doctor's words. The operation succeeded, Stapleford survived, was taken prisoner of war for a short time and was then able - as his son says - to lead a full life and, despite his wounds, to pursue his passion for golf. "Can you believe it?" interjects Gendreau-Héту. As Canadians, he and Stapleford agree, war is a distant and abstract concept.

All the greater is the fascination of the two for the risk that the supposed German enemies have taken with their willingness to help.

Anti-war song in remembrance

This realization also sets the tone for Stapleford and Gendreau-Héту when they each give a short speech at the memorial plaque in brittle voices and tears. For Stapleford, his father's story centers on the fact that he once came by plane to bomb Germany and that today Germans and Canadians stand together in peaceful remembrance and sing the anti-war song "where have all the flowers gone". For Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту, the story is also very personal. It is the story of his great-uncle, a young man who was raised in the Frech part of Ottawa/Canada, by his older sister and went to war as a 19-year-old aviator in the Royal Canadian Air Force. "He wanted to become a man. Well - he became a man ...and he died here," the 56-year-old says. It was obvious to him how much his grandmother's grief weighed on her too. His beloved grandmother, who also helped raise him in his childhood and teenage years never got over the death of her little brother - his great-uncle.

"I don't know if he realized what he was getting into. But who understands - even today in Ukraine or Russia?" says the Canadian, and suddenly the war is very close.

Still open questions around crashed bomber

On January 28, 1945, a Lancaster bomber of the Royal Canadian Air Force crashed near Waldenbuch. The historical reappraisal continues to this day.

By EDDIE LANGNER

WALDENBUCH. When the four-engine Lancaster K.B. 770 took off from Yorkshire toward Stuttgart on the afternoon of January 28, it was to be a flight to death for five of the seven British and Canadian crew members. The plane, which was shot apart by flak and probably also by German fighter pilots, crashed on this Sunday night about a kilometer away from Waldenbuch into the Lindhalde forest area with its engines on fire.

One of the pilots killed in the attack was the Canadian gunner Fernand L. Jolicoeur, who was only 19 years old at the time. Decades later, Jolicoeur's great-nephew Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту began researching the death of his ancestor.



The British-Canadian crew of the crashed bomber. Foto: alt-waldenbuch.de

During his research, he came into contact with Waldenbuch local historian Wolfgang Härtel. Together they got to the bottom of the plane crash. They found out that the pilot belonged to the 428 Ghost Squadron, a night bomber squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force, which flew strategic attacks over German territory during the Second World War.

According to Härtel's and Gendreau-Héту's findings, some 800 bombers were deployed in the Stuttgart area, 539 of which reached their target area. The planes of the first wave dropped their bomb load between 8:35 and 8:54 p.m., the second wave followed between 11:30 and 11:48 p.m.. The planes dropped about 10,500 explosive and incendiary bombs. "The weather was bad and the pilots had to fly long detours. There were numerous plane crashes," reports Wolfgang Härtel on his local history website alt-waldenbuch.de, where he and Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту document the background to the crash.

The events of the night of January 28, 1945, had been forgotten in Waldenbuch in the years after the war. "Before Pierre contacted me, I knew nothing about the crash," Härtel says. A report in this newspaper last February helped find several eyewitnesses and even some wreckage. In August 2021, Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту, who now lives and works in Switzerland, came to the crash site with his family for a memorial service.

During further investigations Gendreau-Héту came across Robert Stapleford, the son of the Canadian navigator Robert Laird Stapleford, who had survived the shooting down of the Lancaster bomber as one of two seriously wounded crew members. Despite all investigations, however, many questions are still unanswered - first and foremost because of a discrepancy

in the body count. According to the local death register of 1945 as well as an investigation report of an Allied commission written two years later, four bodies were buried in Waldenbuch.

When these human remains were exhumed in 1948 to find their final resting place in the cemetery of honor in Dürnbach near Lake Tegernsee, five bodies were buried according to the grave inscription. Why four bodies here and five there? Jean-Pierre Gendreau-Héту has not yet found the answer to this question.

The events of January 1945 had been forgotten in Waldenbuch