The Hill of Crosses

Alex Sinclair commenced aircrew training for a wireless operator in December 1942 at No. 4 Radio School at Madley in Herefordshire. He qualified after twenty-four hours flying time in de Havilland Dominies and Percival Proctors as well as many hours spent in the classroom. April 1943 found him at Mona undergoing gunnery instruction with No. 3 AGS, flying in Bothas and Ansons. One of the pilots he flew with was Pilot Officer Stephens who was killed a few months later in Anson LV152 (see Chapter 14).

On successful completion of the gunnery training Sinclair went on to No. 10 Radio School at Carew Cheriton, in Pembrokeshire, where advanced radio training was carried out in Ansons and Oxfords. Several of the flights were brought to a speedy conclusion by bad weather and equipment failures: all quite normal and untoward for crews able to dive down to the safety of their nearby bases.

The next posting was to No. 3 OTU at Withybury, near Haverfordwest to train on Wellingtons. Here Sergeant Sinclair teamed up with other airmen to complete their overall training as an operational crew. With Sergeant Wolman as captain this crew flew ten long cross-country flights and, as befitted a Coastal Command Unit, sea-leg flights. The last flight prior to going to an operational squadron was scheduled for 19th November 1943. The crew climbed aboard Wellington LB185 which left the runway at 2015 hours, leaving an airfield covered with the rime of frost.

With a layer cloud obscuring the Moon the radio was all important for fixes to establish their position and to that end Sinclair was kept busy. At intervals he changed position with Sergeant Maskell in the rear turret. All was routine until the radio packed up. They flew on hoping that the cloud would break or the radio come to life. After six hours of flying and fuel supplies running low, Sergeant Wolman had no choice except to reduce altitude and hope to drop below the cloud to establish their position. Sinclair and Maskell traded seats at this time, the former taking the rear turret post. Ten minutes later, at 0225 hours, the Wellington hit a rocky outcrop on the summit of 1,500-foot Moel y Cronesau (Hill of Crosses) near Trawsfynydd. The rear turret complete with occupant was catapulted to land almost a hundred yards further on.

After the initial shock of the crash Sinclair was amazed to find that, although he was in some pain, he was at least a survivor and able to move about. He made his way over to the main body of the aircraft in the near dark. Clambering into the tangle of wreckage it was soon evident that the two pilots, navigator and front gunner were dead. A shout made him turn - Maskell had been thrown out and rammed waist deep into marshy ground. He could not be moved, so Sinclair told him he was going to get help.

It was 7 am at the farm of Bwlch Gwyn when Mrs Blodwen Roberts heard a sound at the kitchen door. It was not a proper knock - more of a scuffle. Mrs Roberts hesitated, no one they knew would be there at that time of day. She called to her husband to come and open the door. They were shocked to see an injured airman. It was Sergeant Sinclair with a handkerchief tied round his head trying to stem the flow
of blood down his face. He told them of the crash, and said it had taken him four and a half hours to find help. He had found a fence on the mountain and followed it down to a river where a track appeared. A faded notice indicated that an abandoned (gold) mine lay up the track. Turning in the other direction, he soon came to an empty farmstead, Doldinisa, which the Robert's had left three years before. He found a table inside and lay on it for a while, moving on again when rested. He followed the rough track until Bwlch Gwyn appeared, arriving with three socks on one foot and one on the other. One boot had been sucked off in the marsh and found again, less two socks.

Mr Roberts hastened to the ROC post situated to the east of Trawsfynydd to report the crash. The Medical Officer at the nearby Army camp came out and rendered First Aid to Sinclair. At Llandower the Mountain Rescue team were notified at 0815 hours and reached the wreck in the jeep at 1000. Sergeant Maskell was found to have a broken spine but managed to give a running commentary on how to extricate him from the marsh. A stretcher was clearly useless for a spinal case so the rescuers found a flap detached from a wing and placed the survivor on it. He was carried down to the Humber Ambulance waiting near the gold mine and given a hot drink to sip. He was then taken to the Royal Naval Sick Quarters at Pwllheli, as was Sinclair, who had suffered internal injuries from the battering in the turret. The medical staff had been alerted by radio and knew what type of case to be ready for.

Although Sergeant Maskell survived it is believed he only lived for three years after the crash. Sinclair never flew as aircrew again, so all that training was wasted. He carried out ground radio work on aircraft when he resumed duty and later as a civilian worked at RAF Silloth. In 1964 he went back to thank the Roberts family for their help and paid his respects at the spot where his comrades died.

Above: Sgt A.Sinclair, wireless operator on Wellington LB185. (Mrs Sinclair)
Below: The crash site of LB185 on Moel y Croesau. The abandoned farmstead of Dolddinisa is in the trees.