



TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

RAF PATHFINDERS ARCHIVE - New & Historical Items, No.3 – 16 December 2017

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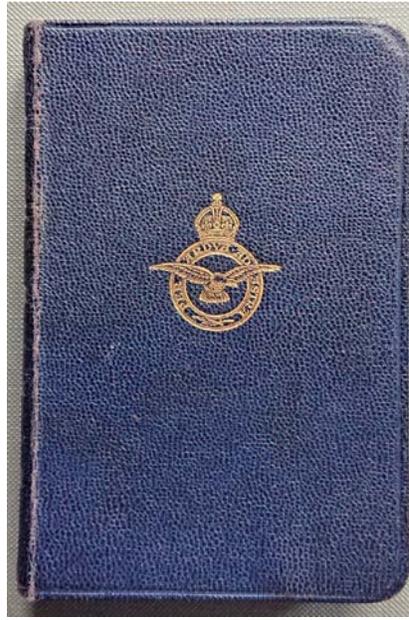
74th Anniversary of Black Thursday

The extraordinary survival of a sister's Christmas gift to her brother, who was shot down and killed over Berlin on 16 December 1943

Butler, Mary, WAAF

Butler, Robert

NEW: ROBERT BUTLER'S PRAYER BOOK



Earlier this year, we received a most generous gift from Margaret Butler, the niece of Robert Butler who flew with 97 Squadron's Brill crew. It was an archive of letters written home by Robert, known in his family as Bob. Other items included a prayer book with possibly one of the most extraordinary stories in the history of Bomber Command.

What seems a very ordinary little book in fact represents an astonishing tale of survival. It is also evidence that even the Germans in Berlin, suffering from devastating and repeated Allied bombing raids, could still recognise the humanity of their fallen enemy.

The prayer book had been given to Bob only days before his death by his beloved sister Mary, who was in the WAAF (*Mary appears below with an RAF boyfriend*). The inscription she wrote in the book can be seen overleaf.



Bob clearly treasured the gift, and took it with him on the night of 16 December 1943, when his crew flew in the operation against Berlin.

THE FATE OF THE CREW

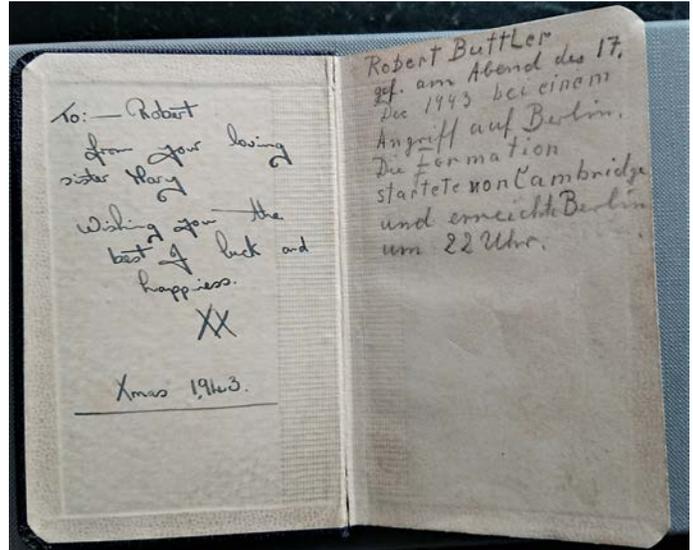
The Brill crew arrived at Berlin around eight o'clock at night with the rest of 97 Squadron. Shortly afterwards, the aircraft was hit by flak and apparently exploded in mid-air. None of the crew of eight survived. The body of Robert Butler was later found, without any sign of a parachute, but with the prayer book Mary had given him lying nearby.



After the war, only four of the crew could be identified by the **RAF Missing Research and Enquiry Service**. Amongst the four was Bob, and it was the testimony of a former German soldier which helped to identify him.

In August-September 1945, his family, who had known of Bob's death since early 1944, suddenly received – without explanation - the prayer book which Bob had carried with him on the night of his death. It had come back from Berlin, to his family home in Stafford, from a British Military Government Officer in Germany via the Air Ministry. This is the only explanation the RAF offered when Bob's mother (seen on the right, with Bob and other family members) wrote asking about the prayer book.

A report which would have been secret in 1945 gives the true story of how it was found.



Erich Kremer, a former soldier stationed in Berlin, gave testimony on 23 May 1945 at Aachen, Germany, to Major A J C Hirst, a Legal Officer with 227 Military Government Detachment. Erich Kremer stated that he had been sent, in the early hours of the morning of 18 December 1943, to the scene of three crashed British aircraft lying over a wide area:

“In or near the wrecked aeroplane (four-engined) which I guarded were four bodies, one in the plane and three on the ground. About three yards from one body was a prayer book which I now hand over to Military Government officials. I am certain that this body was the body of Robert Butler [...] as some papers which were taken from this body gave the name.”

Kremer, who understood English well and later worked for the Allies as an interpreter, must have been deeply moved by the inscription in the book from Mary to Bob. It was probably Kremer who wrote in German in the prayer book, saying that it was Robert Butler's and that he had come from near Cambridge on the fatal night. It was Kremer's act of preserving the prayer book which meant that, almost two years after Bob had carried it with him to Berlin, the book was at last returned to his loving family.

ROBERT BUTLER'S PRAYER BOOK CAN NOW BE SEEN IN THE BLACK THURSDAY EXHIBITION AT THE PATHFINDER COLLECTION, RAF WYTON, HUNTINGDONSHIRE.

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