

## PILOT OFFICER PETER JAMES DUKELOW No 170280

Peter Dukelow was born near the Tower of London in 1923. He was the eldest child of James Dukelow and May Christina McQueen, a working-class couple. Sadly, at age of 9, his mother died from pneumonia, leaving his father to raise four sons alone. Under the recommendation of the local priest, Peter and the second eldest brother, James, were sent to a boys' home in Westcliffe on Sea, Essex, which was run by the Sisters of Nazareth. The boys received a strict, Catholic education and this had a profound influence on Peter for the rest of his life.

At the beginning of World War II, Peter was employed at a firm of chartered accountants in the City of London. He wanted to join the war effort and become a pilot. At the age of 18, he sat the RAF entrance exam for air crew in Cardington Bedford which entailed various gruelling aptitude and physical tests over a period of three to four days. He was selected for pilot training with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Other cadets followed a path to engineering, navigation, bombing, gunnery and wireless schools.

As he entered the Initial Training Wing in Paignton, Devon, he posed proudly for a photo in his new uniform. The new recruits lived in this requisitioned seaside resort for six to eight weeks. Drill and physical training accounted for 4 hours a day in a six-day week, while classroom instruction was given in airmanship, meteorology, mathematics, Morse code and aircraft recognition. The courses were tough and standards high with an 80% success rate required. Peter passed with flying colours and, after a few days leave, embarked on the next stage in the process of becoming a fully fledged pilot.

Due to the lack of training airfields around the UK, the constant threat from the Luftwaffe and the vagaries of the British climate, the Air Ministry had set up the Empire Air Training Scheme in April 1940. Pilot training took place in the USA and Canada where the wide open spaces, plentiful supply of fuel and well established aircraft production facilities made flight and navigation training much easier. Peter went through the system when it was at its peak in 1943. On 27th August 1942, he sailed from Gourock, Scotland on SS Thomas H Barry Prior. Prior to the war, it had been the ocean liner SS Oriente and was requisitioned as a troop ship. Peter was accompanied by his friend John Appleton whom he had met at Initial Training. The pair arrived in New York on 5th September 1942. Peter was aged 19 and John was aged 22.

Cadets then boarded a train for the twenty-seven-hour journey to the main receiving centre at Moncton in New Brunswick, Canada where there were two Commonwealth Air Training bases.

During his time in Moncton, Peter fell in love with a French Canadian by the name of June Duprix/Duprez and, for the rest of his life, made plans to return and live in Canada.

But first, he had to travel to the British Flying Training School in Clewiston, Florida where the practical part of his training began. Flight training commenced with civilian instructors, using single engine American aircraft. Peter was trained at the Riddle-McKay Aero College. McKay, a Miami attorney, started the operation in September 1941 and trained 2500 RAF

pilots during the war. It was closed in 1945 and re-opened in 1947 as the Airglades State Airport.

The primary trainer was a Stearman biplane, similar to a Tiger Moth. Then cadets went onto a basic trainer, a Vultee BT13 before finishing on the advanced trainer, the AT6 Harvard. Over a period of 6 months and 200 hours of flying time, they learnt to spin, roll, loop and complete forced landings.

Training was intense and took up most of their time, but, every other weekend, the cadets were allowed time off. To stretch their \$7 a day pay, they often hitch-hiked to Miami or West Palm Beach which were located between 50 and 100 miles away. On Sunday there was a bus back to the airfield.

The contrast between conditions in the UK and the other side of the Atlantic was stark. Fruit such as oranges and bananas were freely available and there was sunshine aplenty. Perhaps for the first time in his life Peter was rubbing shoulders with university students who made up 90% of the cadets.

Training was not without its risks and accidents did occur, but Peter survived and graduated on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1943. He returned to Moncton, Canada, briefly and, after a few days, went back to New York and embarked on a troop ship to cross the Atlantic once again.

Back in England, he parted company from his close friend, John Appleton, who was posted to 142 Squadron in North Africa. Peter, now nicknamed 'Duke', was posted to Bomber Command to undergo further training. He had to become familiar with twin and four engined aircraft in order to help with the bombing offensive against Germany.

According to his school records, Peter visited them 'every time it was possible whilst on active service'.

By the close of 1943, he was commissioned on probation as a Pilot Officer No 170280. This is confirmed in the London Gazette of 26<sup>th</sup> December 1943.

North Killingholme, the base of 550 Squadron, was now his home. Before taking his own crew on an op, he had to do a trip with another crew. This was known as a 'Second Dicky'. According to correspondence from the Wing Commander of 550 Squadron to Peter's father after his death, Peter participated in four operational missions 'with great skill and determination and an unerring accuracy for bombing his target'.

Peter's last mission took place on the night of 21/22 May 1944 when Bomber Command sent 510 Lancasters and 22 Mosquito aircraft to bomb Duisburg. The previous year, the old part of the city had been completely destroyed in the Battle of the Ruhr, but it remained a logistical centre and a hub for important chemical, steel and iron industries. Squadron 550 contributed 18 aircraft.

Peter's crew boarded Lancaster LL851, laden with 5 tons of bombs. This aircraft had been delivered to 550 Squadron in March 1944. His crew consisted of Flying Officer L R Dunham 154276, navigator, Sergeant D A W Mayo 1576545, wireless operator, Sergeant D S

Bruty 1153961, flight engineer, Pilot Officer Leslie R Towsley J 93639, bomb aimer, Pilot Officer H E MacDuff J 19534, air gunner and Sergeant S A Jarvis 1808378, air gunner.

They climbed to 10,000 feet before setting course over the Netherlands. They then climbed to around 20,000 feet and lumbered towards their target at between 180 and 210 knots. When the aircraft reached Duisburg they found it covered by cloud. However, using accurate Oboe sky-marking, the raid destroyed 350 buildings, seriously damaged another 665 and there were 124 casualties. A lot of the damage was in the southern part of the city.

On the return home, at 2.15 in the morning, Peter's crew came under attack from a Messerschmitt fighter over St Niklaas, Belgium. The Lancaster was capable of performing a corkscrew manoeuvre to evade enemy fighters, but this was not always effective against small, speedy aircraft. They could also be outshot. Unfortunately, Peter's plane was shot down and crashed into a field owned by Albert Van Hoornick at Heimolen between the Wever and Heimolenstraat, 3 km south of Sint Niklass, Belgium.

A total of three 550 Squadron crews died that night. Lancaster DV 309 crashed outside the hamlet of Voortkapel Schobbroek and LM 319 is thought to have crashed in Germany. German records show that at least one of them was shot down by the German night fighter ace, Oberstleutnant Heinz Wolfgang Schnauffer (16 February 1922 – 15 July 1950) who finished the war with 121 kills. He remains the highest scoring night fighter ace in the history of aerial warfare and was awarded the Iron Cross personally by Adolf Hitler. He was based in Sint Truiden, Holland from August 1943 and was nicknamed the 'Ghost of St Trond'.

When Peter failed to return, the 550 Squadron Wing Commander dispatched a telegram immediately to his father. A letter followed stating that he may have become a prisoner of war, but 'information of this nature often takes several weeks to filter through the International Red Cross Society'. It also advised that Peter's personal belongings would be forwarded to RAF in Colnbrook, Slough. Peter's father relayed the news to Peter's brother, James, who was serving in the Navy in Sri Lanka.

In the meantime, Peter and his crew were buried in St Niklaas cemetery by German soldiers under the watchful eye of the Belgian police who took clandestine photos. Initially, the graves were simply marked 'Britisher oder Kanadischer Flieger' (British or Canadian airmen). Peter was just 21 years old.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1944, Peter's father was informed by the Air Ministry that the Red Cross had received information from official German authorities that Peter was killed. His father requested the return of his personal effects, which he received towards the end of October 1944. Amongst these items were a rosary and a cat mascot.

The site of Peter's grave was finally confirmed in a letter from the Air Ministry in London, dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 1944. He was buried in grave No 32970 in the Parish cemetery of Josef's Church, St Niklaas, 12 miles away from Antwerp, Belgium. It was not until October 1953 that permanent headstones were erected at the grave site. Peter's father was consulted about the inscription which reads:

*“In loving memory of my darling son, Peter. He died for us. Dad and family.”*

His death is also recorded in his school records, where there is a further epitaph.

*“Peter was an excellent young man and a true Catholic”*

Peter was awarded the 1939-1945 War Medal and the Air Crew Europe Star.