

World War II saw many Australian volunteers enlist in the conflict. They bolstered the ranks of the Royal Air Force and were trained on site. Squadron 463, to which the aircraft that crashed at Chaussy belonged, was formed in November 1943. More than 80 years have passed since the memorial stone was first unveiled in 1948, and memories had faded somewhat. Our crew had come to be remembered as Canadian, when in fact it consisted of six Australian airmen and one Englishman. The 2024 commemoration allowed us to restore the integrity of the memory we owe them — something that may no longer feel like a duty, but an honour, after the account I am about to share with you, which is drawn essentially from first-hand testimonies.

Here is an extract from John Barnes Sincock's military report regarding the take-off:

*On the evening of 25 July 1944, I was navigator of Lancaster JOY, tasked with attacking the aerodrome at Saint-Cyr-l'École in an operation planned shortly before nightfall. The scheduled arrival time was 20:00, at an altitude of 8,000 feet. Due to the short notice following an operation the previous night, the bomb loading on JOY was not completed until 17:52 — five minutes before the designated formation heading and eight minutes before the take-off deadline. By skipping the preliminary engine warm-up, the captain managed to take off 30 seconds before the deadline and overtook the formation, eventually positioning himself in the middle of it, with the other aircraft tightly grouped all around him. The aircraft's altitude was 8,000 feet.*

Then, in a letter to his family written in September 1944 shortly after being repatriated to England, he describes a suspended, almost unreal moment just before the crash:

*It was around eight o'clock in the evening — it would have been night back home, but here it was very bright. It was our sixth operation, but the first in daylight, and it was the most magnificent sight I had ever seen.*

*On all sides, the silver wings of our mighty aircraft glided through a carpet of enemy anti-aircraft fire targeting us, while our bombs fell, and they seemed miraculously to avoid the planes flying below. Suddenly, a vast column of smoke and debris rose up, and something that had contributed to the power of the German war machine simply ceased to exist.*

*A magnificent sight, even more impressive than the one I had often watched in the final stages of my training, when I would see our swarm of bombers rise at dusk above England.*

What follows this moment of grace lasts no more than two minutes, and crystallises all the solidarity, resolve and courage of this seven-man crew.

At the extremities of the aircraft: front and rear gunners Edward John Fallon and Edward Burke.

In the upper mid turret: Nevin Michael Davidson.

Behind pilot Donald Charles Gundry: Percy Oliver Francis Wadsworth, the sole Englishman and flight engineer, and John Barnes Sincock, the navigator and our principal witness.

John Vernon Scheldt, the radio operator, rounded out the front of the aircraft.

Sincock continues:

*Shortly before reaching our target, as the bomb aimer was making minor corrections, the aircraft was violently struck and suffered severe vibrations. Unaware that a starboard engine had been hit, I assumed at the time that our bombs had taken the impact. However, having heard the dorsal gunner Davidson tell me that one or more starboard engines were on fire before he himself was hit, it seems certain to me that the fire broke out with the first explosion. The captain maintained perfect control of the aircraft and continued to respond to the slight turbulence of the bomb aimer, flying through the anti-aircraft fire at the same altitude. Two or three seconds after the bomb release, the aircraft was hit again. But the explosion seemed to be of low intensity. Wadsworth briefly reported that his instruments had gone to zero but that he could continue without them.*

It was at this point that Gundry, in order to protect the squadron, deliberately lost altitude. But at the next salvo, a shell fragment pierced the mid turret and seriously wounded Davidson's left leg. Sincock came to his aid to pull him out of the turret, and Scheldt left the radio post to help. At that moment, the fuselage and the starboard wing caught fire, and only two of the four engines remained. Sincock left them to attempt to fight the fire, in vain. He saw Fallon, the front gunner, and Wadsworth pass in front of him heading for the rear escape hatch. He had not heard the pilot's order to bail out but understood it had been given, as the hatch opened very quickly. He saw Scheldt helping Davidson make his way to the rear of the aircraft and put on his parachute. Sincock then retrieved the captain's parachute, which was stowed in the roof of the engineer's instrument panel, and checked the ripcord on the right-hand side. He rejoined Gundry, shook his hand, jumped from the front hatch, and lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, on the Omerville plateau, here is what the diary kept by Madame Pietri in a pocket calendar — and preserved to this day by Gilbert Sarazin — records:

*We are gathering sheaves on the Omerville plateau, Robert Sarazin, Roger Tersinet and I... it was about ten to eight, we had not made ten piles of wheat when we saw the bombers returning in the distance; one in particular caught our attention, as it was trailing a plume of black smoke, then we saw a red glow that would sometimes disappear but immediately reappear, growing larger and larger — we understood it was on fire, it had been hit by anti-aircraft guns. Then suddenly a parachutist jumped from the plane, then four more; seeing they could not put out the fire, they leapt into the void. It was high time — the plane began to descend lower and lower above our heads, fire surrounding it on all sides. We thought it was going to fall on us; it was diving steeply, but at about fifty metres from the ground it banked and hurtled towards Chaussy, then seconds later the sound of the crash, the flames, the dust rose into the sky. Pieces fell from the sky in every direction.*

*We hurried down, but first we wanted to know where the parachutists had landed. One in particular was descending very fast — his parachute had torn. He landed heavily on the slope of the hillock; another came down in the Marquise meadow. The Germans were running in every direction to take them prisoner. We left quickly, as we wanted to go and see the plane. "Already a crowd of people was climbing the gendarmerie hill; men were trying to stop the fire that had caught in the oat field, and a stack of recently baled straw was burning. Monsieur Jouenne, pitchfork in hand, was searching for debris scattered here and there; and it must be said, two men had remained in the plane."*

Those two men were pilot Donald Charles Gundry, aged 27, married and the father of a one-year-old daughter who is still alive today, and John Vernon Scheldt, the radio operator, aged 22.

The five survivors were quickly captured by the Germans. After a brief stop at an aid post where their personal belongings and identity tags were confiscated, they were taken by truck towards Paris. Along the way, Fallon, Wadsworth and Burke were dropped off to be transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp — Bakow, in present-day Poland, until early 1945, then Luckenwalde, south of Berlin, until liberation. All three survived their captivity.

Sincock, wounded in the leg upon landing, and the badly injured Davidson were held and treated at the Beaujon Hospital in Clichy, which had been renamed Luftwaffen-Lazarett. During a failed SS transfer on 18 August, Sincock was recovered by the FFI and hidden in a retirement home.

They were repatriated at the end of August, via the American hospital system, first to England and then to Australia.

Donald Charles Gundry and John Vernon Scheldt are both buried in Omerville cemetery. At the foot of their graves, Davidson's son, who came on pilgrimage to pay his respects, left these words:

*My father made a full recovery — though he walked with a limp for the rest of his life — went on to raise a family, and lived a full and fulfilled life. For 50 years, the selflessness of Don Gundry and Vernon Scheldt has never ceased to be present in our family's shared memory.*

He also said:

*I stood there with my 22-year-old son — the very age Vernon and my father were at the time of the crash. And those two young men gave my father, and through him, me and my son, a chance to exist.*

Sincock, for his part, concluded his military report as follows:

*I wish to emphasise the courage, tenacity and bravery of our captain. It was certainly not the first time I had witnessed this in him. His courage, skill and determination were always evident, and he always kept his composure in emergencies. On 25 July, he was the same courageous and resolute captain as ever. When we were hit during our bombing run, it was our bombs that were struck first. As the squadron was heading towards its target, the safety of the other aircraft was being compromised by ours, and he sacrificed precious altitude. Once the danger had passed, he then thought of his aircraft and crew. In my view, he held on with exceptional courage and devotion. One engine caught fire, and when he heard of another fire in the fuselage, he gave the order to fight it with extinguishers. He fought to keep his aircraft flying and his crew together. When he finally gave the order to bail out, he left himself virtually no chance of getting out. His own life came last of all — and yet he had his whole life ahead of him. It was an honour to fly with him, and an even greater honour to call him my friend.*

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Chaussy has restored the memory of this event by revisiting the original tribute of 1948 in May 2024, and it will not stop there. A lectern will soon be placed beside the memorial stone, which we have restored and completed by engraving the insignia of their aircraft, and it will tell the story of what they lived through. This memorial will become the thirteenth stop on our heritage trail. And nothing of their sacrifice or their courage — to borrow the words of Sir Paul Keating, which are also engraved upon it — can ever again be either ignored or forgotten.