

Obituary - Kenyon Bowen-Bravery

Kenyon Bowen-Bravery, DFC, CdG, captained the first plane over France on D Day – Lancaster 'Bad Penny II' – and dropped the opening salvo of bombs which started Operation Overlord: the greatest liberating armada in military history. He was 21 years old.

In recognition, he and his crew were awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government.

For him, D-Day started the night before the famous date of June 6, 1944, when he and his crew climbed into the cockpit of his Lancaster - LL811 from 550 squadron - to begin what we now know as Operation Overlord.

The task of the sortie they led was to silence the huge guns trained on the Normandy coastline where British, American and Canadian divisions were to make their beach landings early the next morning.

Not even he knew the full scale of Overlord, so secret was it. However Flying Officer Bowen-Bravery (later Squadron Leader) was to set in train the RAF's largest ever operation. At 11.34 on June 5, he ordered the aircraft's payload of thousand-pound bombs away - and D-Day began.

Later he was to recall that night as being "unbelievable. Even though it was quite cloudy we could see the sky was full of planes. We realised the enormous scale of the invasion only later that day."

An artists' impression of Bad Penny II, with its marking BQ-J, was published in many newspapers and magazines across Britain to illustrate accounts of Operation Overlord. (attached)

That night, 1,012 aircraft - 551 Lancasters, 412 Halifaxes, 49 Mosquitos - followed Bad Penny II into D-Day. A plaque hangs in 550 Squadron's church, St Denys in North Killingholme commemorating the crew's historic role (Bowen-Bravery, Thompson, Thomas, Fyffe, Cleghorn, Bodill and Thompson) and their subsequent Croix de Guerre . F/O Bowen-Bravery was also awarded the DFC in September 1944.

Quiet about his wartime exploits, only in later life was he persuaded to recount some of the stories of his RAF service. These included the time when one of his crew needed to relieve himself returning from a mission of many hours.

The man, unknown to Kenyon, used a crack between the empty bomb doors. The effluent froze as it departed the plane and the ice particles showed up on the cockpit radar looking like a sudden cloud of attacking Messerschmitt fighters. Kenyon took instant avoiding action, taking the Lancaster into a steep corkscrewing dive and hurling the poor man, deshabelle, around the interior as if he were in a washing machine.

He preferred to talk of his times in India, where he met his beloved wife Mary, who was stationed in Karachi with the Princess Mary's RAF nursing service.

Bomber Command's death toll was appalling - comparable only to the worst slaughter of the First World War trenches. Of every 100 airmen who joined Bomber Command, 45

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were killed, 6 were seriously wounded, 8 became Prisoners of War, and only 41 escaped unscathed (at least physically).

That he and his crew survived was due in part to Kenyon's attitude to risk. His view was that there was nothing one could do about events one couldn't control, such as being shot down by anti-aircraft fire. However there was a lot one COULD control: he vowed they were not to die as the result of poor planning or an avoidable incident. Thus, while they could have relaxed in the mess, he would frequently insist instead on a cockpit practice, in which the entire crew, himself included, carried out emergency procedures blindfolded, so they could put out fires or land the plane in pitch blackness with a cabin full of smoke.

Indeed, when Bad Penny II was hit mid-air and shrapnel pierced him in the shoulder, the endless disaster training paid off and all landed safely. The entire crew made it through the war, bar one who transferred to a different plane to adjust his leave time.

After the war Kenyon joined Transport Command flying Dakotas in India and helping to train pilots for the Indian Air Force. He was heavily involved in the partition of India in 1947, flying Hindus to Delhi and Muslims from Delhi across to what was to become Pakistan. On one journey, the plane's smoke alarm sounded. He raced from the cockpit to find an Indian family had lit a bonfire on the floor of the plane to brew up some tea – they smilingly offered him a cup.

Later, he continued an extraordinarily interesting life as a director of Thomson Television International, travelling the world starting TV stations in Canada, India, Kenya and many other countries around the world.

Kenyon, of Hythe, Kent, died peacefully with all his family around him on Sept 1, at the age of 90. He leaves a widow, Mary, daughters Jane and Katy, and grandchildren James, Elizabeth and Alfie.

All his close and loving family, while respectful and admiring of his wartime exploits, remember him better as a wonderful husband and father, intelligent and fun-loving right to the end of his days, whose wit, good nature, generosity, sociability and love of nature and music will be sorely missed.