

F/Sgt Ashplant was later commemorated on three war memorials in Liverpool, at Halewood Parish Church close to his family's home, at the St Francis Xavier School in Woolton and at St Charles RC Church in Aigburth.

His CGM remained with the family in Liverpool until the early 1980s when it was stolen during a burglary at his sister-in-law's house. It was never recovered.

### **The crew that went alone**

It was courage of a different sort which led to another act of extraordinary bravery by a Lancaster crew from Elsham Wolds just a few weeks after George Ashplant won his CGM.

They were led by S/Ldr Charles O'Donoghue, a regular RAF officer who had spent part of the war in India and had flown Blenheims before arriving at Elsham Wold early in 1943 where he joined 103 Squadron. There he was to make a reputation for himself as something of a maverick, a man who liked to do things his own way. He told his crew he disliked night operations and would prefer to operate as he had done in Blenheims, by day, something he was to put into practice before very long in dramatic fashion.

March of 1943 was a stormy month and Elsham wasn't a good place to be in those conditions. There was heavy rain, low cloud and banks of fog alternating with storm-force winds which led to operations being cancelled and nerves becoming frayed as crews steeled themselves for yet another sortie over only to be stood down at the last minute. At times the winds were so strong even the Lancasters parked at their dispersals could be seen to be moving slightly, straining against their chocks as their wings flexed in the wind.

It was in these conditions that S/Ldr O'Donoghue asked to do something quite extraordinary, carry out a single-aircraft surprise daylight attack on Germany.

Another operation had been scrubbed on the night of March 19th and it was then that O'Donoghue, who had recently replaced the tour-expired S/Ldr Kennard as 'A' Flight commander, went to see the squadron CO, W/Commander Carter, with his idea for a solo nuisance raid. Carter consulted Group HQ at Bawtry and, after reviewing O'Donoghue's plans, gave the go-ahead.

Early the next morning O'Donoghue and his new crew, flight-engineer Sgt Jim Callaghan, a 20-year-old Londoner, navigator Sgt Tony Fry (21) from Grantham, bomb-aimer F/O Eric Ashcroft (20) from Worthing, wireless operator Sgt John Winn (22) from Northampton and gunners F/O Ian Burns DFM, a 22-year-old Glaswegian who had won his medal on his first tour with 144 Squadron in Hampdens, and Sgt Sefton Stafford (33) from Blackpool, climbed aboard Lancaster ED612. It was still very dark at the dispersal but, as the only RAF bomber flying that morning, there was nothing to delay their take-off at 4.20am.

Their target was the small port of Leer, near Emden and they carried 11 1,000lb bombs, the first with a six hour delayed fuse. The squadron's operation record book recorded: 'It was a target of S/Ldr O'Donoghue's own choosing and he bombed from 3,200ft at 0645. As this was a surprise raid, he was, of course, the only aircraft attacking. The first stick of bombs fell within 100 yards of the town's railway station and the second stick fell parallel

to the town's main street.' The report added that the attack was made 'in foul weather' and the Lancaster returned safely, landing at Elsham at 0842.

O'Donoghue's raid was judged a success so when he requested another solo raid eleven nights later permission was readily granted.

In the interim his crew had taken part in an inconclusive attack on Duisburg on the night of March 26/27 and Berlin three nights later when 21 bombers were lost and most of the bombs fell in open country. In between O'Donoghue had to abort a raid on St Nazaire when two engines on his Lancaster cut on take-off. He managed to get the aircraft clear of the airfield and was ordered to dump his bombs in the North Sea before making a successful two-engine landing back at base. During the Berlin raid O'Donoghue's Lancaster dropped its bombs from 16,000ft, some four thousand feet below the other Elsham Lancasters.

His second and final single-Lancaster nuisance raid began in the early hours of April 1. O'Donoghue and his crew were allocated Lancaster ED626, a virtually new aircraft which had only been delivered to the squadron earlier that month.

They took off at 4.30am and their target this time was the little town of Emmerich on the Rhine which they planned to reach at dawn. The weather was again foul with strong winds lashing Elsham and the cloud base so low it seemed to be pressing down on the airfield. O'Donoghue again hoped to catch the Germans napping and it appears that, initially, he was successful. The Lancaster was believed to have reached its target and bombed at first light but it was then that his luck ran out.

The whole of Northern Europe was covered by the world's most sophisticated air-defence system and, once the Lancaster was picked up on radar, a chain of events began which was to lead to the destruction of ED626 and the deaths of all those on board.

One of the Luftwaffe's crack day fighter units, 3/JG1, was based at Arnhem/Deelen in Holland, and its Fw190s were scrambled to intercept the Lancaster as it turned for home. It is likely they took only minutes to find the bomber and the ensuing fight would have been a grossly unequal one. At around 7.20am an RAF listening post picked up a distress call and two minutes later the bomber crashed in flames five miles east of Harderwijk, a small town in the centre of Holland. The 'kill' was later credited to Ofw Fritz Timm, one of JG1's least experienced fighter pilots. Timm was to go on to become a Luftwaffe ace with five Allied aircraft to his credit before he, too, was killed in combat at the end of May, 1944.

Back at Elsham there was an ominous silence. Crews who had been woken early that morning by the sound of O'Donoghue's take-off began to look at their watches and wonder whether this time his luck had finally run out.

At the station tannoy summoned all crews to the briefing room where they were told that a distress call had been picked up from a single aircraft which had been hit as it was believed to be crossing the Dutch coast on its way back to England. There was a chance, the men were told, that the Lancaster had ditched in the North Sea.

Australian Don Charlwood, who flew as the navigator in Geoff Maddern's crew, later recalled: 'We were ordered out on a square search in the area east of The Wash but our

chances of success were negligible. Met had forecast waves of 30 to 40 feet high and the gale was still blowing.

‘All that morning we flew, scanning the changing mountains and valleys of the grey North Sea. White-caps rose and broke, lashed by squall after squall before eventually we flew back across the scudding clouds and the windmills of Norfolk with little hope that anyone would have anything to report.

‘When we reached Elsham it was to learn that the German radio had claimed a single heavy bomber shot down. All members of crew had been killed. Perhaps the listening post had heard O’Donoghue’s last call.’

The confusion over the location of the crash probably emanated from that last message from the dying Lancaster. Harderwijk is some distance from the North Sea but the town is bordered by the Veluwe Meer, one of the inland waterways which are a feature of this part of Gelderland and, in the murk of that terrifying morning, perhaps the crew of ED626 mistook that for the coast.

Today six of the crew, O’Donoghue, F/Os Ashcroft and Burns, and Sgts Callaghan, Fry and Winn, lay side by side in the British military section of Harderwijk General Cemetery. The rear gunner, Sgt Stafford, is buried some 15 miles away in the Amersfoot (Oud Leusden) General Cemetery, suggesting that somehow he became separated from the rest of his crew in the final seconds of Ofw Timms’s attack.

Whatever did happen, Bomber Command learned a simple message that All Fools’ Day morning, four-engined bombers were not suited to daylight nuisance raids whatever the weather. There would be no repeat of S/Ldr O’Donoghue’s exploits nor would there be any medals for him and his crew.

### **The hero who took his Lancaster home for tea**

Medals were not always awarded for a single act of courage. Many went to airmen who showed outstanding courage and determination over long periods of operations. Once such was Arthur Harrington Jefferies, one of the most colourful characters to fly with 1 Group. He was a man destined to fly on some of the most harrowing operations during the long, hard winter of 1943-44 and was to be awarded a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. But his devil-may-care attitude to authority and his disciplinary record meant that when he was killed on his 29th operation he was still an NCO, something almost unheard of for a pilot of his experience and undoubted ability.

F/Sgt Jefferies had joined the RAF at 18 and was to have numerous brushes with authority during his short career in Bomber Command. He had already had one spell on a disciplinary course before going to 1662 Heavy Conversion Unit at Blyton in April 1943. He then joined 101 Squadron at Holme-on-Spalding Moor where he flew four operations before the move to Ludford. From there he was to fly on a number of raids, including Hamburg where he nursed his badly damaged Lancaster back to Ludford.

At the end of August 1943 he appears to have run into problems once more and was sent to the RAF disciplinary centre in Sheffield. He finally returned to Ludford in November but was immediately sent to Lindholme where he joined a new crew which was