

LUKE SYLVESTRE DELANEY 1919-1941

The following narrative is about the search for my uncle Luke and, through that, learning of the bravery of the aviators of RAF 211 Squadron in Greece in 1940 and 1941.

None of what follows would have been possible without the generous help of Gillian Gloyer, the staff and associates of the British Embassy at Tirana, Ian Carter of the Blenheim Society, Don Clark of the [211 Squadron](#) website, the villagers of Topova and Ksenofon Dilo. Terry Delaney and his family provided much source information which enabled the story of Luke to be covered in some depth. My wife, Pauline has provided much support throughout and helped in editing this story.

PART 1.1- LOST - WINGS OVER OLYMPUS

When I was a child in the 1950s my father gave me a copy of 'Wings Over Olympus'¹ written by T.H. (Tommy) Wisdom. The book is the story of the Royal Air Force in Libya and Greece in the early years of WW2. At my age all I was interested in were the photos, especially 'The Duke' 'nursing an Iti dud'. The picture was of my uncle, Luke.



The gift was to provide me with a memory of an uncle I never knew, who died on 6th January 1941 in Albania with no known grave. Years later, on reading the book, it seemed odd that Luke was only commemorated at the Alamein War Memorial when he *did* have a grave: Tommy Wisdom recounted visiting it (see Note 4), but Albania was inaccessible and that was that.

Following the death of my mother I inherited a formal photograph of Luke as a newly commissioned Pilot Officer, and over the following years the desire to find his grave grew in me. There was frustration as Albania had been a closed country for so many years, and although the communist regime of Enver Hoxha had ended, the country was in turmoil. More years passed and it was only when I retired in 2019 that I decided I had to do what I could to find where Luke had died.

The breakthrough came when I chanced to learn that one of my relatives, Joe Delaney, had also been searching for information, and he led me to Brian Cull's book 'Blenheims Over Greece and Crete'². On pages 61/62 is what appeared to be a first-hand description by 2/Lt Kaneuopoulos (*sic*), 34th Greek Regiment, of the crash of Luke's aircraft and the burial of Luke and his aircrew at the village of Topova. I had, earlier in the year, been trying to make sense of letters written to my grandfather in 1942, citing Greek references and names of places that could not be found. The more I researched, the more I realised that much was being lost in translation and the confusion of war. I now had a place to focus on, however: Topova in the Zagoria valley, East of Gjirokaster.

Then the Covid pandemic broke out.

Research During the Time of Covid

The information in Brian Cull's book had some inconsistencies that needed ironing out. The Greek officer writing about the event spoke of carrying the dead aviators across the Drino river. Using Google Earth, it was apparent that this must be wrong. It was definitely the Zagoria river. Looking at the location I realised I needed help, particularly as the village was remote and 'off-road'. I contacted Gillian Gloyer, author of the Bradt Guide to Albania³, and also the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). The CWGC website had information on it relating to other aircrews lost in Albania during the war, and the CWGC representative for The Balkans recommended that I contact the British Embassy in Tirana, which I did. In the meantime, Gillian, through a friend of hers, confirmed my findings that Luke and his fellow aviators had died near Topova and had been buried in the village churchyard. Three years of research had almost come to an end. Then I heard back from the British Embassy Defence Section that they would be able to provide transport and interpreting support. I booked a flight for my wife Pauline and myself to Tirana.

"What Was Meant to Be Has Already Happened"⁴

Like most Britons, I knew and still know next to nothing about Albania and the years of Enver Hoxha. I cannot write about the effects of his rule, except to point out that the Tirana Park Memorial Park⁵ is a reminder of his attempted erasure of the memory of UK assistance during WW2. That could have had repercussions for the remains of other fallen servicemen, but thankfully, memories remain, and stories are handed down, even if with time they take their own paths: the past and present are one.

Tirana and the British Embassy

On 15th May, the day after our arrival in Tirana, we met with my British Embassy correspondent Major Imran Ahsan. He introduced us to his colleagues Gerd Kaceli and Richard Bone. Imran and Gerd were to take us to Topova. Earlier, in England, Terry Delaney (Joe's father) and I had searched for possible churches on the internet. We had found a 'Kisha e Shën Kolli, Topova' on the St Nicholas Center website but it was not marked on Google Earth, and I dismissed it. Richard, however, had visited Topova the week before and confirmed that the church was indeed Kisha e Shën Kolli (Church of St Nicholas). Richard had also met a villager, Vasil Dilo, who indicated that the graves were there.



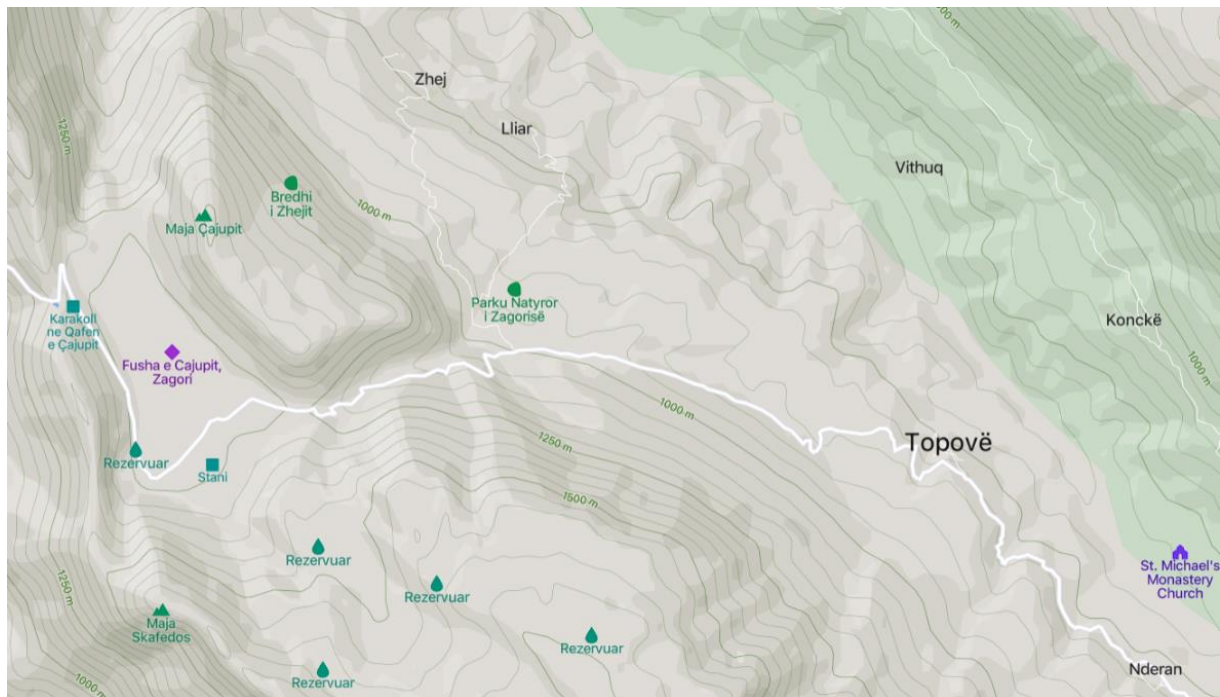
We later learnt that the church had been destroyed during Hoxha's Atheist State period, but in recent years the bell tower has been rebuilt and the St Nicholas Center is correct in its listing.

PART 1.2 – FOUND - THE TRIP TO TOPOVA

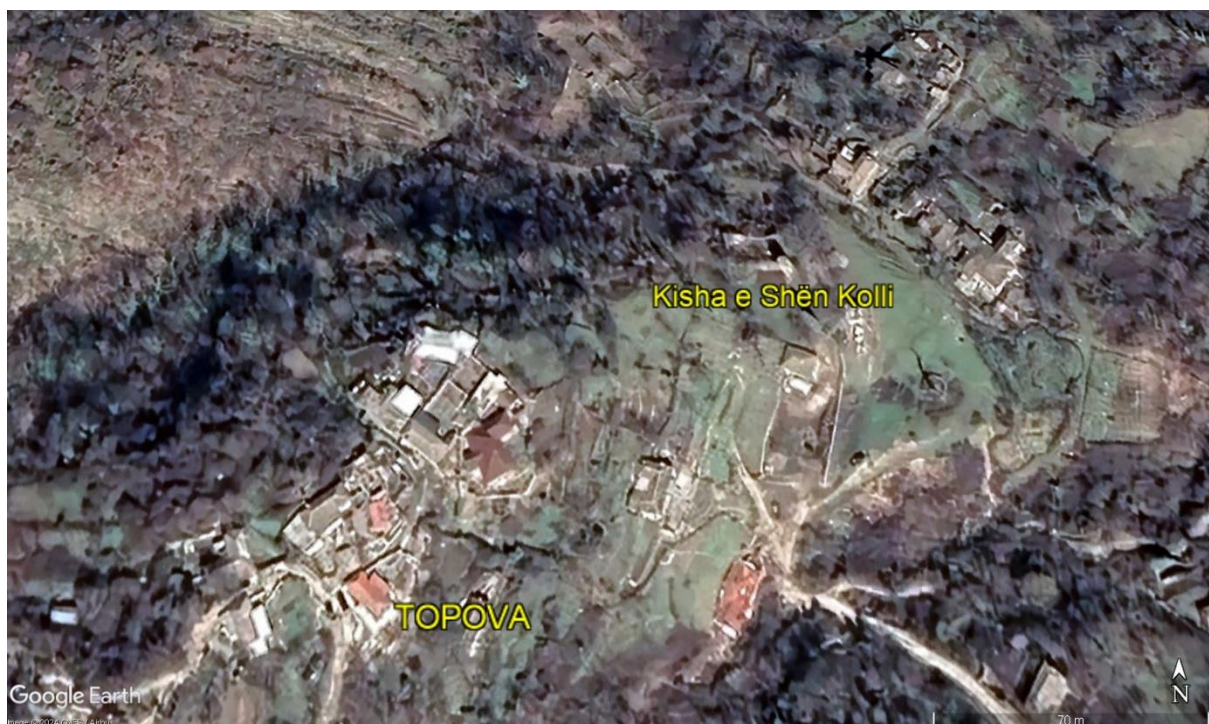
The distance from Tirana meant we would have to stop at Gjirokaster overnight, and wet weather delayed the whole trip to Topova by a day, giving us a little more time to see central Tirana. We had arranged to meet Gillian at our hotel in Gjirokaster. Staying in the old town was certainly a bonus to our trip, together with the hospitality we met there.

The road to Topova from Gjirokaster snaking over the ridge into the Zagoria valley towards Fusha e Çajupit

On 18th May Imran and Gerd drove us 5 Km on a very difficult mountain track down to the village from the end of the metalled road at 'Fusha e Çajupit'. When we arrived, we were met by Vasil Dilo and two other villagers together, briefly, with one of their wives.



Map 1: The road into the Zagoria valley (Mapcarta)



Topova showing location of Kisha e Shën Kolli. The shadow of the bell tower is clearly visible.

The villagers led us to the churchyard and Vasil Dilo pointed out 'with certainty' where the graves were. There was nothing to indicate them, but then we expected nothing after 80 years.



*The remains of Kisha e Shën Kolli (Church of St Nicholas)
with the rebuilt bell tower and a Judas tree in the foreground*



The indicated site of the graves



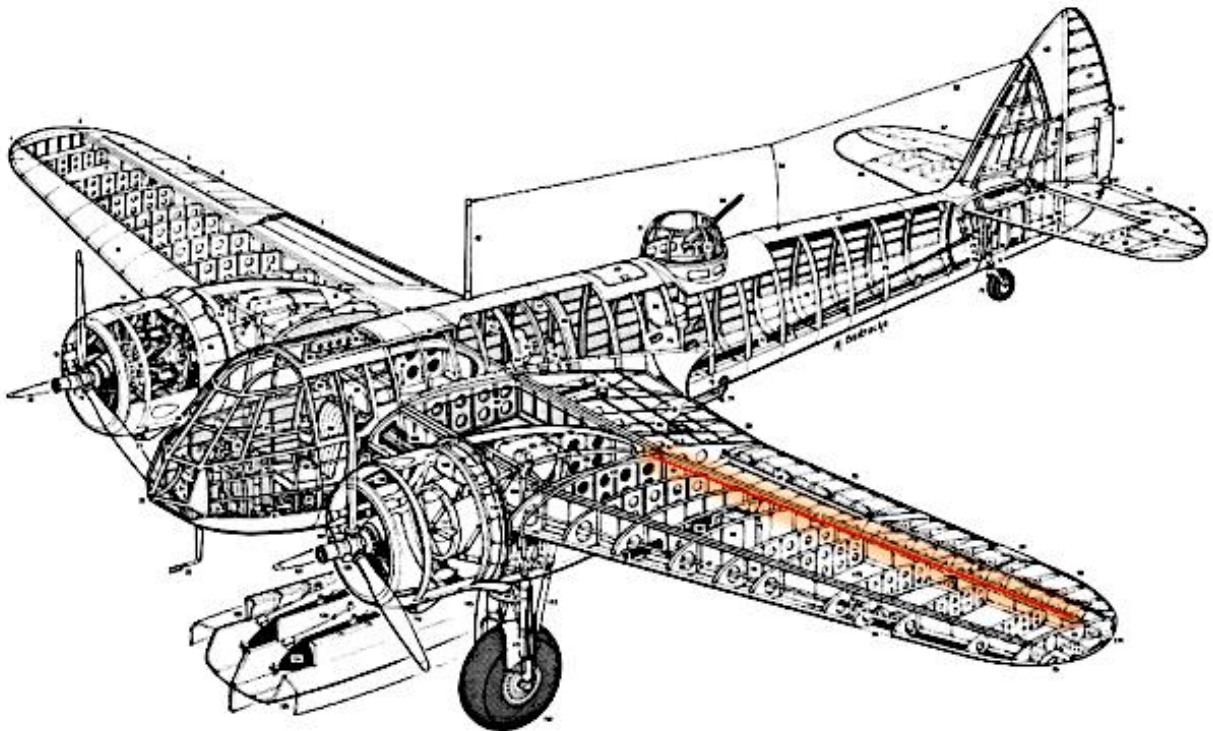
View across the Zagoria valley towards where the aircraft crash-landed

While we were quietly taking in the site and its setting, one of the other villagers said he had a piece of the aircraft! We went off to his house and from behind a shed he brought out a long, narrow piece of metal with bracing on the long edges. From detail of the riveting, it was clearly highly engineered, and a patch of colour suggested RAF origin to Imran.



The Wing Spar.

The metal was later confirmed by a Blenheim Society expert⁶ to be a wing spar from a Bristol Blenheim.



Cutaway of a Blenheim Mk 1 showing the approximate location of the wing spar



Pauline, Imran, Gerd, the three villagers with Vasil Dilo to right, Gillian with the Blenheim wing spar

We then returned to the churchyard. Walking up past the village houses, the only sound in the otherwise wonderfully tranquil valley was that of a nightingale singing.

While the others stood at a distance, I laid the wreath in the area where we had been told the graves were and said a few words in remembrance of my uncle and his comrades. We all agreed this was a good resting place for the three men.



We then left the villagers, who had reluctantly accepted a little cash to have a drink on us, and we headed back to Tirana. While on the journey, the following day's meeting was confirmed with Gerd.



The return from Topova: the Drino valley

Meeting The Eyewitness

The next morning, we visited 91-year-old Ksenofon Dilo at his home. He had been located by Gustav Shtjefni, a contact of Richard's, who had found a Zagoria valley facebook page and posted a query on it. Ksenofon had replied on facebook that as a young boy he had seen the crash-landing and attended the funeral of the three airmen. The graves had originally been marked with simple white crosses bearing the names of the men, but these had rotted away over the years.

Ksenofon said that the whole village was upset by the death of the young airmen, and he was visibly distressed when I offered a photo of Luke. Gerd video-recorded Ksenofon's description of the event as evidence-gathering for CWGC. Ksenofon clarified that the graves (marked in red in his drawing below) were a few feet away from where we had been standing in Topova.



Drawing by Ksenofon Dilo of the tree and Church



The remains of the tree, 2023



Ksenofon Dilo is a noted artist and was at one time Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Tirana.

The occasion seemed as important to him as it was to us.

He generously gave us all signed copies of a book of collected paintings of his, to thank us for visiting him.

Ksenofon Dilo signing his book

gjurmimi i shtruarit i topave. Ai dimër do të ishte vërtet i rëndë. "Larashët" filluan gjuetinë e mishit mbi mushkat "ushtarake" të ngordhura brinjave...

Rrëzimi i aeroplanit

Me dy nga shokët e mij të mëhallës, më duket me Dhion dhe Çeçin s'e mbaj mend mirë, po zbresnim nga "Kroi i Mikut" kur befasi në qiell mbi fshat u fanit një aeroplan që fluturonte fare ulur. Kaloi mbi Rrapin e Madh, mori drejtimin drejt "shesheve" të Konckës dhe vate e ra në arat mbi lumë. E kam të gjallë dhe sot në sy ceremoninë e varrimit të tre pikotëve të vrarë në këtë avari. Ushtarët grekë të rreshtuar te Rrap i Madh i fshatit i poërcollën arkivole për në Kishën e Shën Kollit aty pranë dhe i varrosën bri njeri tjetrit nën këmbanoren apo më saktë rreth dy metra nga një llofatë që ndodhej buzë murit rrethues të kishës. Në vitet e para të pasluftës, kryqet e drunjtë ishin ende aty por, më pas u kalbën e u fshinë nga koha. Aeroplani ishte anglez dhe siç thuhej pilotët e vrarë e të varrosur ishin një anglez dhe dy kanadezë. Para dy vjetësh ja pata treguar këtë episod një mikut tim skocez i cili mbajti shënim me interese gjithë hollësitë e ngjarjes por me sa di unë sot e kësaj dite, nën tokën e asaj ish kishë, të shkatërruar plotësisht më pas, së bashku me eshtrat e stërgjyshërve tanë, prehen edhe ato të atij ekipi pilotësh të huaj. Duke rëmuar në kujtesë më duket se avioni ra përtej lumit, në brezalet e Konckës, më 6 janar të vitit 1941.

te naje njeru njerne... Dne ja thoshin katraurën e kemi prapa derës! Ne të vegjëlvë që dëgjionim pak sa mënjanë na dukeshin këto muhabete si magjira të mëdha që hera herës dëjka nga to kuptonim, ndërsa herë të tjera të bëhej sikur flitej për një botë që ishte diku prapa malit tonë me emrin e çuditshëm Katal, ku fshiheshin dhe ca "Thesarë të Bilbilenjve" siç qarkullon deri në ditët tona kjo thashethemnajë. Ishte kohë e mbushur me një tis të dëndur hallësh, frike, dhe ankthi. Për ne më të vegjëlvë kohë e magjive të çuditshme.



shumë zanate praktike në kurbet. Nga "kula" mbi sheshin e fshatit, pranë vështit të Lekos, ku skuqte hekurin me kaçup, zbrishte poshtë "Xhoxhi", Jorgo Dilua, hokatar e me ato shpotitë e tij të romuze e humor të gëzuar. Nga skaji tjetër, nga Dedajt, ngijte përpjetë Rakua, kryeplaku i fshatit dhe i urti erudit i fshatit Levani, njeriu i librave që hera herës psallte bukur në kishë. Në hajatin e madh të kishës mbledheshin burrat, ndërsa në hajatin e poshtëm gratë. Mbledheshin aty Pelo Pangua e Naço Pangua, Dhame Dilua e Liko Murati, Vesil Dilua, Themo Vasha e Peko Vasha, që u ndanë nga jeta para pak kohe. Aty vinte Rako Londi që më pasdo të kishte një fat tragjik. Vinin nga Mëhillajt, Dheftajt, Dhesmëvitajt... Por aty do të gjen-

paget. Duke zotuar tatepjetë me keqër Pilua i Dilanje mërmëriste refrenin e të njëjtës këngë me motive biblike:

... "Doli shejtani nga dheu Edhe Evën e gënjeu dhe Eva më pastaj gënjeu burrin e saj. Q' atë ditë e q' atë natë, burrat bëjnë ç' thonë gratë. Edhe gratë qoftë larg kanë shejtanin në bark..."

... "Qoftë larg" thoshte herë pas here në muhabet e sipër edhe Papa Nikolla (Duri) që vinte ashtu i këmbur qvash - qvash që nga fshatet e jeta të gjihtë e kam zhdonështë ndërsa ëshë prezat u janë,

ku shkuan gjithë këta njerëz?... Nga kjo largësi edhe huqet e tyre të duken tipare të profilit njerëzor ku shpalóset ajo mirësi e pafund që ndjej gjithmonë për njerëit e fshatit tim, ai fllad ngrohtësie që të push-ton e që vjen pa dyshim nga larg, nga genet e lashtësisë së krahinës. Dhe në këto kujtime të cinguar mungon natyrisht kapitulli më i dashur, më i dhimbshmi, por dhe më madhështori në dramën e vet, ai i gjysheve dhe nënave tona, me emra një nga një të veshur qëkur s'mbahet mend në të zeza, si të dala nga tragjeditë e mëdha anti-ke.

Siluheta madhështore të dhimbjes dhe ripërtëritjes së pashtershme të jetës...

KSENOFON DILO

In December 1997

Ksenofon wrote an article in the 'Zagoria' newspaper a copy of which he gave me, and which Gillian has kindly translated. It tells of seeing the aircraft fly really low over the big Oriental Plane tree (Rrap i Madh), heading towards the flat lands of Koncka (a village on the opposite side of the valley) and 'falling' on the fields above the river.

"To this day, I can see before my eyes the burial ceremony of the three pilots killed in this mechanical failure. The Greek soldiers were lined up at the village's big Oriental Plane tree; they bore the coffins to St

Nicholas' Church, where they took them and buried them alongside each other, under the bell tower - or, to be more precise, about two metres from a Judas tree that was next to the wall surrounding the church. In the early post-war years, the wooden crosses were still there, but later they decayed and were hidden by time."

"... but, as far as I know, as of today, under the earth of that former church, which was later completely destroyed, together with the bones of our great-grandparents also lie those of that team of foreign pilots.

References for Part 1:

¹ *Wings Over Olympus, The Story of the Royal Air Force in Libya and Greece, T.H.Wisdom (THW), 1942*

² *Blenheims Over Greece and Crete 1940 -1941, Brian Cull (BC), 2014*

³ *Albania the Bradt Guide (now in 7th ed.), Gillian Gloyer, 2022*

⁴ *Mud Sweeter Than Honey, voices of communist Albania, Margo Rejmer, 2021. 'WHAT WAS MEANT TO BE HAS ALREADY HAPPENED' is the title of a chapter on the Zagoria valley in the book. While it alludes to Ecclesiastes 3.15, it has a certain resonance with the search.*

⁵ [Tirana Park Memorial Cemetery](#)

⁶ *Ian Carter and the Blenheim Society President, 'Smudge', confirmed the wing spar identification.*

Notes for Part 1

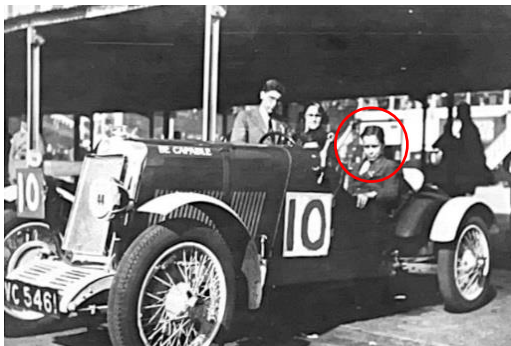
1. Throughout, place names are those which are current, thus 'Valona' (Italian) is replaced by Vlora, but I use 'a' instead of 'ë' at the end of Albanian place names, for simplicity.
2. In BC¹, on page 61, there is a recollection by Serg. Emilio Piva reported in *Volare*, 2009. BC referring to the 6th January mission. I think this must be in error as the description that Piva gives of seeing two airmen parachute from a flaming aircraft into open sea and drowning does not accord with the Operations Record Book (see Part 2) for that day. Also, it could not have been L8536 as stated in BC as Piva's account bears no resemblance to the events leading to the loss of the aircraft Luke was piloting.
3. The discrepancy above reflects as much the passage of time as anything else when memories become blurred, different events combine, sequences become altered, and so on. The events were many years ago. Below are some other discrepancies encountered:
 - a. 2/Lt Panayotis Kanellopoulos' confusion of the rivers Drino and Zagoria.
 - b. The crash landing of Luke's aircraft has been variously related as it 'hitting a rock on landing and turning over', or 'exploding', or 'clipping a tree and crashing into a 'wall' (this is assumed to be a rock outcrop marking the end of a field)'.
 - c. The men were all dead when the Greek soldiers found them, but one second-hand commentary has 'one was alive when the men were first found'.
 - d. The aviators were Canadian or were one English and two Canadian. This confusion has yet to be (if ever) understood. According to Vasil Laj from Ndëran (who had given the initial information about the graves to Gillian's contact) in the 1990's two foreign men with an interpreter visited and asked about the graves, but on hearing the buried men were Canadian they went away. (It is possible that they were looking for war graves of either Greek or Italian soldiers).
4. In March 1941 Tommy Wisdom¹ describes going by car to Gjirokaster, then mule for 20 miles/6 hours before climbing on foot, surmounting a ridge 5000 ft high and descending into the village of 'Lutezi', before going on a few miles to a Greek gun position. The gun position was possibly at M. Golikut, overlooking Tepelena. While he may have confused names, he was very circumspect about giving out detailed information and it is entirely possible that 'Lutezi' was, in fact, Topova, where he saw the graves of Luke and this crew as described earlier, in Chapter 14 of 'Wings Over Olympus'.

PART 1.3 - LUKE BEFORE THE RAF

Knowing where my uncle is buried brought comfort to myself and relatives, but who was my uncle? My parents did not speak of Luke. All I ever had was the book and the photograph. I decided to look through scrapbooks made available by my cousin Terry and his family. It did not take long to draw up a simple (but of course incomplete) biography to 'paint' a picture of him before he joined the RAF.

Luke Sylvestre Delaney was born on 15th August 1919, the sixth child of Luke Terence Delaney (LTD) and Amy Delaney. LTD was a highly successful entrepreneur, having built up a thriving and innovative engineering business based on working and sporting experience from the early days of motoring together with its subsequent development. This, together with his older brothers' interests in motor racing, flying and gliding, provided Luke with some of the tools for an exhilarating life.

LTD's second son, Tom, raced a Lea Francis in the 1930s (and again later, in the same car, up until 2006 when he was 95!) The first recognisable images of Luke appear with the 'LeaF':



With his mother Amy and my father, Eric



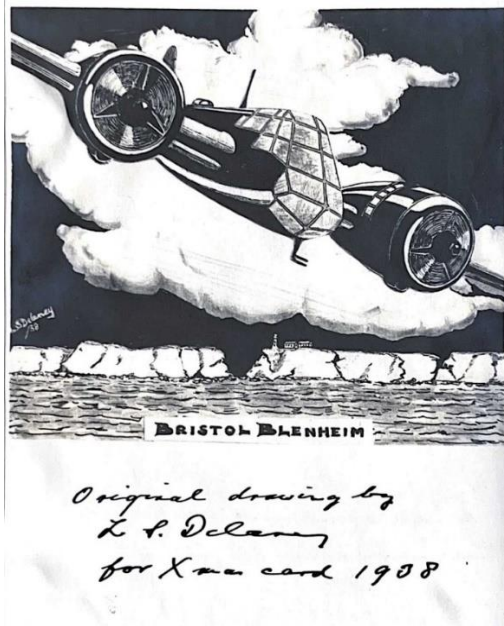
With Tom at Brighton Speed Trials 1934, 15 yrs. old

Luke was educated at Bishop's Stortford College where he was keen on rugby and also showed an aptitude for art. At 15, a sketch of his for the school magazine so impressed SCH (Sammy) Davis, cartoonist and sports editor of 'The Autocar' magazine, that he strongly recommended Luke continue developing this skill. Photos show his interest in motor sport from a young age. Moving from onlooker to participant, by 1936 he was competing in cross-country motorcycling on a 350cc Royal Ruby in the 'Schoolboys Trial'.

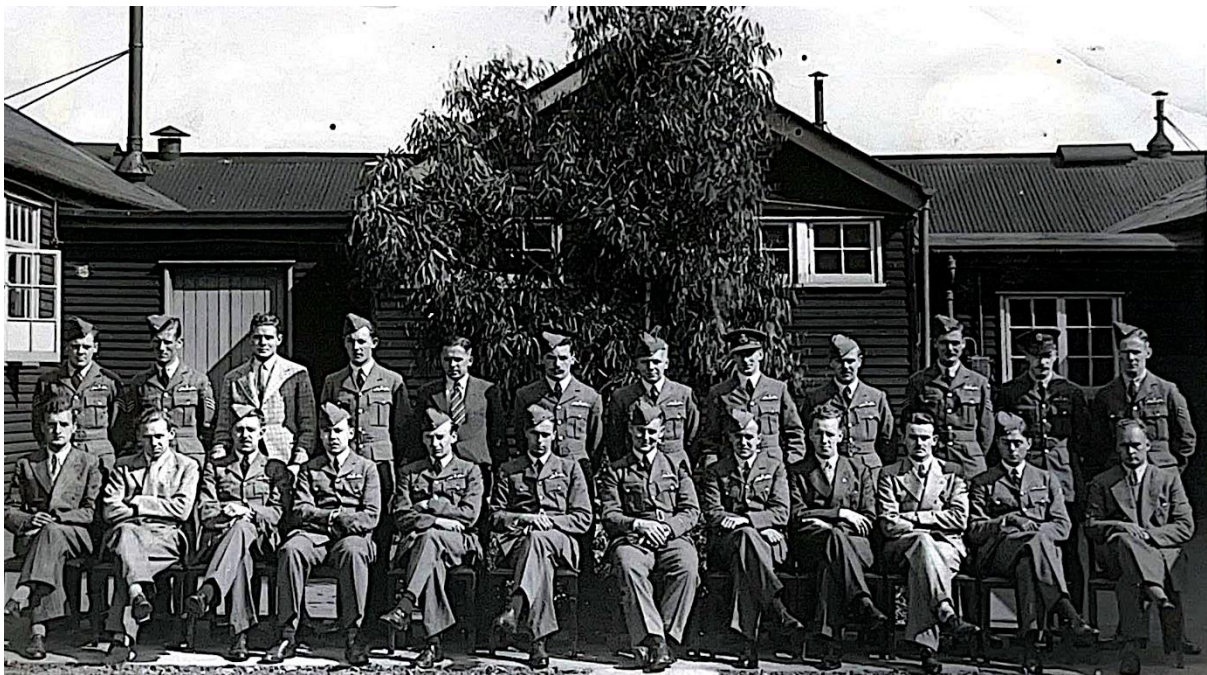
PART 2.1 - 'DUKE' IN THE RAF UNTIL NEW YEAR'S EVE 1940

The reason for Luke's decision to join the RAF is not given in the records available to me, but most of the family were keen on flying (either airplanes or gliders) so he was likely to have had some experience at flying and WW2 was impending. By 1938, in case of war, a 'Schedule of Reserved Occupations' had been drawn up. His elder brothers would have been included in such as they provided engineering management for the war effort. The family may have foreseen that Luke, at his age, would not be eligible and he should choose a service to join. Whatever the reason, he joined the RAF on 9th January 1938.

Service personnel are usually given nicknames and Luke's was 'Duke', occasionally 'The Duke', throughout his time in the RAF and that is how I shall refer to him in the context of the RAF. After training, in November 1938 Duke was posted as a Pilot Officer (P/O) to 108 Squadron, flying Bristol Blenheim Mark 1s, based at Bassingbourn.



Christmas Card for 1938 (Leaving the White Cliffs?) and Formal Portrait



A photo possibly from the time Duke was commissioned. He is centre left, front row.

In August 1939, a letter he wrote to his parents describes flying from RAF Waddington to Marseille before going onward the following day to Malta. James Dunnet⁷ recounts flying to Malta, resupplying spares and stores, and this may have been a similar mission to Duke's (although, for James flying in September 1940 there was no stopping over in Marseille which was by then part of Vichy France).

On 22nd November 1939, Duke flew 'his' aircraft, named 'Bloody Mary', together with F/O George Doudney in a second Blenheim to El Daba, Egypt, where they were posted to 211 Squadron. A month later, on 28th December, the postings were formalised.

The Western Desert and the Move to Greece

The Royal Air Force and its predecessor, the Royal Flying Corps, had a permanent base at Ismailia, Egypt from 1916. There were also operational bases in the country and 211 Sqn used El Daba. On 10th June 1940 Italy declared war on the UK and the war in the Western Desert began.



In The Western Desert: Duke, front left with other officers of 211 Squadron, Sqn Leader Gordon-Finlayson front centre

Why Bomb Albania?

Albania had long been strategically important to Italy in commanding access to the Adriatic, and in April 1939 Italy invaded and declared the country a protectorate.

On 28th October 1940, Italian forces in Albania invaded Greece, a neutral country. This activated the pledge of support against aggression by Italy made by the British to Greece in April 1939, and Arthur Longmore, C.I.C. of the RAF Middle East, despatched five squadrons of fighters and light bombers to Greece. On 16th November the ground support part of 211 Squadron arrived at Piraeus, Greece and set up base at Tatoi near Athens. The air part followed on the 22nd. During the Western Desert Campaign, the squadron had earned its nickname 'The Greyhounds' due to its rapid deployment capability. The speed of preparation for their new role in Greece seems to have reflected this. Action against Italian assets in Albania by 211 Squadron began on 26th November, against Tepelena. On the 28th the base was renamed Menidi, apparently to avoid confusion with the Royal Palace at Tatoi.

(A more detailed assessment of the high-level decision-making for the support for Greece can be found in 'A Greek Tragedy? The Royal Air Force's Campaign in the Balkans, November 1940 to April 1941'⁸.)

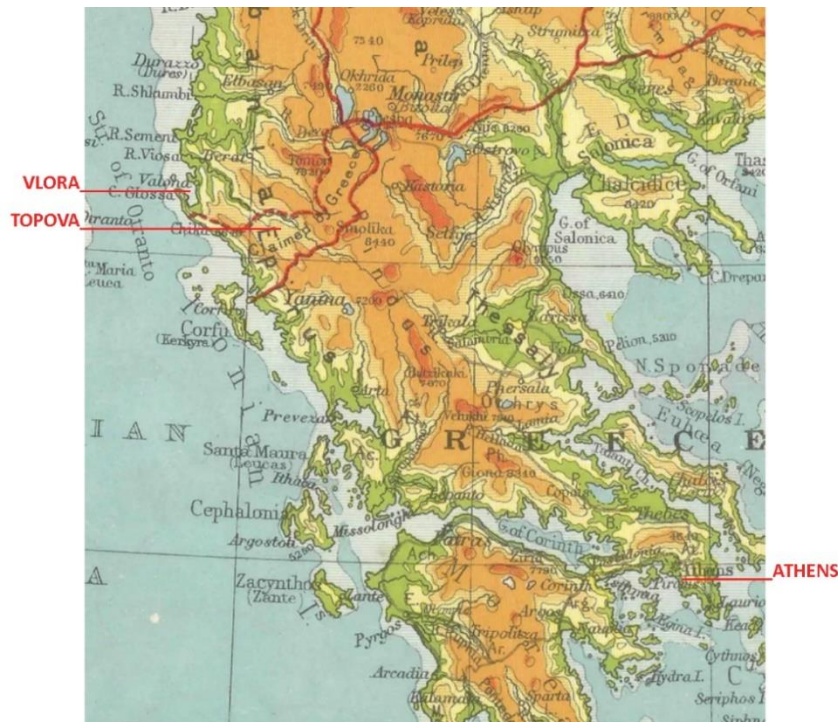
Flying Conditions in Greece and Albania

The mainland geography of the region was not particularly conducive to flying between Menidi (Athens) and targets in Albania with the inland route over the Pindus mountains that stretch from the Gulf of Corinth, Greece, through to central and eastern Albania. The Blenheims were daytime

bombers, so needed to make use of cloud cover, but this brought its own disadvantages, particularly during winter months and especially then for the aviators, after serving in North Africa.

Map 2: 1920's map illustrating the mountains between Menidi (Athens) and target at Vlora (then Valona). The approximate location of Topova is marked.

(The 'Claimed by Greece' area is indicative of the tensions that have long existed in the Balkans and sadly continue to this day.)



THW¹ alludes to the winter conditions that were being met by the Greek forces – soldiers with frostbite – as well as problems of icing up on the Blenheims while flying sufficiently high to clear the mountains (Note 5). More emphasis on conditions is provided in 'Middle East Scrapbook'⁹ in which David Squire, an RAF Medical Officer recalls:

"For the past month 211 Squadron have been hard at work from Menidi, together with 84 Squadron. There have been constant raids, in which conditions were really bad. Sudden mists from the mountains would fill the valleys down to the ground. These mists, being full of mountains, were a deadly menace. Also, the cold was getting worse. The worst temperature met was -65°F (-54°C). There were several cases of frost-bite in spite of precautions as these old Blenheims had no heated cabins or clothing and especially in the airgunners' seat at the back, the draught was strong. Coming straight from the desert, the change in conditions was especially trying."

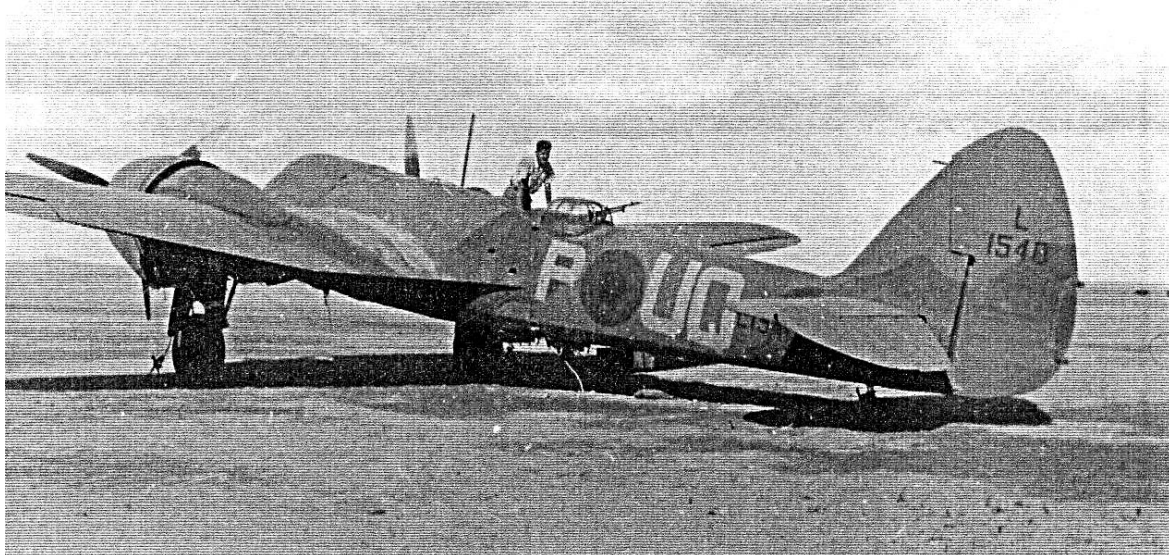
Graham Warner in 'The Bristol Blenheim a Complete History'¹⁰ considers the weather conditions in December 1940 in some detail and writes:

"The weather continued to hamper operations during the rest of December. Apart from the lack of visibility, particularly dangerous in such mountainous country when using totally inadequate maps, airfields flooded due to rain and thawing snow, or plummeting temperatures would freeze everything solid."

PART 2.2 - 'DUKE' IN THE RAF – IT ALL TURNED RATHER BAD¹¹

New Year's Eve 1940

Duke did not fly that day and Pilot Sgt Bennett flew Duke's usual aircraft, L1540, on a bombing raid to Vlora that morning. Leaving the target, he was intercepted by Italian fighters and the aircraft was last seen in flames south of Vlora. All the crew of L1540 were lost (Note 6). This was the end of 'Bloody Mary.' (The aircraft had been named after John Bolster's famous twin-engine hill climb car).



L1540, 'Bloody Mary' (photo courtesy of Ian Carter, Blenheim Society)

Back at Menidi, NYE was F/Lt Jones' birthday and a surprise party had been laid on for him at a private 'do' at Maxim's in Athens. As recounted in 'The Elephant on My Wing'¹¹, there was a confrontation between the RAF pilots and some Gestapo at Maxim's that could have been a scene out of the film 'Casablanca'. (Greece remained neutral until April 6th, 1941). Apparently, Duke was all for 'throwing the Germans out' but a pilot from 84 Sqn was able to advise the Gestapo officers to leave quietly, by demonstrating the superiority in numbers of the RAF pilots. It then seems that the party really got going. Later the CO decided to return to base with others including Duke, and with Dennis 'Keeper' Barrett driving. In what would have been the early hours of 1st January 1941, on the outskirts of the city the car swerved to avoid an unlit shelter and hit a tree. Barrett, driving, was very seriously injured, and the CO had a broken leg¹¹. The others had lesser injuries. Luke was discharged the following day, but Dennis Barrett died on 3rd January. With Duke as one of the pall bearers, he was buried the following day.

6th January 1941 - The Last Flights of L1487 and L8536

Although I am writing about my uncle's flight, it would be remiss of me not to mention the other flight that never returned to Greece that day, L1487, piloted by F/Lt Campbell.

The squadron of nine Blenheims led by George Doudney left Menidi at 08.10 (Operations Record Book (ORB) (TNA-Air27/1302 p.133)¹². According to Bobby Campbell, the flight route to Vlora on the morning of 6th January was westward from Menidi along the Gulf of Corinth, climbing to 10,000 ft over Ithaca before turning northwards towards Kelkyra, Corfu and levelling out at a ceiling of about 13,000 ft. After some minutes, with dawn breaking, the formation turned east towards the Albanian coast. The targets were to be the foreshore and jetties at Vlora. Turning towards the town, the squadron reformed into tight flights of three aircraft apiece and began to dive to 5,000 ft towards the targets¹¹.

According to the narrative report by F/Lt Doudney (TNA - AIR-27-1304 p103/156)¹³, landfall was made through a gap in the cloud and the squadron approached Vlora at 2000 ft, 10 miles from the coast in heavy rain and low cloud. The bombing run-up (*the squadron would have first sought cloud cover*) was carried out in an easterly direction diving to 3000 ft below low cloud. Bombs were seen to burst in motor transport parking areas, in barrack buildings and in the town in the vicinity of the jetties.

AIR-27-1304 continues to indicate that as the squadron turned to port, the leading flight 'A' was attacked by six monoplanes (*probably G.50s*). While flights 'B' and 'C' sought cloud cover, the leading flight continued to turn into the fighters' attack as it made for cloud cover. Before reaching cloud cover both the leading aircraft of flight 'A' (Doudney) and the No.2 aircraft (Duke) were hit several times by tracer and shell but without apparent damage. The fighters were shaken off in the cloud after some 15 minutes and the flight set course for base overland. Then, at Këlcyra ten miles east of Tepelena, Duke's port engine stopped ...

L1487

Immediately on dropping their bombs the squadron turned to port and was climbing hard. It appears that the manoeuvre left Bobby Campbell, the last aircraft in the formation, isolated and being attacked by a G.50 fighter flown by Livio Bassi ^(note 7). Keeping hard to port and diving ferociously, his aircraft almost skimmed the waters of the Gulf of Vlora before he lost the fighter. Then, on rounding the Karaburun peninsula and heading south towards Corfu, the aircraft was attacked again by Bassi. The port engine was hit, and Campbell had to ditch in the sea. (The full story with Bobby Campbell's attempt to escape and his years as a P.O.W. is told in 'The Elephant on My Wing' ¹¹)

L8536

On 13th March George Doudney wrote to LTD:

"On climbing into the cloud the squadron got split up but the flight remained intact as it always did when these two pilots were flying with me and coming out of the edge of the cloud we found ourselves in a dead clear patch of sky with about 15 miles to go and 8,000 ft to climb to reach cloud cover and clear the tops of the mountains. At about this time we were attacked by six low wing fighters of the Machi 200 type and had been badly shot up, though still intact, by the time we reached the clouds that did not turn out to be very dense. By this time my blind flying instruments had been damaged, and I wasn't sure that I'd be able to fly in cloud with any degree of safety, so I signalled to Luke and my No. 3 to push off on their own. No. 3 did but Luke waved and stuck up his thumb and tucked in even tighter. However, I soon found out that one can do a lot of things when there is no alternative and we succeeded in shaking off the fighters.

At this stage we were nearing Greek occupied Albania and had a further 1,000 feet or so to climb before we could get over the highest mountain tops. I communicated with Luke and asked him if he were alright and he pointed at his port engine which even then, as I looked, stopped turning. With reduced speed he managed to keep his height, but it was soon obvious that he would not be able to climb any further. I climbed above him and found a solitary gap in the clouds about a mile wide and to this I led him thinking he and his crew might bale out ^(Note 8) over it as the weather looked rather bad underneath and there was snow on the ground.

Luke gradually lost height as he circled round and down through the clearing, and I watched until he disappeared from sight near to the cloud base and the ground ^(Note 9). He appeared to be perfectly under control as he went down but I wasn't able to follow him as my own machine was damaged and as soon as I had lost sight of him I made for my base to do a crash landing, sure that he would be turning up on foot in a day or two."

In AIR-27-1304 Doudney concluded "When last seen he appeared to be trying to find a suitable place to force-land and was flying south down the valley."

The next known sighting is by the Greek soldiers of the 34th Regiment and the villagers of Topova, including Ksenofon Dilo:

“I was coming down from the 'Friend' spring (Kroi i Mikut) with two of my friends from the neighbourhood - I think it was Dhio and Ceci, I don't remember - when, in the sky above the village, suddenly there appeared an aeroplane flying really low ...” (Ksenofon Dilo, start of article in 'Zagoria' paper, Part 1.2.)

PART 2.3 - DUKE'S DEATH REPORTED

On 9th January LTD received a telegram to say that Luke was missing, with a letter to follow. A further telegram was received on 11th January with another letter to follow. This read:

“Sir, I am commanded by the Air Council to inform you that they have with great regret to confirm the telegram in which you were notified that your son, Flying Officer Luke Sylvester (*sic*) Delaney, Royal Air Force, lost his life as a result of air operations on the 6th January. The Air Council desire me to express profound sympathy with you in your bereavement.”

At some time, an undated letter of sympathy and gratitude from King George VI was sent to LTD.

On 5th February Margate Corporation instructed monumental masons to amend the memorial stone to Luke's grandmother, Elizabeth Delaney:



IN LOVING MEMORY
ELIZABETH DELANEY
NEE McALPINE
WIFE OF JOHN SYLVESTER DELANEY
OF EDINBURGH
WHO PASSED AWAY SEPT 14 1920
AGED 63
IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR GRANDSON
LUKE SYLVESTER DELANEY
FLYING OFFICER R.A.F.
AGED 21

COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVE COMMEMORATION

Luke is commemorated at the Alamein War Memorial Column 241. His comrades Thomas and Vynor are likewise commemorated at Alamein on column 243.

THW was a friend of Luke's from before the war, so it is natural to find he covers his loss in some depth both in 'Wings Over Olympus' and then in an article in 'The Autocar' magazine (possibly March 1941). THW also mentions the burial site in 'Wings Over Olympus'. The description is of a small churchyard on a mountainside not far from Këlcyra, the only further detail is to refer to 'peasants from the village' burying the men. There is no mention of Greek soldiers. Later, he describes a trip to the Front via Gjirokaster and his description of the journey would have taken him close to Topova (See Part 1, Note 4) and this is possibly the time when he visited the graves. The discretion regarding location and Greek forces was probably because of the need for secrecy during the war.

He also writes to Sammy Davis (now a Major in the RAOC) on 5th March 1941, referring to "a tiny churchyard up in the mountains. It's a lovely spot but in the war area at the moment." This agrees with the location possibly being Topova.

PART 2.4 - DUKE'S CREW ON 6TH JANUARY 1941

There is only a little that I can write about Duke's crew. Both the McCord and Pollard families were in correspondence with LTD after the death of the men.

Thomas McCord



The source for information on Thomas McCord is:

<https://alliethinksgenealogy.wordpress.com/2016/11/12/they-gave-sergeant-thomas-alexander-mccord-1921-41/#more-883>

I quote from Allie's blog:

"Thomas Alexander MCCORD was born on 20 Feb 1921 in North Belfast, to parents Thomas MCCORD (b.1885) and Edith Helen NICOL (b.1896). He was the elder of two children and was unmarried at the time of his death. He was known as 'Lexy' to his family."

From September 1940 It appears Duke flew often with 'Jock' as his Wireless Operator/Air Gunner (WO/AG) in L1540 (ORB records).

Vynor Pollard



Vynor 'Vic' Pollard only flew the once with Duke, on that fateful 6th January.

From Allie's blog:

"Vynor POLLARD was born in Sculcoates near Hull in 1919, to parents Edward J POLLARD and Beatrice DOLMAN. He was the youngest of three children and was known in the family as Billie. The family lived in Withernsea, East Yorkshire at the time of his death, and he is commemorated on two war memorials there."

A letter written to my grandparents from Beatrice Pollard describes how Vynor suffered in his young days from a variety of serious medical conditions. In late 1940 he was diagnosed with jaundice and was only discharged from hospital just before Christmas when 'they had a lovely time with the Greeks; how good they were and how they are all for the British'.

It is a sad fact that although the Air Ministry informed each family of the deaths of their sons, they were unable to say who their fellow crew members were. It seems that it was through LTD that the names became known to each other.

Part 2.5 - RECOLLECTIONS

My aunt's scrapbook contained dozens of letters of condolence to the family, together with more formal correspondence, including the letter from King George VI.

Here would seem to be the right place to recount a few of the words that Luke's fellow servicemen wrote, either in letters or in books. The main problem is that there are so many kind, sincere, words that a little of the essence of Luke's character could be lost, so I will keep to just three, part of a letter George Doudney wrote to LTD, a letter from an 'Ex-211 airman' and one from an officer.

George Doudney: "In brief, Luke and I came out from England on the same day in 1939, doing the same job and later he was a member of the two flights that I took to Turkey. On our return we split up for a short time when I was posted to 211 Squadron in the Desert and he remained at Heliopolis. About a month later he also joined the Squadron and was posted to my Flight. From that time on he remained my second in command and almost invariably flew on my right as my number 2. I might add here that from the very first Luke was always looked (on) as one of the very best pilots in the squadron and I myself never hope to meet a better one and certainly shall never meet a more reliable one."

7th January 1943 from 'Ex-211': "I served with 211 with your son and although a boy in years I think I can safely say he was adored by the boys. Although the 'Duke' was an officer and we only airmen we mourned the loss of him as if he was a brother."

In September 1942 F/Lt James Williams wrote "We called him the 'Duke' and how he deserved it – he was a real 'toff' and the wittiest man I have ever met. He could and did keep the whole Mess in roars of laughter for hours on end ..."



Luke, 1937

References for Part 2:

⁷ *Blenheim Over The Balkans*, James Dunnet, 2001

⁸ <https://www.raf.mod.uk/what-we-do/centre-for-air-and-space-power-studies/aspr/apr-vol15-iss1-3-pdf/>, Group Captain Alistair Byford

⁹ *Middle East Scrapbook by RAFMO*, a compilation of papers by Sqn Ldr H F Squire, as collated by David Squire 1997

¹⁰ *The Bristol Blenheim a Complete History*, Graham Warner, 2002

¹¹ *The Elephant on My Wing*, the wartime exploits of Flight Lieutenant Bobby Campbell, a Blenheim pilot with 211 Squadron RAF 1939-43, as recounted to Peter A. Wright, 2011. "IT ALL TURNED RATHER BAD" is a phrase found in the book.

¹² TNA - Air27/1302 p.133. This is a page from the Operation Records Books (ORB)s that recount the daily activity of the RAF squadrons held by the National Archives.

¹³ TNA - AIR-27-1304 p103/156. These are the Narrative Reports held in the National Archives. This covers from April 1940 to February 1941 for 211 Sqn and page 103/156 covers 6th January 1941.

Notes for Part 2

⁵ On 7th December 1940 both L1535 and L4926, outward-bound to Valona crashed less than 100 miles from Menidi in the hills near Lamia, probably due to low cloud and icing.

⁶ An astonishing coincidence: Chris Bennett, nephew of Sgt Bennett, the pilot of L1540 on NYE 1940, had initiated a search for his uncle in 2005 and later published articles in the Blenheim Journal. His search took a different course, and it seems uncovered a certain post-war imperious, if well-intentioned approach from the authorities to relatives of war dead.

On reading the account of the loss of L1540 in Graham Warner's book¹⁰ the same discrepancy as in Piva's account in BC for L8536 (Part 1 Note 2) was noted. The confusion of war?

⁷ Tenente Livio Bassi and his honourable actions following the aerial encounter are described in both BC² and JD⁷, although curiously he appears as Carlos Braganilli in Campbell's account, where he describes his attack¹¹.

⁸ According to THW¹ Doudney considered that one of Duke's crew must have been injured for otherwise they would have baled out. Earlier discussions in the Mess had concluded that baling out was the best procedure in circumstances whereby the aircraft is doomed, but the crew unharmed.

⁹ Doudney's reference to Këlcyrë is important in 'placing' the descent of L8536. Duke must have been flying to the W of the town, for otherwise he would have found himself with more amenable landing areas N of Permeti. Likewise, he could not have had sight of Fuscha e Çapujit, a possible landing place high on the western side of the Zagoria valley. An explanation could be that he descended into a narrow valley N of the Këlcyrë (Klisura) Gorge (which was effectively the Front line) and then directly crossed S into the Zagoria valley at a level low enough to be trapped between the ridges of the Trebeshina/Dhëmbel/Nemërçka massif.



Fuscha e Çapujit, 3 miles W of Topova but 1500 ft higher and screened to North and East



May Rain over the Western End of the Këlcyrë Gorge



The Zagoria valley (centre) meets the Vjosa river (foreground) at the Këlcyrë Gorge

Acknowledgements

I must give special thanks to Don Clark, who maintains the excellent and comprehensive website <http://211squadron.org/>, and Ian Carter of the Blenheim Society <https://blenheimsociety.com/> for checking, correcting and supplying information on 211 Squadron and Blenheims in Part 2.

PART 3.1 - MEMORIALS

As of 2024, 83 years after Luke's death, the story has yet to end. In May 2023, Richard Bone contacted the MOD Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) who liaise with the CWGC in respect of the finding of the burial site. While the evidence is compelling, it currently appears

insufficient for the CWGC to consider further action. Given its worldwide role in maintaining the graves of the war dead, CWGC requires an extremely high standard of proof of identity. Although there is Ksenofon Dilo's eyewitness account of the crash, the actual identities of the aircraft and aviators comes from the single letter that Panayotis Kanellopoulos wrote to TA NEA and the British Embassy, Athens, in 1993.

At Tirana, the memorial cemetery was originally built to accommodate commemorative headstones for those whose original graves were removed in the Hoxha regime⁵. To date the only remains buried at the cemetery are those, recently interred, of [Sgt Peter Twiddy](#).

There is some precedent, however, for commemorating those whose bodies cannot be recovered. In 1944 [Philip Leake](#) was killed during a German air raid on the village of Sheper a few miles from Topova. He was buried by the church. The church was later destroyed by the Germans and the grave lost under rubble. There is a special memorial to him at Tirana Park Memorial Cemetery. Some similarity can be found with destruction of the Kisha e Shën Kolli, Topova, and the loss of the precise locations of the L8536 graves through the passage of time.



On Easter Sunday 1941, six aircraft of 211 Sqn were destroyed by German fighters near Florina, Greece, close to the Albanian border. The story of this tragedy, effectively ending the operational ability of 211 Sqn in the Mediterranean, is the subject of the books by Tommy Wisdom, Brian Cull and James Dunnet. All but two of the Blenheim aviators died.

The survivors and Greek villagers buried the remains of the aviators they could find from the crashed aircraft. According to James Dunnet, after the war, the known graves were visited and the remains, some unidentifiable, exhumed and re-interred at Phaleron War Cemetery. Dunnet⁷ has a photograph of a single headstone commemorating the three aviators who died when L4819 was shot down.

Of great significance was the lifting of Blenheim L1434 from Lake Mikro Prespa by a Greek inter-services team in 1993, as this account, published in 'TA NEA', resulted in the Kanellopoulos letter.

3.2 - THE KANELLOPOULOS LETTER

The Kanellopoulos letter was crucial to the finding of the graves of my uncle and his crew, yet for now at least, the English translation of the letter as addressed to 'TA NEA' newspaper and copied to the British Embassy, Athens is all there is.

The provenance of the translated letter begins, as far as I know, with James Dunnet who copied it to Ian Carter who then passed it onto Brian Cull, who published an extract in his book². It is not known how James Dunnet originally came across the letter. James had been involved in research into the tragic loss of six Blenheims from 211 Sqn to German fighters on Easter Sunday 1941, above. Could he have chanced on the letter while researching the fate of 211 Sqn? His book 'Blenheim Over The Balkans' was published in 2001. James died in 2013 and appears not to have kin in the UK (pers comm. Ian Carter).

The Letter

“Athens 12 June 1993.

The Newspaper “TA NEA” Athens

Copy to The British Embassy Athens.

With reference to the two Blenheim aircraft raised from Lake Prespa (See report in TA NEA of 11 June 1993) I would like to tell you about another Blenheim aircraft which crashed in Albania on 6 January 1941, either because it was shot down by the Italians or as a result of engine trouble.

I was then serving as a reserve officer (Infantry 2nd Lieutenant) with the 34th Infantry Regiment under command of the late Colonel Alexander Tsingounis.

Part of the regiment had camped in the village of Topova, well inside Albania at a great altitude. It was 10 am when far on the horizon we saw an allied aircraft which was coming into land. Moments later it touched down in a narrow field, right across from us but at a considerable distance, overturned and exploded leaving only a heap of broken metal and wires.

The regiment commander immediately ordered me to take a few soldiers and rush to the place of the accident. We went down the slope of the mountain, crossed river Drinos and, after climbing on the opposite slope we reached the scene of the tragedy. All three airmen were dead. They wore uniforms and were scattered around the wreckage. I noted down the aircrafts distinctive markings (L8536 UQ) and the names of the three airmen; Vyron Pollard – McCord Thomas Alexander L.S Delaney.

We then carried, with great difficulty the bodies to the village and in the afternoon we buried them, with due military honours, in the modest cemetery of Topova.

The personal effects we had been able to find were forwarded to the Division for their action.

Let this tragic event be added to the many others of world history.

Panayotis Kanellopoulos

13 Megistis Street

113 61 Athens

Tel 867-1938”

Once the village of Topova had been identified from the extract in Brian Cull’s book, all research turned to Albania. Through personal contacts, an Albanian facebook page and Ksenofon Dilo, it was established that an aircraft carrying three aviators had crashed in the Zagoria valley near Topova on 6th January 1941. We were also shown part of a Blenheim aircraft that one of the villagers had kept.

A few days after our visiting Topova, Ian Carter sent through the full translation of the Kanellopoulos letter, above. Allowing for minor discrepancies, the description by 2nd Lt Kanellopoulos accords well with that given by Ksenofon Dilo, both verbally and in the 1997 ‘Zagoria’ newspaper article. The letter gives the aviators’ names and cites the aircraft registration, L8536. Most notable, however, is the ‘UQ’ cited after L8536. This identifies the aircraft as specifically belonging to 211 Squadron. Such an identifier appears not to be used either in the ORB records or the relevant casualty report (AIR 81/4822). The detail indicates that the likelihood of the Kanellopoulos letter not being authentic is vanishingly small and, as such, provides overwhelming evidence of the fate of Duke and his crew.

Richard Bone and I have each followed the TA NEA lead, but there is no record of publication of such a letter. The British Embassy in Athens has also been contacted but the probability that there would be a record there after 30 years must be low.

Correspondence with the Greek 34th Mechanized Infantry Regiment has been initiated. Any result of this, together with feedback from the British Embassy, Athens, is mainly relevant in terms of establishing beyond *all* doubt for the MoD JCCC that my uncle and his crew are buried where Ksenofon indicated at Topova. As and when any information is received it will be passed to the JCCC and, perhaps, at some point a more personal memorial to the dead aviators of L8536 will be erected.

Such certainty, while of wider significance, is not essential for me – everything points to Topova.

PART 3.3 - AN ENGINE?

While the Kanellopoulos letter is of greatest significance, there may be another secret yet to be given up at Topova. During his interview, Ksenofon mentioned that one of the engines of the crashed aircraft lay in the river Zagoria and that as a boy he used to swim round it!

Since WW2 Albania has changed. Its population grew from 1 million to about 3 million under the Hoxha regime only to then fall, particularly through depopulation of rural areas and emigration. This will have resulted in changes in land cover (fields etc.). With Google Earth imagery only useful from 2007 onwards, it is impossible to determine whether there were any feasible areas for Duke to try and force-land, or whether the crash-landing resulted from stalling (Ksenofon's description of 'falling'?). The fact that an engine fell into the river indicates that however it landed, the aircraft must have been relatively close to the river.

PART 4 - AN ENDURING LEGACY

In the family scrapbook concerning Luke's death is a cancelled cheque for £1000 (~£65,000 in 2023) written by LTD for the benefit of the RAF Benevolent Fund (RAFBF) in 1941, shortly after Luke's death. In addition to this is a reprint of an advertisement in 'The Aeroplane' encouraging others to donate and there is also a letter from the RAFBF thanking LTD for a donation of 100 Guineas at an event later in the same year. Clearly, despite the tragic loss, LTD wanted to contribute to ease the suffering of others serving in the RAF, or their dependants.

As a consequence of this finding, the RAFBF was contacted, at first without much expectation of finding information. To my surprise, the Flying Officer LS Delaney Trust is still extant and very helpfully, I have been given current information about the trust fund and its purpose.

The Trust Fund is unrestricted, meaning it can be used for any eligible veteran or dependant who is in financial hardship or struggling to live independently. The extent of the help available ranges from home adaptations, through mobility equipment to individual and family welfare and mental health support. For 2023, the income of the fund was £13,274.

Since starting this research, I have learnt a little about Albania, a proud country with a tragic history; a little about a forgotten theatre of war in WW2; and a little about the bravery of the aviators from across the world who flew with the RAF.

That the F/O LS Delaney Trust Fund is still active is I think, above all, an enduring legacy to all those young men of 211 Squadron who fought in support of Greece in 1940/41.

Toujours à Propos
