

## **Death by Friendly Fire - the story of Flt Sgt. R. Lavery, 202 Squadron**

**by John Mulholland**

In the 1991 Gulf war there was an incident of a US warplane mistakenly killing British ground troops. In the fog of war death by friendly fire is more frequent than most people imagine. This is the story of one such incident concerning my uncle, Flt Sgt. Robert Lavery, aged 18, who was killed along with his nine crew members in November 1942.

Robert Anthony Lavery was born on 2 January 1924 in Moy. Co. Tyrone. He was the fifth of eight children born to Robert and Sarah Lavery. The Lavery family were well known as international horse dealers and breeders. The family had supplied horses to European armies for over 100 years including some of those used by the Light Brigade in the Crimea. Robert Lavery (senior) with his brother had travelled to Russia before the First World War to sell horses to the Czar for his Imperial Cavalry.

However, family fortunes changed dramatically in July 1921 when the Lavery brothers entered into an agreement with John Panagopolous and Co of Athens who were contractors to the Greek Government. The agreement was to supply 3000 horses for the Greek Army. Two lots were shipped and paid for but the final lot was held up because of a disagreement between the contractor and the Greek Government.

This resulted in the Lavery family having to pay all their creditors without receiving payment themselves. Despite long legal battles the case was never resolved and the Lavery family faced severe financial difficulties for the following 30 years. It was in this uncertain financial environment that young Robert Lavery grew up. He was a lively child and had a love of animals and anything mechanical. After attending Aughanlig school he transferred to Armagh College in 1938.



*Flt. Sgt. Robert Lavery in 1942, aged 18*

In April 1940 Robert decided to run away from school to join the RAF. He enlisted in the RAFVR at Padigate on 22 April 1940, aged 16, as an Aircraftman/Flight Mechanic (AC1). After training spells at 1 and 2 Wings of Schools of Tactical Training, Robert qualified as Flight Mechanic Airframes (AC2) and was posted to 35 Squadron on 20 December 1940 at Linton-on-Ouse. In the previous month the Squadron had been reformed as the first Halifax Squadron and introduced the aircraft into operational service, flying its first night raid on 10 March 1941. The Squadron was commanded by Leonard Cheshire between January and April 1941. While Robert was serving at Linton-on-Ouse, 35 Squadron and 76 Squadron based at Middleton St. George, both flying Halifax bombers, took part in a daylight raid on the German battleship *Scharnhorst*. The attacking force consisted of 15 aircraft, nine from 35 Squadron and six from 76 Squadron. One Halifax achieved five direct hits on the *Scharnhorst* before being shot down. Four Halifaxes were lost in the raid but they shot down four German fighters. The raid took place on 24 July 1941.



*A Catalina flies over Gibraltar in 1942.  
The airstrip is middle left and Catalina can  
be seen bottom left outside a hangar.  
(IWM CM6239)*

After a year with 35 Squadron Robert was transferred to 1652 Unit (Marston Moor) on 31 December 1941. On 7 February he was posted to Tactical Training Unit at Abbotsinch and to No. 9 Air Gunnery School (Llandwrog) and No. 9 AFU (Hulavington) on 13 June 1942.

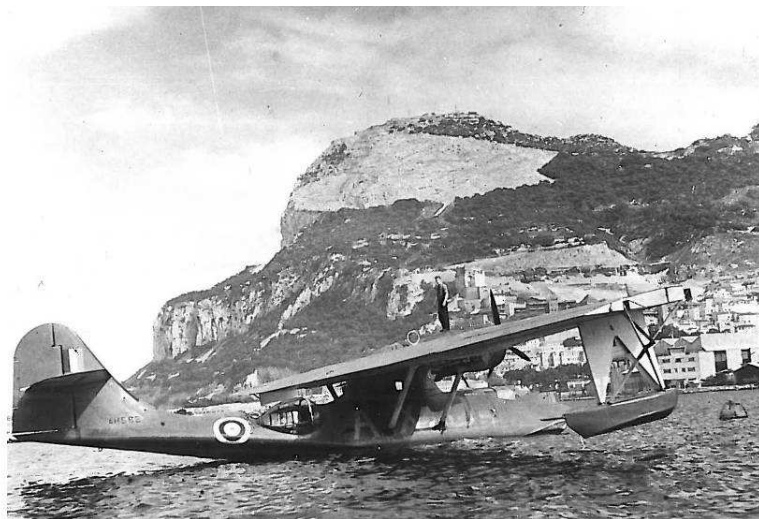
All these postings were for aircrew training. On 13 June he was promoted to Flight Sergeant and qualified as an Air Gunner. Five days later Robert finally joined 235 Squadron of Coastal Command flying Beaufighters VI's from Docking in Norfolk. The Beaufighters were used for attacking shipping off the Dutch coast. Between June and October the Squadron records show no sign of Robert taking place in any operations with the Squadron.

Robert no doubt must have felt some relief in getting a new posting to 202 Squadron based in Gibraltar. He joined the Squadron on 18 October during the preparation stages for the Allied invasion of North Africa - 'Operation Torch'. 202 Squadron were flying Catalina flying boats from Gibraltar on anti-submarine patrols, escorting the main convoys sailing from the UK to North Africa.

The Squadron records show that Robert flew a total of seven sorties between joining the Squadron and his death on 20 November. All sorties were anti-submarine patrols escorting convoys either in the Atlantic or Mediterranean. On 5 November, on a 10 hour flight the Catalina was escorting convoy *UGF 1* from the USA, making its way to the landing beaches off Casablanca. The flight details noted: "Diverted to search for missing corvette *Cowslip* standing by, two damaged Merchant Vessels. Nothing sighted".

The longest sortie was on 8 November 1942 - the day of the Torch landings. Robert's aircraft took off from Gibraltar at 0153 and landed back at base at 1808. During the day they circled the invasion force which was landing at Algiers. On the 11 November they carried out similar duties off Oran.

On the 14 November Robert's Catalina was detailed to escort a convoy; but by the time they reached the rendezvous position the convoy had dispersed because of a U-boat attack. Instead they escorted a damaged merchant vessel and escorted it to safety.



*This Catalina (AH562) has acquired No. 413 Squadron code AX when moored in Gibraltar harbour. Several squadrons supplied aircraft for attachment to 202 Squadron  
(IWM CM2307)*

The last fateful flight of Catalina K202 began on 20 November 1942. The Catalina took off on what should have been a routine anti-submarine patrol escorting a convoy en-route from Greenock to Oran. The convoy KMS-3 sailed from the Clyde on 8 November. There were 53 ships in the convoy in 11 columns, escorted by 12 corvettes and sloops. The convoy proceeded without incident until 0910 in position 35° 55'N-10° 14'W steaming at 7 knots when two merchant vessels *SS Grange Park* (5132 tonnes) and *SS Prins Harold* were hit by

torpedoes from a U-boat (U263). The U-boat had fired a total of four torpedoes: the first was caught in the nets of one of the convoy ships and exploded without damage. At 0907 the second one struck the SS *Prins Harold*, the third torpedo missed and the fourth hit the SS *Grange Park* at 0910.

Twenty minutes before the U-boat attack Robert's Catalina had reached the convoy and was circling at a range of two miles. The last minutes of the Catalina were graphically reported by an eye witness, Pilot Officer D. R. Higgin of 32 (F) Squadron who watched the incident from one of the escort corvettes, HMS *Fowey*.

HMS *Fowey*  
21 November 1942

### DESTRUCTION OF CATALINA FLYING BOAT

At 0850 approx. on 20.11.42 an aircraft identified by me as a Catalina, approached the convoy at a height of about 1000', and proceeded to orbit at a range of about 2 miles. At 0910 when the first of 2 ships was torpedoed, the aircraft was astern of the convoy. It turned to starboard, and flew on the same course as the convoy, approaching to within a mile of the left hand edge. A corvette positioned astern and to the left of the convoy, threw out depth charges causing spouts of water. The aircraft at once changed course, passed over or near the corvette, and headed for the left hand edge of the convoy losing height to about 700'. As it crossed the first ships, turning away to port, a cannon or Oerlikon in the centre opened fire. Immediately, a barrage of light and heavy flak was sent up by all the ships in the vicinity. The Catalina was hit at once, the port motor streaming vapour. Making a fairly rapid turn to starboard and signalling violently with lamp, the aircraft closed motors and attempted to glide to the rear of the convoy. Hit repeatedly by continuous and very heavy fire, it burst into full flames before spinning into the sea from about 2-300 feet. Striking the water the Catalina disintegrated in heavy explosion. A few pieces of small wreckage, two deflated dinghies, and an oxygen bottle was all that remained. There were no survivors.

Note: At no time was the flying boat fired upon by an vessel of the Royal Navy.

D. R. Higgin (signed)

Pilot Officer 128368 R.A.F  
32 (F) Squadron

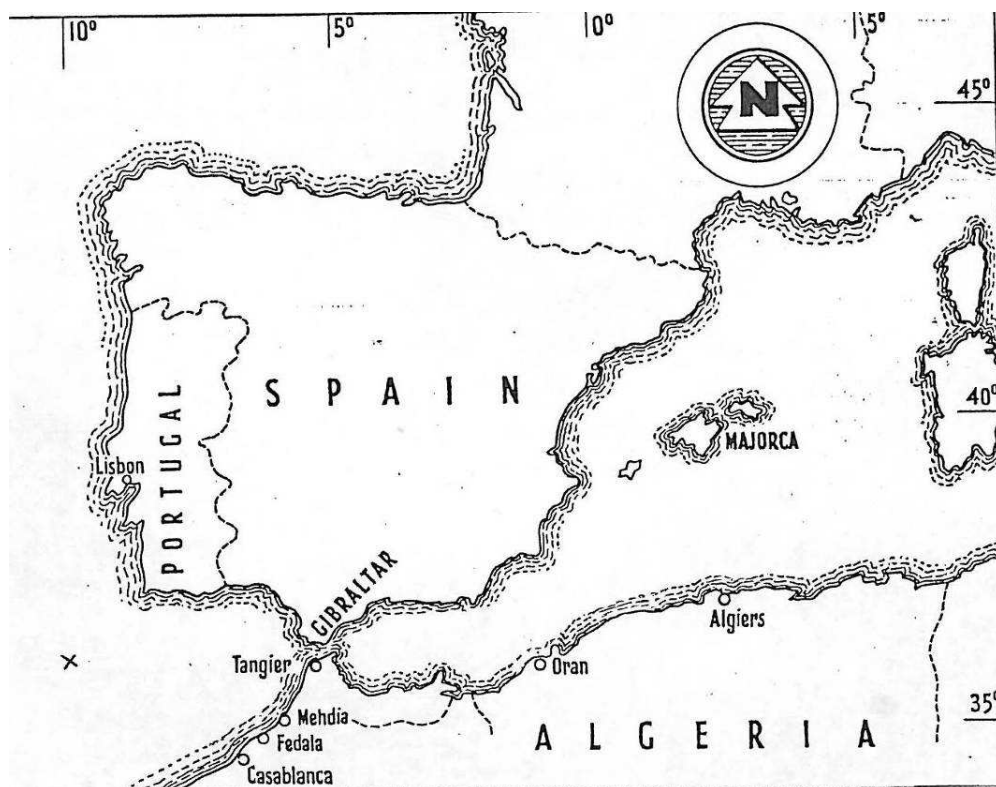
It is interesting to note that eyewitness made it clear that it was the Merchant Navy and not the Royal Navy who were responsible for the destruction of the Catalina.

The Senior Officer on HMS *Fowey* Lieutenant Commander R. M. Aubrey issued the following report condemning the action of the merchant navy as "pathetic":

The Master of *Grange Park* stated that the ship was struck in No. 5 hold and waste flooded from the engine room aft. All the crew were saved and unhurt with the exception of four who were presumed killed by the explosion. No torpedo tracks were seen. All Confidential Books were destroyed before leaving.

Immediately after the torpedoing, a Catalina Flying boat flew within 1500 yards of the convoy and was promptly shot down in flames and exploded on hitting the water. There were no survivors. An eye-witness account prepared by Pilot Officer D. R. Higgin R.A.F, who watched this episode throughout is attached. The volume of fire produced by the merchant ships was most formidable, and it is pathetic that their alertness and good marksmanship should have met with such a tragic result.

When *Fowey* was passing through the columns to regain station one merchant ship asked "Was it bombs or torpedoes?" I am convinced many ships thought that the casualties had been caused by bombs from the Catalina which to them was just an aircraft.



*X marks the spot where Robert's Catalina was shot down*

The Commanding Officer of HMS *Black Swan* in his report was only mildly critical of the Merchant Navy:

## Loss of Catalina

At the convoy conference the masters had been impressed with the need of offensive action as an alternative to premature abandonment and this produced a remarkable effect. Our sweeps through and in this vicinity of the convoy were enlivened by Oerlikon fire in all directions and blasts and ricochets from merchant ships' heavy calibre. Fortunately no surface vessel was hit, but when the escorting Catalina nosed in close and *Lunenburg's* depth charges exploded under her, she was promptly shot down in flames by very accurate A.A. fire from the convoy. She exploded on hitting the surface and to our deep regret there were no survivors. The A.A. gunnery was a great credit to HMS staff but it appears that instruction in recognition is inadequate.

Instead he reserved his wrath for the lack of good drill by HMS *Campion*:

The A/S equipment disposition had done all that could be asked of them in that the U boat was detected and classified by *Campion* in good time before it fired its torpedoes. It was due to bad drill in *Campion* and the commanding Officer's deplorable lack of decision that the U-boat was able to break through and complete its attack before being interfered with.

The U-boat was first detected at about 0900. Non-sub echoes are not uncommon in this area, and some delay in classification was to be expected, but after the decision to attack had been made, the run in completed, *Campion* was guilty of a disastrous breakdown in drill when she failed to get her pattern off. What is incomprehensible, however, is that, having failed to fire at the correct moment, *Campion* did not get her charges off as soon as possible afterwards in order to provide some hindrance to a U-boat now only a few hundred yards from the advancing convoy; instead she ran out to 1500 yards and embarked upon a deliberate "copybook" attack, which had finally to be broken off to avoid collision with the first torpedoed ship.

The Merchant Navy and *Campion* were not the only target for criticism. The Master of *Grange Park* which was sunk in the attack, concluded his report:

There were 53 ships in this convoy all capable of making 10 knots or over with the exception of two ships which could only do 7 knots. Consequently the speed of the whole convoy was kept at 7 knots. I do not consider that the convoy should have been made to slow down to 7 knots on account of these two slow ships.

The Squadron record book shows that another Catalina from 202 Squadron was in the vicinity and saw the destruction of K202:

20 <sup>th</sup> /11 0754	Catalina T/210 (F/L Driffield, F/L Blake) a/c on a/s sweep to West. At 1025 two M/Vs of Convoy KMS3 were seen to blow up in position 3601N1038W and immediately afterwards Catalina K/202 was seen to fall into the sea in flames after being hit by A/A fire from MVs. A/c joined in
------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

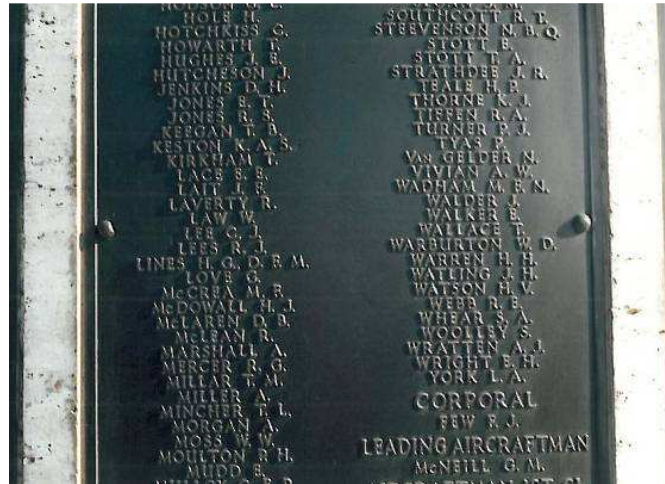
hunt for U/boat but nothing sighted. alg 1720.

0740

Catalina K/202 (F/O O'Connor, P/O Campbell, P/O Macarthur, F/O Pollock) a/c on a/s escort to Convoy KMS3. Personnel lost. See above.



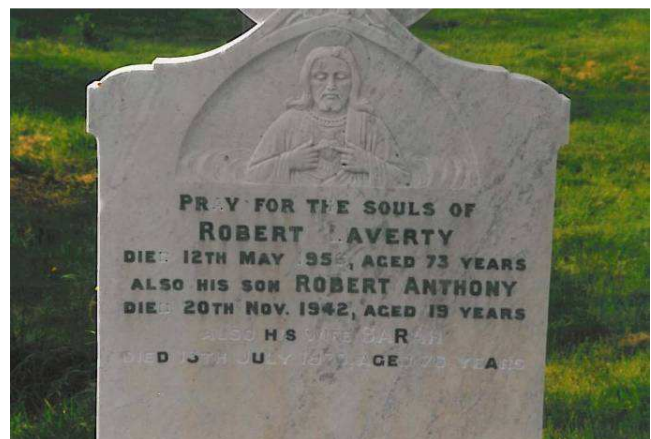
The Malta Memorial, Malta



Robert Laverty's name on the Malta Memorial. His crew member, Ft. Sgt. R. A. Tiffen can also be seen top right.



Robert Laverty's name on the war memorial in the village square, Moy, Co. Tyrone. The memorial was located in front of his home which was later destroyed in an IRA bombing in the 1970s.



Robert Anthony Laverty remembered on grave of his parents in the Roman Catholic parish church, Moy, Co. Tyrone. The inscription gives his age as 19 but he was killed aged 18.

The perished crew of Catalina K202 was:

F/O WB O'Connor (Captain)  
P/O AL Campbell  
F/O HK Pollock  
P/O DA MacArthur  
Flt. Sgt. AF Fletcher  
Flt. Sgt. IW Drywood  
Flt. Sgt. RA Laverty  
Flt. Sgt. J Sanderson  
Flt. Sgt. RA Tiffen  
Flt. Sgt. JL O'Rorke

Robert Laverty and his crew members are remembered on the 202 Squadron Roll of Honour Board and on the Malta Memorial. Robert Laverty is also mentioned on the grave of his parents and on the war memorial both of which are in his home village of Moy. Co. Tyrone. His medals were the 1939/45 Star, Atlantic Star and War Medal.



The U-boat involved in the attack, *U263*, survived the events of the 20 November 1942 to be sunk by a mine in the Bay of Biscay on 20 January 1944.

## References

Operations Record Book 202 Squadron October/November 1942

Admiralty Files ADM 199/2143 PRO  
ADM 199/1216 PRO

*Invasion North Africa 1942*, S.W.C. Pack, (Ian Allan Ltd, 1978)

*Flying Cats*, A Hendrie, (Alfie Publishing, 1988)

*Famous Maritime Squadrons of the RAF* (Vol 1), J. J. Halley, (Hylton Lacy, 1973)

*Stop the Sharnhorst*, (Medal News, April 1993)



## **Acknowledgement**

Photographs CM6239 and CM2307 reproduced by kind permission of the Imperial War Museum.