

Levin Fredman was called up to RAF service in September 1939, he and his squadron flew their Gloster Gladiators across to France on 15 November 1939, to bolster elements of the Air Component of the British Expeditionary Force already there. Once there, 615 Squadron and fellow Auxiliary Air Force Squadron No 607 (County of Durham) Squadron that had flown with them settled into the routine of the Phoney War – occasional encounters with enemy aircraft, coupled with occasional trips to Paris. That changed in the spring of 1940 after the launch of the long-awaited Blitzkrieg.

On Friday 10 May 1940, the German offensive in Europe started at dawn. Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands are attacked simultaneously under 'Plan Gelb' (Plan Yellow).

The Belgian Air Force was virtually destroyed that day and the RAF and French Air Forces were faced with rapidly regrouping and fighting the confident German forces sweeping across Europe.

On that day, Pilot Officer Levin Fredman took off in a Gladiator biplane and attacked a Luftwaffe Heinkel He-111 bomber. Out run, he reported 'port engine seen to emit black smoke and made off towards the west'. It was probably the last time he flew the Gladiator as No 615 Squadron 'B' Flight were re-equipping with modern Hawker Hurricanes fighters.

Two days later, on May 12, 1940, he and other members of his squadron were sent to Vitry-en-Artois to reinforce No 607 Squadron (County of Durham) RAF. At around 09:30 he took off as part of a mixed section of Hurricanes with both No 615 Squadron and No 607 Squadrons. They encountered a number of Messerschmitt bf 109 fighters escorting Heinkel He 111 aircraft and he failed to return.

The National Archives has a file detailing the hunt to discover exactly what happened to him. In this file are copies of RAF reports, letters from his brother and a sister asking for information on behalf of his aged parents. It details searches by the Red Cross – including one to a mysterious Miss Day who is sending a telegram to 'Direktor Maurer' at the Töchter Institut in Switzerland, where she was apparently a former pupil – to see if he had been badly injured and become a prisoner of war, a report from a Frenchman in Merville in the Nord region of France that he was buried there.

There was also a report that he had been buried secretly in a village in Belgium and his grave hidden from the German occupiers. Again, this is not the whole truth. These are just a sprinkling of the sorts of correspondence in the folder. The first item is dated May 1940 and the last December 1949. According to the file, enquiries with the Red Cross produced no lead nor had Miss Day's enquiries. So his case had been handed to the Missing Research and Enquiry Unit in 1946 and after reviewing the case, interviewing possible witnesses they found a Gendarmerie report indicating that he was buried in Wihogne, a small village around 90 kilometres from Brussels – and around 500 kilometres from Merville. The (very damaged) MREU report on the file is dated 26 June 1946 and written by Flight Lieutenant J A M Stuart from No 8 Section, No. 2 Missing Research and Enquiry Unit.

He states that he interviewed witnesses (including the local mayor) and found that Levin Fredman had been recovered from his burning aircraft and he had been identified by his identity discs and a number of papers – a bank statement, an RAF message form and five letters.

The report continues:

*5. I paid a visit to this cemetery and there saw the grave of FREDMAN. It was marked with a wooden cross on which is written the number of this officer. On the Grave itself is a small white stone on*

which is marked in French: 'To our Brave Ally'. This grave has been registered by 73 G.R.U. [a military Grave Registration Unit].

6. Ref. para 2 in your letter of 27th June 1946 stating that a M. Jean Carette had informed F/O Fredman's brother that F/O Fredman was buried in Merville cemetery, France. I think that perhaps M. Carette must refer to some other airman. '

He concludes the report with an appropriate understatement...

7. In view of the fact that the burial place of F/O Fredman has been located, I thought it unnecessary to make the journey to Merville to interview M. Carette. May this case now be considered closed? please.'

Levin's burial was recorded and documented and today his grave (the only British military grave in the cemetery) is well tended. Photographs show that although the wooden cross has been replaced by a Commonwealth War Graves headstone, there is still a separate plaque marked 'A Notre Brave Allie'.

Information taken from Volunteer London Blog, Articles by IWM London Branches Volunteers and written by Richard Maddox. <https://iwmvolunteerlondon.wordpress.com/2017/05/11/may-12-1940-the-death-of-flying-officer-levin-fredman-and-the-nine-year-search-to-find-out-what-happened/>