

Profile – Stan Collett – 600 Sqn



Stan – thought to be while at GWR. © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

Introduction

Having moved to a new HQ building at Northolt last year, 600 have for the last few months been based on a road now named after a former commanding officer – namely S B Collett. Why is an officer who died in tragic and sensational circumstances before the Second World War began, still of such consequence and importance to his old unit so many years on? Who was Stanley Beresford Collett?

Background

Stanley Beresford Collett was born on the 27th November 1896 at Beckwith Road in Camberwell.

He was the 2nd child of Sir Charles Henry Collett and his wife Louisa, who would ultimately have 10 children – eight of whom were sons. Sir Henry worked in the textile industry and owned a retail sort on Shaftsbury Lane. He was a descendent of the prominent Collett family that had risen in the 1490s to provide 2 Lord Mayors to the City of London.



Collett family – Stan behind father in centre. © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

Stanley, or Stan as he is still widely regarded as, was schooled at the Quernmore School and later at Bishop's Stortford College where he represented the college at rugby and swimming. He was by all accounts a talented musician and classical singer. From 1913, aged about 16, he began studying for the law. His military service record shows that he was employed at various times as a law student and latterly solicitor (presumably in articles in a local firm) and later still Town Clerk in Peterborough. He would not have required a degree to have done so, and it seems fitting that the son of a solidly middle class family would have pursued such a practical course rather than going to university and the bar.

War Service

Upon the outbreak of the Great War, Stanley was declared unfit for service as he had twice broken his arm playing rugby and had received a broken leg in a riding accident in 1912.

He was however, eventually accepted into the Durham Light Infantry as a Second Lieutenant – presumably chiefly on home duties, on the 27th November 1915 before then joining the RFC on 25th March 1917.

Thereafter, Stan was promoted to Flight Commander and Captain in February 1918, having passed through a number of training schools and area defence organisations. At various times he flew with 43, 50, 55, 100 and 141 Squadrons and worked as personal assistant to Sir Percy Scott in charge of the defence of London. It is thought that he took part in strategic raids into Germany on multiple occasions, although his logs would have to be sought to confirm this.

As a sideline, 50 Squadron were also involved heavily in the night defence of the UK – the shape of things to come for Stan's future AAF colleagues! Also as a precursor to the future, the Squadron's last CO in 1919 was one Arthur Harris, a name that needs little explanation to readers of this article!

Many other members of the Collett family also provided War service. Of particular note, his younger brother Norman enrolled in the Royal Naval Air Service also in 1917. Tragically after leaving training school at Vendôme, he was killed in a flying accident at Sleaford no less than 3 months later. His Sopwith Pup spun in to the aerodrome. He was the first Collett lost in a service flying accident.



Norman Charles Collett RNAS © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

Post-War

Stan continued in uniform well past the armistice – taking part in the British occupation of the Rhine and being granted a permanent commission in August 1919 as a Lieutenant in the RAF.

On the 2nd of September 1919, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre by France.



However, as the 1920s began, it seems that he suffered from prolonged ill-health, and after lengthy periods of sick leave, hospitalisation and grounding from flying duties to instead become a recruiting officer, he resigned his commission as a Captain in March of 1921.

Stan continued in the law and he joined the GWR as assistant solicitor and later assistant secretary. He participated in the flying at the Hendon Pageant in 1923, and in the same year on the 12th April married Olga Kathleen Griffith, daughter of Colonel Frank Griffith. Stan and Olga were to have no children.

To the AAF

In 1925, with the formation of the AAF, Stan promptly applied for a commission with the obvious expectation that he could resume flying – DH9's again!

Stan's AM Form 50, dated 14th June 1926 shows the Air Medical Board as passing Stan as fit for AAF service, with the next and final page showing "commission parchment sent 25 Oct 26 – received 26 Oct 26". Illustrative of the then efficiency of Royal Mail!

On the 6th July that year, Flight Lieutenant Collett joined the newly formed 601 (Bombing) Squadron at Hendon as an officer in the General Duties Branch AAF. He would promptly again rise to become a flight commander.

To 600 Squadron

On the 3rd September 1931, he was promoted “to Sqd Ldr to cmd [sic] a Squadron” and on the 19th of November 1931, just after the announcement in the London Gazette, he took command at 601’s rival – 600 Squadron.



On taking command at 600. Note only one “A” on collar. An old 601 trick perhaps??? The size and build of the Wapiti is evident – Stan was not a small build but is overshadowed by the beast. (Sqdn Archive). © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

He would not be the last man to change allegiances in this way. Later the equally legendary Charles “Paddy” Green was to do the same at the height of the war. Each man in his own way changed the fortunes and character of 600 Squadron, albeit in different ways, through the force of their respective characters. More on Paddy from me in the future!

Under Stan’s command, the squadron consolidated its reputation as a premier flying unit, and the standards achieved by all ranks of the squadron was seen by the press and public as being to a standard surpassing that of the regular service.

In addition, he worked tirelessly to improve the lot of his men, and he features in the minute's books that we hold of the various messes and the social club that was set up at Finsbury Barracks. It is thought that he contributed to the building of separate messes at Finsbury and Hendon and ensured that the junior ranks were well tended for in terms of their welfare.

At this stage, the squadron would have had no official badge or crest, but it seems that for some time an adaptation of the City of London crest had been used on Squadron aircraft. This leads on to the question of the Collett Standard.



The Collett brothers at the Mansion House. Father centre – Stan Second from left. The Squadron holds on loan from Hendon a large colourised photo of Stanley in this uniform which has been framed in black mounting as a memorial. It is on display in the lobby of the main briefing room. © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

It was at this time, in 1933, that Sir Charles Henry Collett, Stan's father, became the second Collett to hold the office of Lord Mayor of London – from November '33 to November '34. He had been prominent in the City and latterly as an Alderman for some time. There was an obvious connection here, and the City of London Squadron being connected so directly to the incumbent Mayor and this appears to have been recognised by the awarding of a standard with the so familiar "dustcart crest" in 1933.

Tragedy at Hendon

Tragedy struck the Collett family in 1934 at that year's Hendon Air Pageant. At that year's show, Stanley, as CO of 600 Squadron was the escort to the Prince of Wales. The squadron were to perform a mass take-off and fly-past. Stanley took the observer's seat in the lead aircraft flown by Pilot Officer Lea, who was according to the later board of enquiry, widely regarded as the most technically proficient pilot on the squadron.

The crowd instead watched anxiously as Lea's aircraft was seen to be in clear trouble. He attempted to turn for an emergency landing. Veering at first towards the crowd, he was said to have struggled to control the aircraft back towards the field before the aircraft stalled into the ground. Lea was thrown

partially clear and escaped the wreck – which subsequently burst into flames. It seems that Stan was knocked unconscious and received a possibly lethal blow to the head – but in any case was trapped in the inferno which took his life in front of a horrified crowd.

2 fire tenders and various airmen rushed to fight the flames and they struggled to release the observer to no avail. Mrs Collett was present at the show and collapsed at the scene before being taken home where the news was broken to her. She went on to work tirelessly in charity until her passing many years later.

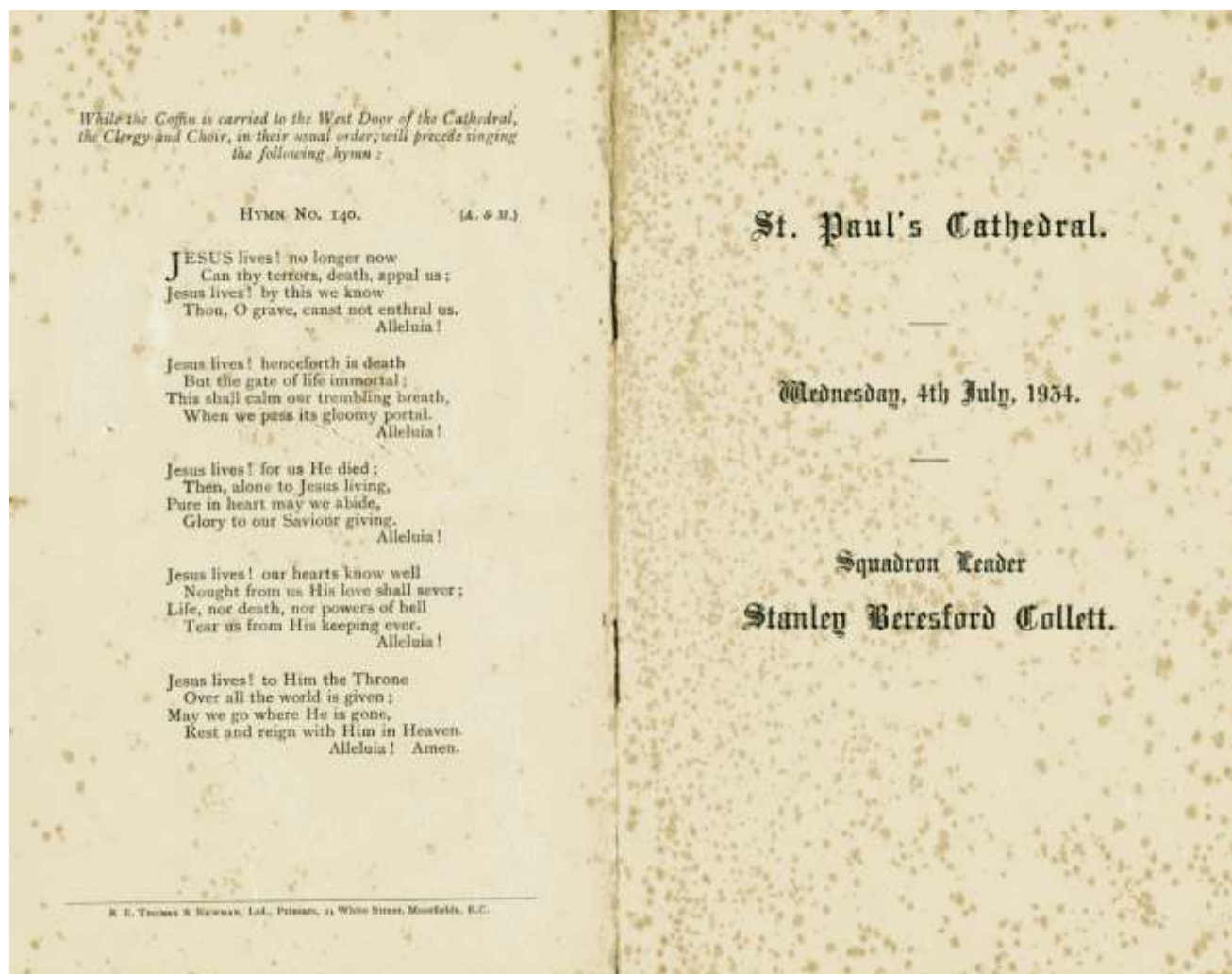
Stan's record is emblazoned – "Killed in aero accident at Hendon, 30.6.1934."



1935. Preparations for the Hendon Pageant that year. J 9606 is believed to be the mount of Stan's replacement as 600 Squadron CO, Squadron Leader (later Group Captain) Peter Graham Stewart. His observer is Cpl Charles "Chas" Kirby, later Lt Col Kirby RA!

The photo is well known, and gives a clear impression of the type of mass take-off and formation flying that would have been seen at the 1934 air pageant before things went so tragically wrong. Note the WW1 style pennant flying from the tail of the aircraft on the left. (Squadron Archive). © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

Subsequently, Stanley's funeral was held at St Paul's Cathedral on 4th July. The Squadron turned out as a whole and Stan was borne from Finsbury Barracks on a gun carriage, through the crowded streets past Mansion House. The casket was carried into the Cathedral by the CO's of the other AAF Squadrons. He was later cremated at Golders Green. The Squadron has contemporary news clippings from the time and a battered order of service. The news reel footage from the time can be sought and viewed online which gives some feeling of the impact that the incident had at the time.



The cover of the funeral order of service – now preserved as part of the squadron collection in the AHB controlled storage. © 600 (City of London) Squadron Association

In the House of Commons, the Secretary of State for Air stated:

“The regrettable accident which occurred at Hendon on Saturday was the result of an attempted forced landing probably due to engine failure. The pilot of the aircraft is still suffering from injuries received in the crash and cannot be questioned, but it would appear that when gliding in to land he realised that if he continued on his course he would land among the spectators and that he turned at a low altitude and, in so doing, stalled the aircraft”.

“I should like to take this opportunity of publicly expressing my Noble Friend's and my own deep personal sympathy with the relatives of the late Squadron Leader Collett, and to place on record the Air Council's high appreciation of the distinguished services he has rendered to the Auxiliary Air Force since its formation”.

HC Deb 03 July 1934 vol 291 cc1751-2

Consequences

Immediately after the accident, the books that we hold in archive show that 600 Sqn were to be commanded by Squadron Leader Peter Stewart, promoted internally to do so. Peter was himself greatly loved and admired and will hopefully be the subject of a detailed profile in the future. Indeed, so quickly was everything in place that meetings were held the night of the crash to amend the makeup of the various social and welfare committees.

The subsequent board of enquiry accounted for the accident in that the knee of Pilot Officer Lea had inadvertently knocked and turned off the fuel cock – a not uncommon accident – and that at low altitude and ever slowing speeds his manoeuvres stalled the aircraft leading to an uncontrolled stall landing. The finding was obviously one that lay the blame at least partly at the Pilot Officer's door – however, he seemingly continued with 600 Sqn for a few years afterwards, and he crops up in one photograph in the Getty Collection from the war as a Wing Commander associated with the Observer Corps. Robert Francis Gore Lea appears to have died in 1994.

The Collett family, including Stan's widow continued to visit the Squadron well after the Second World War as can be evidenced from the visitor books also kept in our archive.

On a final note, it seems likely that, the evidence pointing to the Standard having been given to the Squadron by the Collett family much earlier than expected in 1933, Sir Henry must have given permission for it to be marched through the City after his son's death and in his son's memory. There can be no doubt in my mind that the Standard could not have been "given in memory of his son" as is often recorded. However, there appear to be no formal records of how or why the custom began.

Sir Christopher Collett became Lord Mayor in 1988, being the 3rd Collett to do so and the Collett extended family remains active across the City of London today.

His influence today

On the reformation of 600 Squadron in 1999, the standard was loaned out on permanent loan by the RAF Museum in Hendon alongside its presentation plaque and a sombre memorial portrait that presumably was displayed with the standard previously. The Photograph is on display at 600 Squadron as a reminder of the Squadron's loss and the former CO's sacrifice.

The Standard is still brought out on special occasions, it and the memory of Squadron Leader Collett are a reminder of the link between the Squadron and the City, but are a link between the Squadron and it's past- they physically link us to the airmen and officers who pioneered the Auxiliary Spirit in the 1920s, and in some cases paid to create that spirit with their lives.

SAC Stuart Edwards, Squadron Archivist – 30/08/2011