

# Canvey's Secret War



**The death of a Heavenly Body**

A SeeHistory Publication

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## **The death of a Heavenly Body**

### **The story of the World War II B-17G aircraft collision.**

Canvey Island is rich in history but few islanders seem to be aware of its somewhat diverse heritage. Even the wartime roles of the island during both World Wars and later in the Cold War period seem to be forgotten and would in the most part be lost if not for the dedicated efforts of amateur historians and researchers. Otherwise the island's past is seemingly lost to memories or at best buried away in hidden archives.

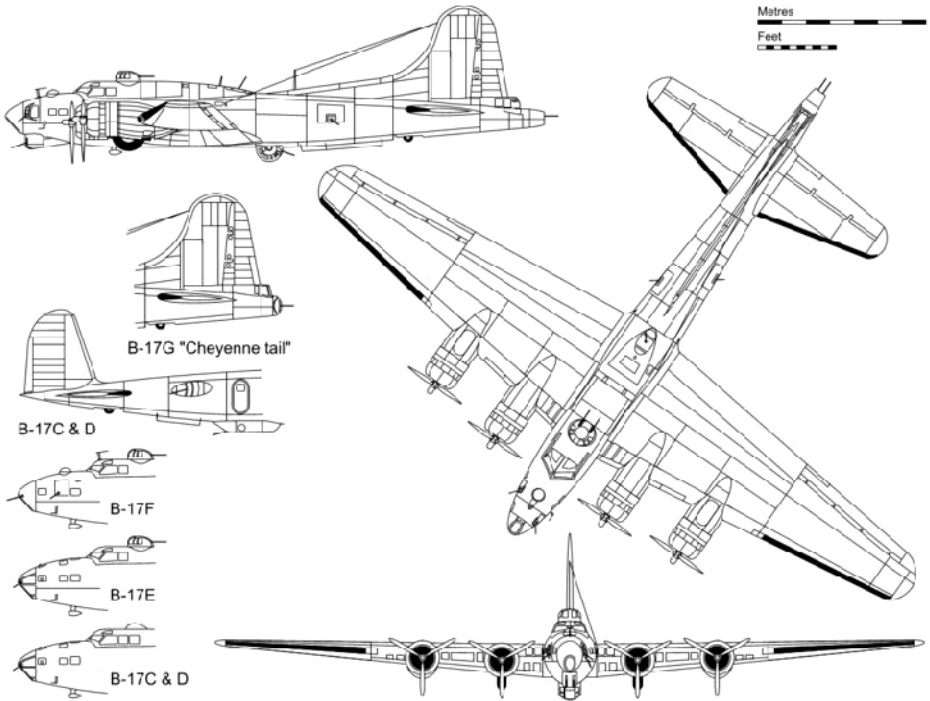
The single wartime tale that some locals are vaguely aware about (if only because it is often mentioned as part of the island's annual memorial ceremony), is that of the mid-air collision of two American B-17 bombers. One of the aircraft having crashed at Canvey Point onto the salt marshes. This event occurred on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 1944 and forms an epic story with a somewhat frightening if thankful outcome that still lingers in the memories of some of the island's more elderly residents.





# B17 Heavy Bombers

379<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group  
Kimbolton  
Huntingdonshire



## **The first Heavenly Body.**

It was only the third bombing mission in the brand new B-17G Flying Fortress aircraft recently named Heavenly Body by its crew of American airmen.

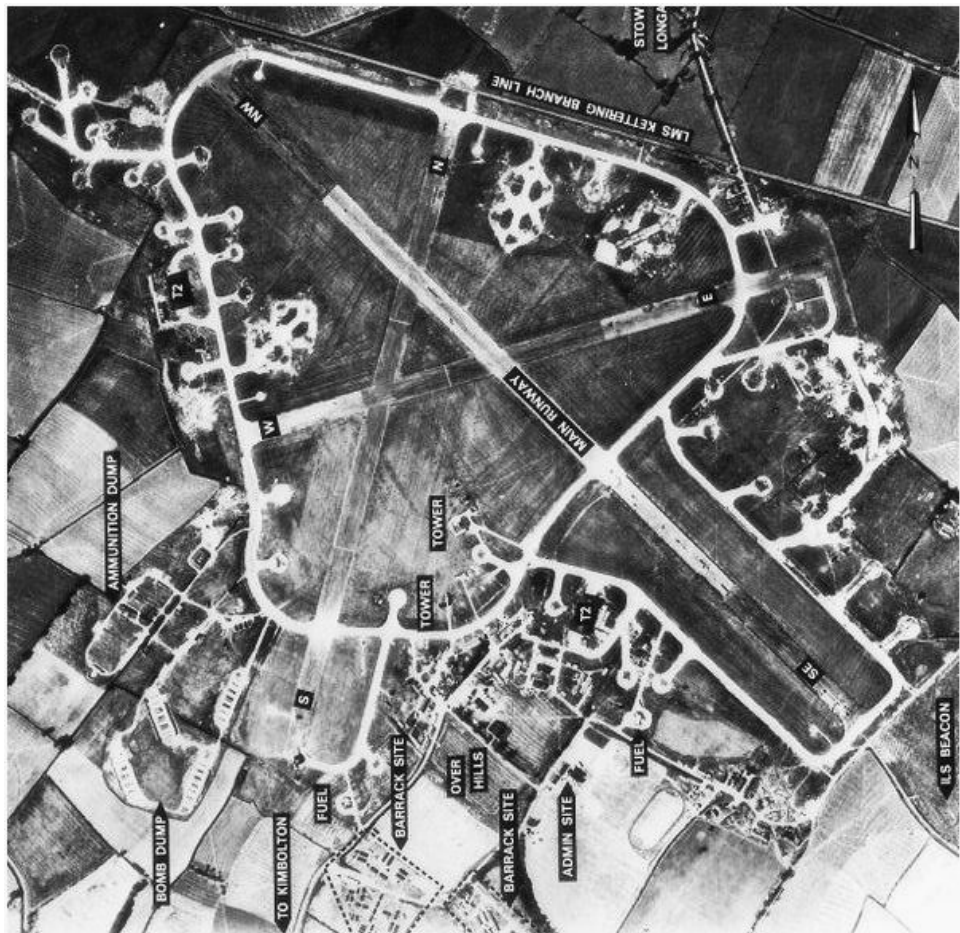
The bombing run had been straight forward other than expected enemy anti-aircraft fire that had raked the underside of the aircraft! Thankful to be approaching the squadron's base at Kimbolton airfield in a relatively undamaged state so the pilot prepared to land. At this stage it was not realised that the undercarriage brakes had been shot away!

Pilot Lloyd Burns had gained a reputation for landing his charge smoothly no matter what the terrain. He brought the aircraft down perfectly along the runway only then realising that the brakes were out! At this point it became as perfect a crash-landing as any pilot could ever wish for! The aircraft looked for all the world like it would eventually roll to a lady like gentle halt had it not been for the fast approaching lack of runway! The plane left the airfield rolled down a hill colliding with a pile of discarded concrete left behind by British contractors constructing the new airfield!

The final moments of Heavenly Body I were concluded with an almighty crash as the aircraft ploughed uncontrolled into the debris adding to this pile of scrap material as it broke up on impact losing a wing and undercarriage. The crew remained unharmed if shaken by the violent vibrations! However the shaking failed to conclude as one of the remaining engines continued to run destroying itself in the process! Lloyd shut down the errant engine and the crew fled the aeroplane expecting it to explode at any moment!

Rear Gunner Richard Andrews recounts that moments before preparing to land he'd asked of Pilot Lloyd Burns if he could enter the underside gun position in order to photograph the landing? Permission was refused and as a result thankful Richard lived another day in order to tell his story of the events that were soon to follow!!

## Kimbolton Airfield circa 1944



## A casualty B-17G Crashed at Kimbolton



## Shortest mission

It was to be pilot Lloyd Burns 29<sup>th</sup> combat mission (only one more flight to go and his European tour of duty would be complete and he'd return to the USA) with his loyal aircrew over enemy territory, they had commissioned their brand new B-17G Flying Fortress heavy bomber aircraft very recently and had quickly nicknamed her Heavenly Body II in order to keep the name flying; it was only their third mission in the new aircraft...

The assignment had been out to enemy controlled France to bomb a suspected 'V1' rocket site located at Zudausques that would have otherwise rained its own particular style of terror on London and the South East of England.



The squadron comprised some thirty or more aircraft of the 379<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group\*, 41 Combat Wing, 1<sup>st</sup> Air Division, 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. Lloyd Burns piloted his, the 525<sup>th</sup> squadron's lead aircraft on this day 19<sup>th</sup> June 1944; their second mission of the day! They were returning from France flying North, to their airbase at Kimbolton in Huntingdonshire. Some of the aircrew described the mission as a milk run, although ground based spotters at the time noted that several of the aircraft were flying on just three of their four engines and of those some were smoking quite heavily. It was also observed that several had sustained significant flak damage and were returning in what could only be very loosely described as flying in formation.

\*The 379th Bomber Group,, was made up from the following group of bomb squadrons:- 524, 525, 526 and 527, they could be identified by a group code painted on the aircraft which comprised: a white K on a small black triangle within a larger yellow triangle. Lloyd Burns was attached to the 525<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron.

It was approaching 1815Hrs the River Thames was coming into view in between the clouds as they crossed the county of Kent far below. Flying at height of around 17,000 feet through cloud haze visibility was reduced to around 1000 yards. Left wing man, pilot Armand Ramacitti was having difficulty with his aircraft, referred to as 44-6133 (it had not been given a nickname) however Lloyd Burns in Heavenly Body II 42-97942 at this stage was unaware of the difficulties Ramacitti was experiencing.



B17's flying in formation

Pilot Ramacitti's aircraft encountered thick cloud and worsening visibility and accordingly at this stage he was almost certainly flying on instruments alone. He lifted the B-17 out of formation above and slightly ahead of the lead aircraft, Heavenly Body II, his concerns were most likely for the aircraft behind him that were flying into the thick smoke from his failing engine adding to the lack of their own visibility and increasing the risk of a collision.

At this stage Theodore Chronopolos 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt on-board 44-6133 gives his account in his official account of events:

I was watching 42-97942 (Heavenly Body II) all the time. As we came closer and closer to it, I started to get a little worried. I called the pilot on the interphone and told him to pull up. Nothing happened so I switched to command. At about this time we hit ship 42-97942. We must have come in on this plane from about a 30 degree to 40 degree angle. It seemed that we were sliding together with the nose of 42-97942 just about under our pilots compartment. Our air-plane was just a little ahead of 42-97942. I grabbed my chute and started to buckle it on. The Navigator was fumbling with his chute....



Moments before on Heavenly Body II Pilot Lloyd Burns became aware that something was very wrong, this is his official account:-

We were flying lead of the second element in the high squadron of "B" Group and were at 17,000 feet descending through a haze that wasn't too bad. It was possible to see the whole formation. We had made no changes in throttle settings or position. The first I knew about the collision was when I heard a grinding crash. I knew right away that we wouldn't be able to pull out of it. I tried to gain control of the ailerons but found it impossible to do so.

I had the feeling that the planes were locked together. It was my impression that the other aeroplane came down on me from above although I never did see the other aeroplane. The Engineer was leaving the ship. I dived down into the passage leading to the Navigator's compartment looking for my chute. I assisted the Engineer in getting the escape hatch open. We got it open alright and I shoved him through and got through myself. After leaving the ship I saw one aeroplane going down in a steep bank with one engine smoking but I didn't know whose plane it was.



*Lloyd L. Burns*  
LLOYD L. BURNS  
1st Lt., Air Corps  
OS10816, Pilot.



44-6133 fell to earth and into the  
River Thames below

What had been omitted from Lloyd Burns testimony and seemed not to be picked up in the official hearing that followed was the fact that Lloyd wasn't piloting the aircraft at the time of the incident. In truth it was his Co-pilot Fred Kauffman that had taken the pilots position in order to gain experience before taking over his own command of a crew. This wasn't particularly unusual as crew members swapped around from flight to flight between both aircraft and jobs, they were very young and often relished the chance to try out different roles; in fact Lloyd Burns himself was only 19 years old at the time of the collision!

A later transcript of Lloyd's account written by Alan Jasper, crash historian, alters things and brings understanding of the events on board Heavenly Body II a little clearer. Lloyd Burns wrote:

As we let down over the River Thames we encountered a layer of clouds, losing sight of the horizon but able to see aircraft immediately adjacent. By the time I realized that Lt. Kauffman was having trouble with this he was already having to over correct somewhat, having slightly over shot our position on the lead planes.

Historian Alan Jasper then notes:

Lloyd Burns had swapped seats with his co- pilot Lt. Kauffman to give him experience in flying in the left hand seat as Kauffman was soon hoping to get his own crew.

Lloyd Burns continues:

I remember reaching over, above Lt. Kauffman trying to push back the curtain to locate our left wing man Ramacitti. Then the crash --- right into Fred Kauffman --- the tremendous grinding crash of metal, the roaring of the wind and the engines. I looked at Fred. He looked dead.



Accounts also reveal that an engine and propellers of Ramacitti's aircraft had in fact almost cut the front of Heavenly Body II clean off just ahead of the pilots position.

Bombardier Jack Gray recounts *"The plexiglass nose cone was knocked off I found myself more out than in the aircraft"*.

The impact has almost certainly killed Co-pilot Fred Kauffman outright! However observers on the ground tell a very different tale:

To them the last moments of the aircraft Heavenly Body II seemed to be controlled and was seen to take decisive action saving Canvey Island from a disaster! As the aircraft veered away to the West towards London following the impact, this was also towards the industrial area and oil storage depot on the island. Then miraculously the aircraft turned again (this coincided with crew members bailing out close to Hole Haven Creek) swinging back toward Southend over a more built up area of Canvey now directly in line with Marine Parade, looking as though it would attempt a landing on the mud flats beyond! But it overshot the suspected target area, circled and then nosedived towards the estuary mud just off Canvey Point, where it crashed.

Onlookers of the crash on the ground agree with this as do those of the official reports from observer stations both on Canvey Island and on the mainland. In fact the full account of nine year old Canvey Islander Stan Pierce is so graphic as to how he saw the aircraft heading towards his home in Northfalls Road, off Marine Parade, Canvey thinking he'd be killed by the crashing aeroplane 'Heavenly Body II' that it can leave the reader taken aback.

## **Memories of Stan Pierce,**

*I didn't know it happened on June 19th 1944. I only found out the actual date 54 years later. It was a beautiful summer's day. A little haze over the Thames, but I remember it was the first time I was conscious of the blueness of sky. Mum had just called me in from playing cricket with Ginger from next door. We lived at the top of Northfalls Road and around the corner in Marine Parade in front of the seawall. I was bouncing the ball along the path towards the door when I turned to look up at a roaring noise in the sky.*

*There were huge four-engined bombers all in neat formation, cruising in slowly, dozens of them. I know of them now as B17's. They were American, and so low I could see the blue and white stars underneath their wings. Then as I stood gazing, right above my head, one bomber fell on top of another. No explosive sound but a crunch and a screeching, tearing noise. I was stunned. A wing floated away. A lot of black smoke. One plane fell away, and bits fell off. I have no further memory of it, but the other plane had a more lasting effect. It tipped over, and the nose was looking at me.*

*I was nine years of age, looking at this huge monster pouring smoke and with four propellers screaming straight at me. I kept staring for maybe three or four seconds and then panicked. I bolted...over the fence...don't even remember touching it...then across the field next to the house. I can still feel the long grass snatching at my laces, and I must have been screaming because a lady, Mrs. Roberts, mowing her front lawn in the next road shouted at me to come to her. She ran to the gate to grab me, and I turned to see the plane still hurtling down towards the roof of our house as little white puffs of what looked like cotton wool floated away from the plane. Mum and my three younger brothers were in the house. Dad was out on the mud digging for bait. Somehow, the plane pulled out of the dive a few hundred feet above the house, roared off across the island and came round back again over the seawall to keep away from the houses and was climbing away up again and curved round and appeared to try to land on the mud but went up on its nose and exploded.*

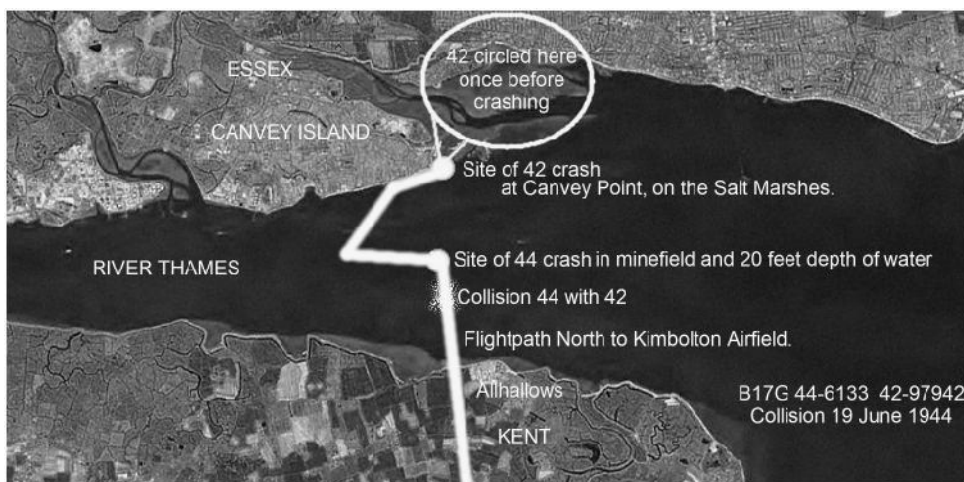
*A little while later as the crowds gathered, I saw one of the men who had baled out walking along the seawall wearing white overalls. I would have sworn then that he was nine feet tall, but I was only about three feet myself. I thought he was a Martian. He walked along the wall with us, carrying his helmet, and I remember I walked behind him and had some fascination with his helmet and his furry boots. I heard him speaking in a strange accent to the grown-ups. I had never seen a film, and there was no television then, so I just gawked at this giant man from the sky.*

*One of the crew had landed his parachute in the water out by the lighthouse. A tug went right past him, and then a few seconds later turned round and went back to pick him up. Lots of people gathered up at the point and some army people from the huts that used to be at the roundabout were there. Two men came across the mud carrying a stretcher with a blanket over it. A body had been thrown out 100 yards from the plane. Dad came home looking a bit grey-faced and quiet. The plane had gone over his head before it hit the cockle bed. It was an eventful day for a young lad!*

Extract from:-



*Canvey Island.org*  
The Canvey Community Archive



The most likely paths of the two crashing aircraft.

## Aftermath

As a result of the collision only Theodore Chronopolos 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, Bombardier on-board 44-6133 (the unnamed aircraft) survived; this then is the final section of his official testimony:

...I started to go for the escape hatch. The Engineer and Co-Pilot were already there trying to open it but the door was jammed. Then we went into a spin. The next thing I remember was another crash and I thought we had hit the ground, but we hadn't. I blacked out and when I came to I was falling free. I opened my chute and blacked out again. On the way down I saw a ship spinning down. It was in two pieces and three engines were on fire.

Of the remaining crew 'they all perished', the airframe was so badly distorted in the impact and it fell to Earth so steeply that it would have been near impossible for them to escape! This then is the list of casualties on-board 44-6133:

Pilot	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt.	Armand J Ramacitti	MIA
Co-pilot	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt.	William J Hager	KIA
Navigator	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt.	Donald F Watson	MIA
Gunner	S/Sgt.	Richard Ritter	MIA
Gunner	S/Sgt.	Cecil A Tognazzini	MIA
Gunner	S/Sgt.	John P Burke	MIA
Gunner	Sgt.	Warren G Oaks	KIA
Gunner	Cpl.	Paul K Haynes	KIA

On Heavenly Body II, 42-97942 the following casualties:

Co-pilot	Fred S Kaufman	MIA
Navigator	Edward N Sadler	KIA
Gunner	Louis V Schulte	KIA

The Heavenly Body II aircraft continued to remain in the air following the collision for sufficient time that six of its crew managed to escape.

Even though the aircraft was losing height fairly slowly it was nevertheless in chaos as expressed in the testimony of William Farmer, S/Sgt. Ball Turret Gunner:

I was sitting in the waist and I heard over the interphone that there was a plane above. The planes hit and the Waist Gunner fell flat on his right near the ball turret, things started popping off the wall. The Radio Operator helped the Waist Gunner take the door off. I saw the Radio Operator leave the ship. I went back to the waist door and looked back towards the radio room. Everything was really coming apart and so I jumped. I didn't see the Waist Gunner get out at all.

The six crew members that did manage to escape were:

Pilot	Lloyd L Burns	SIA
Bombardier	Jack L Gray	SIA
Top Turret Gunner	Leonard F Gibbs	SIA
Ball Turret Gunner	William H Farmer	SIA
Tail Gunner	Richard Andrews	SIA
Radio Op/Gunner	Leroy J Monk	SIA



Heavenly Body II 42-97942 Crew

Abbreviations used:- IA in action. K killed. M missing. S safe.

## **Outcome.**

Following the accident an inquest was held it was chaired by:

Robert S Kittel Lt. Colonel, Air Corps PRESIDENT.

Robert D Brown, Major, Air Corps.

Clay W Hedges, Air corps, RECORDER.

The Pilots and Co-Pilots of both aircraft were charged to account.

### **The official description and verdict is as follows:**

The formation was returning from a combat mission and had reached the English coast in formation, flying through a haze between 18,000 and 21,000 feet. Aircraft #44-6133 went through the haze and collided with aircraft #42-97942 which was leading the Second element of the high Squadron, hitting the plane just behind the pilots compartment near the top turret. As a result of the crash one plane went down in a spin, the other plane disintegrated and fell apart, falling to the ground in pieces.

**The cause of the accident is substantially as follows:** Second Lieutenant Armand J Ramacitti failed to maintain correct position while in an area of somewhat restricted visibility and while trying to regain his position in formation, over controlled and slid into the Element Leader.

As reported by the pilot, there was haze between 18,000 and 21,000 feet, with visibility of 1000 yards.

The board has no recommendations to make.

No pecuniary or disciplinary action is contemplated.

**[The final technical cause of accident reports show identical findings and conclusions].**



## Heavenly intervention v Aero-science

No matter what the outcome of the official findings and verdict the people of Canvey Island were and are still grateful that the aircraft Heavenly Body II didn't descend onto a populated area of the island.

Observers strongly felt that the final moments of the aircraft were being controlled so carefully someone or 'something' had to be flying the aeroplane. It is possible, if unlikely, that Co-pilot Fred Kaufman did recover, take control and fly the craft in its final moments although even those on-board would indicate that the central controls that ran down the length of the aeroplane were completely severed in the collision. It is therefore likely that the act of opening escape hatches and with sections of the craft falling off, including an engine and a control flap, that this had the effect observed in what is otherwise a very stable flying platform: that of the B-17 series of airframes.

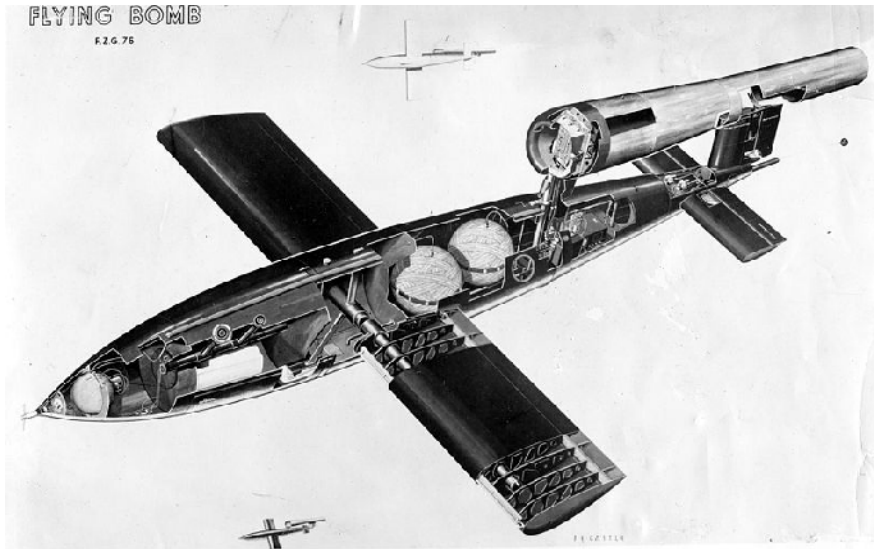
This aside, the act of bombing the German 'V' rocket sites may have saved many thousands of lives and as if to bring this home just one month later in July 1944 a 'V1' rocket fell on Canvey, this is the account of Jim Beaver:

### **The day a Doodlebug (flying bomb) dropped on Canvey Village.**

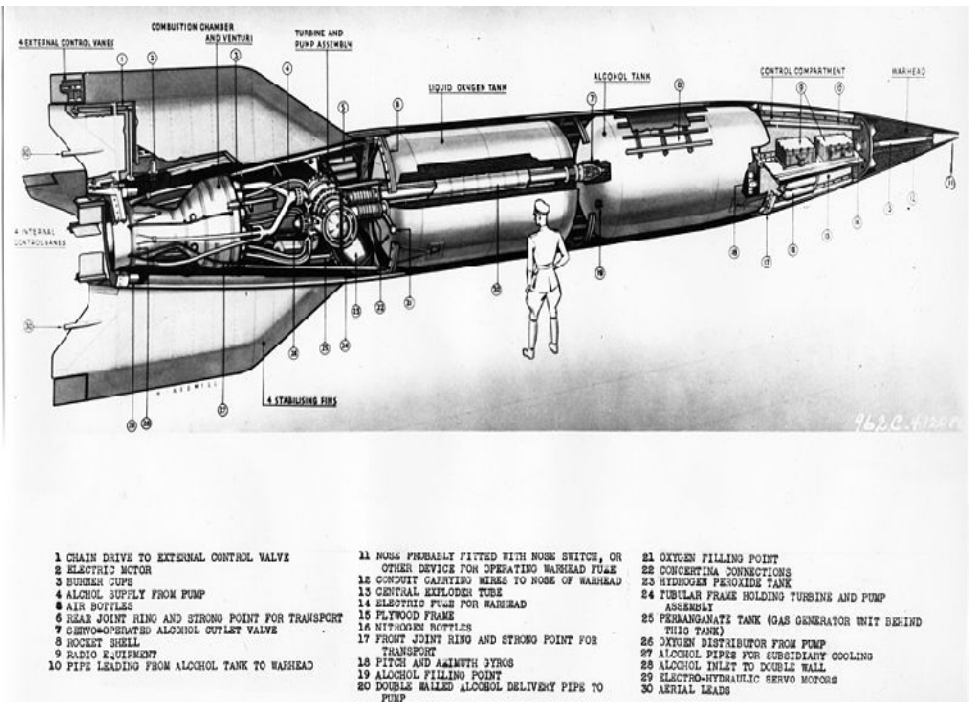
*On 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1944 during the war, I lived in Coniston Road, near Jone's Corner with my mum and dad and my two sisters. My Dad (Bill Beaver) was a fireman at Shell Haven Oil Refinery doing shift work. He cycled there every day, 13 miles each way. There was no other transport to Shell Haven in those days. During his spare time he did a few odd jobs.*

*On this Saturday morning the 22<sup>nd</sup> July, he was going to put up a flag pole for Mr. Peg Scott who lived in Deepwater Road at Canvey Village. Peg Scott was physically disabled; he lived alone in a bungalow with quite a bit of land where he kept bees and a few ducks and chickens. His brother was Vic Scott, a Coal Merchant who lived in Haven Road.*

## Doodlebugs and Rockets: The V1 Flying Bomb, nicknamed Doodlebug...



## The V2 Rocket Bomb, an even more powerful weapon!



*My dad set off that morning with me sitting on the crossbar. We were getting near when there was a terrific explosion from the direction of Deepwater Road. A Doodlebug (flying bomb) had dropped. My dad told me to run straight home at once. He went on and found the Doodlebug had dropped right on Peg Scott's house; he must have been killed instantly. The Howard family lived next door. Two of their little boys Eric age seven and Peter aged just five (Brothers of Ray Howard\*) were also killed Ray himself was badly injured by flying glass. A young girl, Betty Brace was killed, she had been delivering papers. I think my dad must have been one of the first there, he helped get the families out from the wreckage.*

*It was a very sad day and one I will never forget, another few minutes and dad and I would have been at Peg Scott's bungalow!*

**Facts:** In 1944 alone over 8000 Doodlebugs were launched against London. Many of them fell in and around Kent and Essex and as a result many innocent people were killed.

Doodlebugs were small pilot less planes, rocket propelled. These were followed a few months later by the V2 rocket bomb!

At night you could see flames extending out the back from their very noisy engines, when the engine stopped the bomb would be falling and a few long seconds later 'the explosion would come!'

The Doodlebug that hit Canvey was recorded as FLY1. It exploded at Deepwater Road causing three immediate fatalities all male. There were also eight serious casualties two male and six female. [others such as Betty Brace must have died later as a result of the explosion]. Three bungalows were demolished, sixty two bungalows were extensively damaged. Ninety eight bungalows were slightly damaged along with twelve shops and a church.

\*Ray Howard, better known as 'Mr Canvey' grew up and became Councillor Ray Howard. Even today, all those years later he still has to attend hospital on occasions to have glass shrapnel removed from his body when it presents him with problems.

## **A grateful island, in tribute to the airmen...**

Following the collision and crashes of the B17 aircraft Canvey islanders rallied to assist. Of those that made it ashore only one Tail Gunner, Richard Andrews landed by parachute on dry land as confirmed by the Stan Pierce recount of events. As for the remainder, finding themselves in terrible danger of drowning in the Thames estuary, islanders assisted in saving their lives as boats and their crews rowed out to the men and hauled them aboard to safety. The events of that day left an impression on the island's people and an invisible bond that would not be broken.

Years later it was felt that a tribute should be arranged to show that this bond existed and the day should never be forgotten and so in an act of remembrance a plaque was added to the Canvey Island War memorial located in the grounds of the Paddocks Community Centre.



The Thameside Aviation museum at Coalhouse Fort, just up river from Canvey Island, houses a large display dedicated to the memory of the B17's, this display is shared with the Bay Museum on Canvey and is shown at other venues around South Essex. David Thorndike who exhibits the material also holds a large folder of documentation and press clippings which he makes available to anyone interested.

## Where are they today?

Alan Jasper, UK Historian, was instrumental in tracking down the surviving members of crew and through his efforts they all got back together from time to time. It was sad to learn that after the crash none of the crew were to meet again had it not been for Alan's efforts; up to that point in time they had no idea who had survived the crashes and that must have haunted them greatly over the years.

At the time of writing only two of the Heavenly Body II crew who were aboard the aeroplane on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1944 and survived are still alive. It was with a sad heart that we learnt of the passing of Pilot Lloyd Burns just days before the opening of the Bay Museum on Canvey. This was a especially sad as the museum houses as section of a Heavenly Body II engine which forms the focal point of the downstairs section of the exhibits. It was to have a special service of thanks and remembrance read over it during the opening ceremony. The service was accordingly adapted to include a special addition in memory of Lloyd Burns.

Those surviving today are:

Dick (Richard) Andrews & Bill (William) Farmer.

The aeroplane name Heavenly Body continues to fly today as Dick Andrew's daughter named her light aircraft:

'Heavenly Body III' as a tribute to the crew and the aircraft.

The tail of Heavenly Body III  
It depicts the artwork that would  
have adorned the original aircraft  
and the names of all of the crew.



The back of Dick Andrews  
original flying jacket.

## **We would like to thank the following contributors:**

Very special thanks to Dick (Richard) Andrews of the original Heavenly Body I & II crew who very kindly responded to a contact following the sad announcement that Pilot Lloyd Burns had passed away. It was with Dick's very kind help that the work was put together and completed in a relatively short space of time.

Dick Andrews: Heavenly Body survivor.

David Thorndike: Bay Museum & Thameside Aviation Museum.

Alan Jasper: Crash historian: records.

Geoff Burke: Crash historian: records.

Gary Foulger: Crash historian: records.

David Bullock: Canvey Community Archive.

Janet Penn: Canvey Community Archive.

Canvey Library.

All those Canvey residents that kindly submitted their memories.

With thanks to those no longer with us but whose memories have graced the pages of this booklet.

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B17's in the clouds, contrails.



Richard Andrews meets  
HRH Queen Elizabeth (Queen Mother)

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