

Wellington Bomber Crash at Ford 9th January 1944

Synopsis

On the night of 9 January 1944 a Wellington bomber set out from Upper Heyford on a training flight for bombing practice. During the course of the flight the starboard engine failed. The crew abandoned the aircraft at approximately 01:55, except for the tail gunner, who, because of his position at the rear, could not leave the plane. The aircraft crashed at Moat farm, taking down a wall and the side of a barn. The body of the tail gunner, 22 year old Canadian, Sgt Louis Grover Martin, was found in the farmyard. The body of Wireless Operator, Sgt Victor George Bailey, aged 20, was found beneath his fully deployed parachute at the Biggin.

P/o Chenier was recorded as the pilot, and there were three further crew members on board, who survived: P/O G K Campbell, P/O J B Birkett, Sgt R E Dennis.

Eye witness account

John Mott was living at Four Winds with his parents at the time of the accident. He was 21 at the time, and was an air raid warden for Ford with Perce Munday.

The family were woken at 2am with a tremendous crash, but did not know what had happened. Some time later there was a tremendous banging on the back door. An airman stood there, very distressed, saying his plane had crashed. John remembers him as "a big tall fellow, with an accent. He had lost his boots and had walked in his socks." This was almost certainly GK Campbell, the Canadian Navigator. He had baled out over Big field in Upton, (The Biggin?).

Mr Mott Senior brought him inside, and then they drove down to Moat Farm, where they could see flames going up into the sky. It appeared that 2 or 3 crew members had baled out.

The plane was lying across the barn at Moat Farm, and the barn was on fire. The body of a crew member was lying across the gate. A gathering of people were collected at the farm. They understood that the pilot had tried to get all his crew out safely before he left the plane, and that it was his body in the farmyard. (Actually this was the rear gunner, whose position in the plane was very vulnerable, and often prevented the gunner from evacuating the plane).

Wallace Shields from The Old Thatch took control, and said this was not a sight for people to see, and they must leave the farm. Police arrived. The Chief Commandant came out from Westcott, with an ambulance, to see the crew, and John's father, Sydney, invited everyone into the dining room at Four Winds. They sat round the eight-sided dining table and talked though the accident. Sydney put a bottle of whisky and glasses on the table and told people to help themselves.

Next day a friend of John Mott's, who was in the police force, called and asked John to help him search the fields for parachutes.

John remembers other crashes which happened on training flights, one at Upper or Lower Pollicott, when a plane took off from Westcott and did not clear the hill. Westcott was a training unit for crews of Wellington Bombers, so it was assumed by people in the village that the bomber which crashed at Ford came from Westcott.

Mrs Ivy Ludlow remembers the crash of the Wellington Bomber at Moat Farm. Her brother Douglas saw the plane come down, and told her about it next day. Douglas worked at Moat farm at the time, as a farmhand. No one was in the house that night, and the plane missed the farmhouse and The Pightle, but took the side of the barn down, and landed in the field behind The Pightle. The plane was in flames and the body of the Canadian rear gunner was found in the yard. Another crew member died at the Biggin. It was said he had not had enough height to bale out safely. People came from Westcott and collected the pieces of the plane. Everyone talked about the crash for some time.

Gillian Siggers

From conversations with John Mott, and with Mrs Ivy Ludlow, who kindly gave their time to talk about this accident.

August 2003

WELLINGTON BOMBER MEMORIAL

UPDATE

8 NOVEMBER 2003

A considerable number of people have indicated they would like to commemorate the two young men who lost their lives in the Wellington Bomber crash on 9 January 1944. The consensus is that a memorial plaque should be placed near the crossroads, as this is seen as the centre of the village, and is also near the War memorial.

We thought you would like to know how we are progressing towards this outcome.

- Letters have been written to the RAF and the Ministry of Defence to request further information – RAF Personnel Management Agency; RAF Records Association; Air Historical Branch; and the RAF Museum at Henley. We now know the family names and initials of all crewmembers, their RAF numbers, and the fact that three of the crew were Canadians.
- Further requests have been made to follow up the three Canadian crewmembers through the RCAF.
- Research has been done through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to find the burial places of the two crew members who died, and to ascertain that the surviving crew members did not die later in the War.
- A letter has been written to the Parish Council requesting permission to place a memorial somewhere near the War Memorial, at the crossroads. We await their decision.
- Contact has been made with a local senior retired RAF officer who has had discussions with RAF Halton. They have indicated they would be willing to provide a presence at the unveiling of a plaque. A formal request will be made after the Parish Council has made its decision.
- Contact has been made with two witnesses, and their memories recorded.
- A request for contact with survivors or their families has been posted on the Internet.
- Contact has been made with the local press, and research done to find out whether there was a report on the accident at the time. The press is keen to be present at an unveiling if it takes place.

Thanks to David Jutson and Harry Shearman for their research.

Gillian Siggers and Chloe Shearman

WELLINGTON BOMBER MEMORIAL – LATEST NEWS

UPDATE 14 DECEMBER 2003

As you will remember from the November update a considerable number of people said they would like to commemorate the two young men who lost their lives in the Wellington Bomber crash on 9 January 1944. The consensus was that a memorial plaque should be placed near the crossroads, as this is seen as the centre of the village, and is also not far from the War memorial.

The date and time for the dedication of the plaque is 9th January 2004 at 11 am, the 60th Anniversary of the crash.

- The Parish Council gave their permission to place the plaque at the village crossroads. They have been very supportive.
- The Highways Department have viewed the site and have also given permission for the erection of the plaque.
- We have found the relatives of the Canadian airman who died in the crash. His brother, who is 91 years old, and two nephews, still live in his home town of Big River, Saskatchewan. They are delighted, and very moved, that a plaque is being erected to commemorate their relative after all these years.
- Contact has been made with RAF Halton, and a meeting was held on 12 December. RAF Halton will be present at the Dedication ceremony, and the Station Commander, Group Captain the Honourable David Murray will unveil the plaque. RAF Halton will provide a Guard of Honour, and the Last Post will be played. The ceremony will take about 20 min.
- Thames Valley Police are liaising with RAF Halton and ourselves. They have decided to ensure the safety of all participants by closing off the roads in Ford to through traffic from 10 am to 12 noon on 9 January. Please could you arrange with anyone who is likely to make a delivery to you to avoid this time.
- The plaque and its supporting base are in production. Terry Sadler will be overseeing the erection of the plaque, and would welcome help. Phone 748362.
- Several requests for contact with survivors or their families have been posted on the Internet. If you have access to the Internet we would value your help with continuing this task. Phone 748431.
- If you have any other ideas on how to trace the family of Sergeant Victor George Bailey of Rainham Essex, or the families of the other members of the crew, we would be very grateful. (We have already sent a letter through RAF Personnel Management Agency, and have done a telephone trawl through all the Baileys and Morleys in Rainham, and have contacted the Daily Mail “Lost and Found” column.)
- The local press is keen to be present at the Dedication Ceremony.

Thanks to everyone for your support. We do hope you will be there on the day – please put the date in your diary now! Bring your friends and make it an occasion to remember - 11 a.m. 9th January 2004.

Chloe and Harry Shearman, Terry Ford, Terry Sadler, Gillian Siggers

MEMORIAL CEREMONY – FRIDAY 9TH JANUARY 2004

The dedication of a plaque in memory of Sergeant Victor George Bailey and Sergeant Louis Grover Martin who died when their Wellington Bomber crashed at Ford was held on Friday, 9th January 2004.

Mike Trotman Chairman of Dinton Ford and Upton Parish Council made a speech:

“Exactly 60th years ago, on the night of January 9th 1944, a Wellington Bomber took off from Upper Heyford in Oxfordshire on a routine training flight for bombing practice. On board were six crew members, three Canadian and three British. Sometime later the starboard engine failed and at approximately 1.55 a.m. the crew abandoned the plane except for the rear gunner who, because of his position in the plane, could not get out. The aircraft crashed near Moat Farm about half a mile away, taking down a wall and the side of a barn.

The rear gunner, whose body was found in the farm yard was 22 years old. One other crew member, who was just 20 years old died caught up in his parachute near the Biggin Pond. The other members of the crew survived.

The plaque we are about to unveil commemorates these two young men who died so tragically. It reads:

In memory of Sergeant Victor George Bailey, Royal Airforce Volunteer Reserve, Wireless Operator, aged 20 years, of Rainham, Essex and Sergeant Louis Grover Martin, Royal Canadian Air Force, Rear Gunner, aged 22 years of Big River, Saskatchewan, Canada, who died when their Wellington Bomber crashed in Ford on 9th January 1944.

May I just pay tribute to the Ford History Group, and the people of this community, who have worked so hard to make today possible. The History Group have told me that they have made contact with the Martin family in Canada, who incidentally had four members of their family serving in the Royal Canadian Airforce during the Second World War. Two brothers of Louis are still alive aged 91 and 80 and two nephews still live in Big River.

Sadly no family members have yet been found for Victor Bailey.

I would now like to ask the Station Commander from RAF Halton, Group Captain the Honourable David Murray to unveil the plaque.”



Introduction and Citation:
Mr Mike Trotman, Chairman of Dinton, Ford & Upton Parish Council



Unveiling of the plaque:
Group Captain the Honourable David Murray, OBE FCMI RAF Station Commander,
RAF Halton



Formation of Guard of Honour:
12 trainees and two corporals from RAF Halton led by Warrant Officer Terry Kynaston.





Royal Air Force



In Memory of
Sergeant VICTOR GEORGE BAILEY.
1585910, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Wireless Operator, aged 20 yrs.
of Rainham, Essex.

And
Sergeant LOUIS GROVER MARTIN.
R/182617 Royal Canadian Air Force.
Rear Gunner, aged 22 yrs.
of Big River, Saskatchewan,
Canada.

Who died when their Wellington Bomber
Crashed in Ford
On 9th. January 1944.





Service of Remembrance and reading of poem:
Chaplain from RAF Halton



The Last Post:
Trumpeter from RAF Halton Voluntary Band



Representative from the Canadian High Commission: Major Richard Van Der Pryt







Gordon Ludlow was aged 10 when the plane came down in Ford.