

Memorial to 8 airmen killed at Rudgwick's Rikkyo School erected after 75 years.

Over a hundred guests and relatives of seven of the eight men from all over the country attended the event on Saturday 31st August at the crash sites. Rikkyo School headmaster, Dr Toru Okano, kindly hosted a service of remembrance and dedication of a bronze memorial pillar adjacent to a public right of way, led by Rudgwick's Curate Pete Deaves. Several relatives read tributes and poems. Adam Tudor-Lane, 31, an automotive journalist from Milton Keynes, has spent the past two years fundraising to build a permanent memorial to the fallen as well as exhaustively researching to discover the true facts of the tragic accident that remained secret even to the families of the airmen killed.

On 7th January 1944, just over 75 years ago, two RAF B-25 Mitchell Mark II bombers of Second Tactical Air Force returning to Dunsfold Aerodrome collided over where Rudgwick, Cranleigh and Alfold parishes meet, bringing both down and killing all eight servicemen on board. Fortunately, there was little damage on the ground and only one very minor injury. The sites of the two crashes are on high ground at Rikkyo School, then a private house and estate known as Pallinghurst in the ownership of Ernest MacAndrew and his family. Rikkyo School, a Japanese Christian school, was founded here in 1972.

On Saturday 31st August at 1.00pm a large crowd of interested people, most with some connection to the events of 1944, gathered for a memorial service in front of the elegant former stable building, with moving contributions from descendants of the airmen who died. This followed the unveiling of the monument Adam has had created to these eight brave and very young men, average age 23.5 years, all in the Royal Air Force Reserve. It is sited near the crash site of his great uncle's plane. The service concluded down the hill at the exact location where the other plane came down. Visitors later moved on to the Reg Day Museum at Dunsfold, specially opened for the occasion, and to the Three Compasses, Alfold, the pub used by the flyers at Dunsfold throughout the war.

Flying in FR396 from 180 Sqdn were –

Flying Officer Ernest Fooks, pilot, from New Zealand, 32;

Pilot Officer Leonard Taylor, navigator, Birmingham, 24;

Flight Sergeant Charles Forsyth, wireless operator/gunner, Peacehaven, 23;

Flight Sergeant George Ormandy (Adam's great uncle), gunner, Beckenham, 20.

FR396 spiralled down, still with a full bomb load aboard, exploded, and buried itself just 200 yards NE of the house.

Flying in FL682 from 98 Sqdn were –

Warrant Officer Terence Riordan, pilot, Abergavenny, 22;

Flight Sergeant Douglas Morris, navigator, Abergavenny, 23;

Flight Sergeant Stanley Norton, wireless operator/gunner, Lincoln, 22;

Flight Sergeant William Cross, gunner, Ribbleton, near Preston, 22.

FL682 which was already ablaze after the mid-air collision made a nearly level landing in a field and orchard south of the house.

The whole event was the brainchild of a great-nephew of Ft Sgt Ormandy, Adam Tudor-Lane, who first contacted Rudgwick Parish Council a year ago. Adam says, "I've had the help of local historians Frank Phillipson from the Dunsfold Airfield History Society and Terry Batchelor from the Reg Day Memorial Museum, the Sussex Metal Detecting Club and farm owners, visited the National Archives, and had help from two guys who are the world experts when it comes to rebuilding Mitchells, along with stumbling across parts of both planes being recently sold on eBay. Over the last year or so, I have managed to contact the families of six of the other seven men. Douglas Morris has proved impossible partly because he was an only child. Ernest Fooks was difficult too as he is older, and the family are in New Zealand, yet his niece by chance holidaying in Europe was able to attend and contribute her story to the service."

The memorial was unveiled by Gp Capt Derek North RAF (Retd), Deputy Lieutenant for W Sussex. Flt Sgt Morris was represented by the mayor of Abergavenny, Cllr Tony Konieczny. Cllr John Browne represented Preston, and Cllr Richard Landeryou represented Horsham District and Rudgwick Parish Councils, with Roger Nash and Malcolm Francis of Rudgwick Preservation Society. Wg Cdr Matt Roberts, Flt Lt Christopher Warr and WO Mike Maguire from RAF Odiham attended. Cranleigh Royal British Legion were also represented.

WSSC operatives on duty in Chichester recorded the crashes within 10 minutes, entering in their log the event occurring at 13.35 hours. This was way out of line with the normal humdrum reports on other days, but very matter of fact.

"15.18: 4 UXBs [unexploded bombs] found and dealt with by RAF. 3 bombs not found. 4 bodies from one plane found. Damage to stables, cottages and Pallinghurst House. Region notified at 15.25." and at 16.15 "All bombs now detonated. Total bodies found 5. Region notified 16.20."

Finally,

"16.30 Nothing further to report. Incident closed."

From this, it is clear some bodies from the exploded plane were not immediately recovered.

Piecing together the story, so long kept under wraps, and only partly uncovered by local researchers, it is now clear the B-25 Mitchell Mk II bombers were returning in formation. Two six-box groups, arriving simultaneously, got too close, despite clear January conditions, so that the inner planes touched wings and crashed out of control to the ground just 3 miles short of home. One at least had not dropped its bombs. The role of the Dunsfold squadrons in the first months of 1944 was to destroy the feared V1 unmanned flying bomb launch sites, that January day, two on the Cherbourg Peninsula in France. In the event, they were captured after D-Day before they could be used. Reports at the time agreed this was an accident; no blame was attached to either pilot. Stories have emerged over the years of children in Tisman's Common and at Pallinghurst witnessing the falling planes, a memory seared on their brains forever. Pilots Riordan and Fooks and their crews were unlucky to become casualties in West Sussex. Now, their names will live forevermore in a corner of Horsham District in the grounds of Rikkyo School.

Roger Nash, Rudgwick Preservation Society

Adam Tudor-Lane