

WHAT BECAME OF SERGEANT PHILIP VINCENT BIRCH R.A.F.

I have always been aware that my mother had without fail placed three crosses at the Bishopsteignton village war memorial each remembrance day. To my shame I had never asked who they were in remembrance of. I knew of uncles who served during WW2 but all survived. It was not until the celebrations marking the sixtieth anniversary of WW 2 ending that I asked.

Arthur Steel - Normandy, the days after D-Day, killed during an act of bravery, Royal Engineers.
Vivian Perkin- H.M.S. Heckla Cape Agulas, killed when the ship struck a mine.
Brian Egan- R.A.F. plane crash during training.

Mum was not sure about the circumstances of the action in which Vivian and Brian died. The family believed Vivian had been killed in the Mediterranean. However an enquiry to the R.N. proved otherwise. All mum knew about Brian was he died during training in a plane crash. She visited the crash site on the morning of the funeral 1945 but could not remember the location.

Brian was my mother's first cousin, he had two sister's Joan and Moira, I can remember Joan and her son Martin, from a family visit to a holiday cottage at Looe 1967 I think. I also remember Joe an elderly gentleman who was Joan's father, my mother's uncle and father to Brian. Sadly Joan died a few years ago, I recently made contact with Martin, the first time since that visit to Looe. I've only met Moira recently.

Having served in the R.A.F. I was particularly interested in finding out more about Brian. I started surfing the internet all the obvious sites and could not find any Brian Egan on the commonwealth war graves web site for 1945, R.A.F. I finally noticed a site, "Solihull air casualties". I knew Brian was from that area so I looked closer. The site mentioned Wellington bomber LP286 and the crew, one of the names was one James Brian Egan killed 1945. Re-checking the war graves site confirmed the crew and date. The site also gave the names of the parents, this confirmed I had the right person. James used his second name Brian. I later spoke with Moira, she did not know her brother was called James he was always known as Brian. Moira did not know of any specific details about her brother's death, other than he was a wireless operator and was killed during a training sortie. She has the box containing Brian's personal effects that was given to her father by the R.A.F. Adjutant from 12 O.T.U.

I wrote to the R.A.F. Historical Branch requesting information. The returning letter stated the details. Wellington bomber LP286 Mk X took off from Chipping Warden at 12.28 hrs 18 April 1945, a 12 O.T.U. aircraft flying a routine cross country navigation exercise. The crew were still training, all senior non-commissioned officers who had already won their wing's and brevet's. Brian proudly sported the Signaller's insignia, I believe he also did air-gunnery training as well. The aircraft experiencing starboard engine problems returned to Chipping Warden. The bomber failed to land on the first attempt and went around. The plane crashed and burnt out south east of the drome at 14.03 hrs in Edgcote Park, about 150m from some houses in Chipping Warden. The crew were all killed with the exception of the tail gunner, who suffered burns.

- Flight Sergeant WJ Hillier -Pilot 24 ----- St Helens
- Sergeant H Mairs -navigator 24----- Livingstone Station
- Sergeant AG Grant- Air Bomber 21-----Tottenham
- Sergeant JB Egan - Wireless Operator 20----- (Relative) Solihull
- Sergeant P McGowan- Air gunner 20----- Traced Irish Republic
- Sergeant PV Birch- Air gunner (only survivor) 19 -----Possibly London Hampstead (born Norwich)

I found further hits on the internet in particular was aviationresearch.co.uk , I contacted the web master Garth Barnard. Garth was familiar with the crash of LP286 and had researched it. I was sent a map of the crash site and a copy of the crash report. It consisted of one leaf printed on both sides. On one side were tick boxes and on the other was a short narrative. Garth also said he knew of an eye witness to the crash, a man named Philip Lucas. In 1945 Philip was a 10 year old school boy at Chipping Warden village school. About 14.00 hrs 18 April 1945 Philip was in the school playground, when he heard and saw LP286 flying a course around the church, clearly having problems by the sound of the starboard engine and it's low altitude. The aircraft went out of view, then Philip heard the impact. An hour later Philip walked within 30m of the wreckage on his way home. The image has stayed with him all his life.

The narrative reads verbatim:

Aircraft crashed and burnt out, after taking overshoot procedure after starboard engine failure. Pilot stalled the aircraft when at low speed and endeavoring to clear this.

Aircraft out of control.

Pilot stalled aircraft after taking overshoot procedure. Did not raise flaps and could have done when at 500ft. Engine had not completely failed then.

Pilot reported engine trouble. Only survivor reports complete failure of starboard

Pilot mishandled flaps.

Further searches on-line revealed the Griffin Inn of Chipping Warden web pages. The landlord had placed on the site information about Chipping Warden drome based on an article written by Dave Smith in the "Flypast magazine". The site also suggested the public bar contained memorabilia about the wartime drome. I decided to pay a visit. The anniversary of the crash was nearing so I decided to visit that day the sixty second anniversary. There was a slim chance that the survivor Sgt Birch may visit the site every year to remember his crew mates. I also wanted to pay my respects on the said day. I arrived at Chipping Warden at 13.45, I quickly found the crash site with the help of Garth's map just a minute before the crash 62 years before. The location was idyllic and near a public footpath / battlefield trail. The sun was shining and it was warm, the birds were singing, a contrast from the scene 62 years before. The moment was broken by a low flying R.A.F. jet, a kind of salute unknown of course to the pilot. There was no sign of Sgt Birch so off to the Griffin for some food and a beer or two. The walls of the Griffin had no sign of memorabilia, the new landlady said the previous landlord had removed it, this was very disappointing. I know this situation has been somewhat redressed by the new owners who have started an information portfolio about the drome for visitors to read. Aside if anyone has old photos or information please contact the Griffin.

As I sat drinking my beer and eating a delicious bar snack I noticed a gentleman and lady walk in. I could see him scanning the walls with a look of disappointment. He was also holding a book titled "Bomber Losses". I introduced myself and we started talking. It soon became clear he too was researching the history of the old drome. The gentleman said he was trying to find the crash site of a Wellington in which his father survived a crash during the course of his training at 12 O.T.U. Bingo I thought! It was not to be, the fellow researcher was Norman Cox and the crash his dad survived was another story in the long line of O.T.U. crashes. Norman went on to say his dad was killed on operations some time later. The regulars at the Griffin told me that the village sign portrays a plane flying and that the church has a roll of honour and memorial window depicting the O.T.U. badge with the motto "Prepare For Battle". I understand that the badge was not sanctioned until after the Operational Training Unit was disbanded? At this point I decided I would like to install some form of memorial at the crash site, bearing in mind this accident was the last major incident suffered by 12 O.T.U. The regulars at the Griffin said the land was owned by Mr Allen, who had recently purchased the Edgcote Estate.

I contacted Mr Allen and he kindly agreed to the memorial. Expense being the main limiting factor, as funding from other sources was not an option. I thought a wooden loosely shaped prop blade would be suitable. Garth phoned and gave me the number of Philip Lucas. I contacted Philip. Several weeks later I went to Banbury, Philip met me at the railway station. I was driven to the crash site and the location was confirmed. Philip also took me around the perimeter of the drome and reminisced on his childhood wartime memories.

On the 7th November 2007 I travelled to Banbury with my brother Gus. We installed the wooden monolith. In attendance were: Moira, Philip Lucas, representatives of Chipping Warden Parish council, and other relatives of Sgt Egan. The informal ceremony went well.

I received an e-mail from a gentleman resident of the Irish Republic. He was related to Sgt McGowan air gunner. His son had seen a posting on the wartime memories web site, detailing my mother's story. The family were very pleased to learn of the commemoration. Unfortunately they were unable to attend the informal ceremony.

On the sixty third anniversary of the crash a bespoke copper etching was presented to Chipping Warden Parish Hall depicting a Wellington and the details of the accident. A short act of remembrance was observed at the crash site culminating in one minute of silence commencing at 14.03, the exact time of the crash 63 years ago. Additionally in attendance were: Mr Allen the land owner, Philip Lucas, the press, and Sgt Egan's niece, great niece, my mother and her sisters Ruth and Sylvia, the first visit for my mother being the morning of the funeral 1945. Bill Holmes D.F.C. President of the Banbury R.A.F. Association organised the parading of the R.A.F. and R.B.L. standards.

The wooden memorial has a life of about 10 years. I hope at some future date to replace it with something longer lasting. I hope to get sponsorship from the companies that now reside on the site of the old drome.

I am trying to trace the only survivor Philip Vincent Birch or his relatives and eventually relatives of the other crew. I contracted an agency but no trace was found of P.V.B. I wrote to the R.A.F. disclosures department. They are bound by confidentiality rules. They did release his service number and said he left the R.A.F. in 1949. A letter from me to the last known address was redirected by disclosures to the discharge address of Philip Birch, a shot in the dark but worth a try. The address did not exist and the letter was returned to me in error and not R.A.F. disclosures. The address was in Hampstead. Philip Lucas carried out some research and located and received a copy of a birth certificate of a Philip Vincent Birch. Born 1925 at waterworks road Norwich. The disclosures section confirmed the date of birth as that of Sgt Birch. Philip also found a marriage certificate of a P.V.Birch, unfortunately the V was for Victor. Coincidentally this chap was in the R.A.F. during the war but the date of birth was different. Philip Lucas could not find a record of a death or marriage. The local press from Hampstead ran the story, but nothing came of it. I will approach the press in Norwich, maybe that will yield some information?

Both Philip Lucas and I feel Sgt Birch may have left for Australia on the assisted passage scheme? Being the only survivor must have been a terrible ordeal. In those days it would be unacceptable to claim post traumatic stress or survivors guilt. Such feelings would be put down to a lack of fibre. Having left the R.A.F. and the support of his fellow aircrew would have been hard. A fresh start overseas is a strong possibility.

A sign of that time is the size of the crash report. Five dead crew and one sheet of paper. The pilot totally to blame? Thankfully in these days of relative peace and freedom, allows for a comprehensive report and inquiry to take place, in which other factors may be considered.

Remembering the article by Dave Smith mentioning Murray Peden and his memorable book "A Thousand Shall Fall" (ATSF). The story of a Canadian bomber pilot of WW2. The book dedicates some 55 pages to his time at Chipping Warden and satellite Edgehill, while training with 12 O.T.U. Murray was given a warning by his instructor Leo Dwen "The best advice I can give you is just don't do overshoots here, period. Once you've got the undercart up and full flap down, your rate of climb with these old de-rated engines is about a foot and a half every 100 miles, so make your mind up early if you're thinking of going around again- you'll stay alive longer." Despite the warning Murray was forced to do an overshoot due to some day dreaming on the part of his wireless operator ATSF tells of the incident in detail.

I have been in correspondence with Murray via e-mail in recent months. I asked Murray his opinion on the fate of LP286. Even though he is inundated with e-mail Murray found the time to reply as follows.

"A most interesting tale, although sad beyond measure as all these crashes were. I would be loath to sit in judgement on the pilot based on these limited facts. Something precipitated an overshoot. As you now know, I had to do an overshoot from relatively low level, due to some day dreaming on the part of my wireless op and his sudden last minute message about his trailing aerial still being reeled out. Both engines on our kite were working, and yet I had my hands full keeping highly dangerous things from happening. Most of, if not all, the aircraft we had at Chipping Warden and Edgehill had de-rated engines, which meant they did not deliver the full power of a new power plant. If the starboard one as in this case had already been giving some trouble before failing completely, this inexperienced pilot could have been in a challenging position early in this emergency.

Normally the drill on an overshoot would be to open the throttles fully, in fine pitch, and smartly retract the undercarriage. Only after getting a few hundred feet of altitude would the pilot start retracting the flaps, and he would bleed flap off just a bit at a time – as the flaps are retracted, the aircraft sinks significantly, so it isn't just a case of yanking up the flap lever. He may well have encountered problems with his one good engine. The Wimpy pilots notes point out, (and here I am quoting them, verbatim)"

--- The operation of any hydraulic service with the carburettor air-intake control in the warm position may cause engine cutting due to the shutters returning to the cold air position--- "This poor fellow could have had troubles multiplying on him just when he needed some breaks".

During the war the authorities could not dwell on such incidents they had to get on with it. The families of the victims were not even put in touch with one another. Support groups would be bad for morale, what with any publicity that would accompany it.

Flight Sergeant Hillier was a young inexperienced pilot who was the subject of bad luck. I doubt if this crew would have ever seen action even in the far east campaign. Like so many in training at that time paid the same price for our freedom, as that of those on operations.

All the aircrew were volunteers, rigorous selection, hard dangerous, demanding training. The prize being the chance to take the fight to the enemy, with the slim chances of survival being surpassed only by the aviators of the divine wind and the German U-boat crews.

I flew with Philip Lucas on the 6 August 2008 from Enstone Flying Club. Our Pilot Amanda Harrison took us around what Philip calls "Banburyshire"*. We flew near many of the old airfields including Edgehill and Chipping Warden following the probable flight path of LP286s final moments. Philip took many photographs. I sent some to Murray Peden, he appreciated seeing the beautiful countryside of "Banburyshire" again. Amanda commented it would be something different to put in the remarks column of her flying log book.

*"Banburyshire" is a local name for an area roughly ten or twelve miles radius of Banbury Cross.

Murray Peden has given me permission to quote verbatim from his e-mails sent to me.

The story of LP286 was published in the aircrew association Intercom magazine, winter 2008. As a result of this Thomas Lockett called me. Tom was an instructor air gunner at Chipping Warden April 1945. Previous to that he completed 36 operations with 630 sqn Lancasters. Tom saw LP286 struggling in its last moments, with one prop feathered. The wimpy just scraped the top of a tree hit the ground and caught fire. Tom and his companions ran to the scene. The crash crew arrived on site almost immediately and turned them away. Tom can clearly remember the tail turret at 90 degrees to the fore aft, Sgt Birch close by in shock being comforted by a member of the crash crew.