

CRASH OF RAF HALIFAX BOMBER ON CLEEVE COMMON IN 1944



The accident

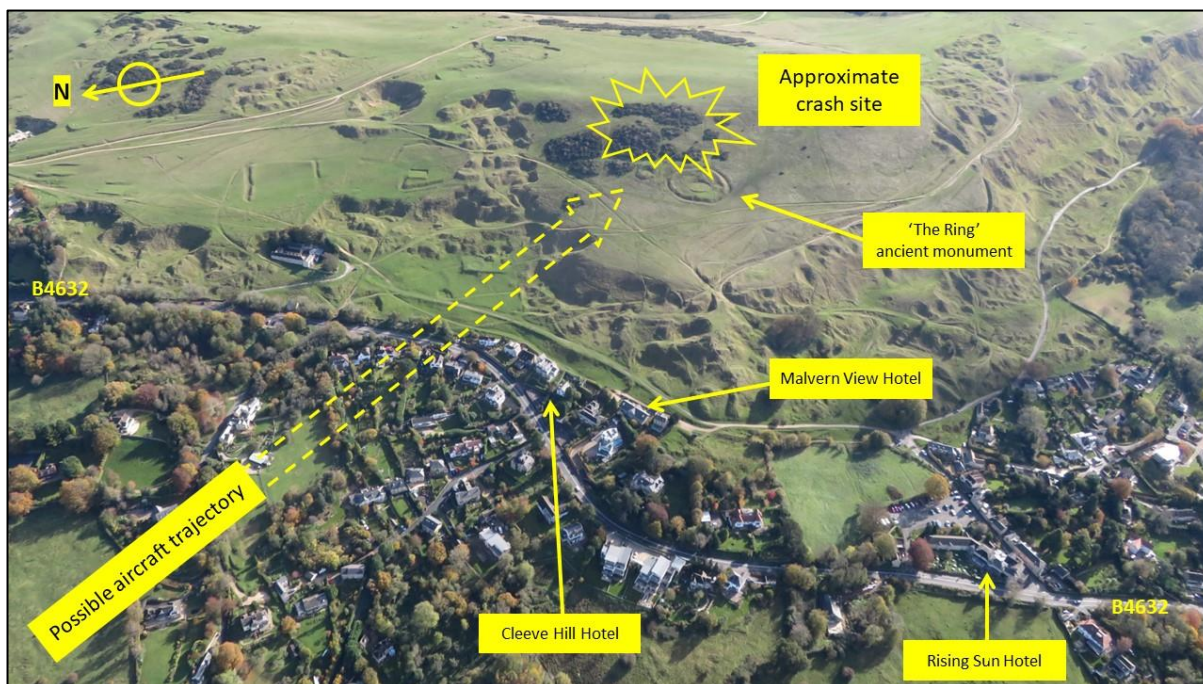
In the early hours of the morning of Saturday 26 August 1944, an RAF Halifax bomber crashed into the escarpment of Cleeve Hill, near Cheltenham in Gloucestershire. All seven of the mixed Canadian/British crew lost their lives.



Handley Page Halifax Mk III bomber

Handley Page Halifax Mark III MZ311 (EY-M) was built at the Park Royal Coachworks aircraft factory and assigned to 78 Squadron of RAF Bomber Command. At 20:36 on Friday 25 August 1944 it took off with 5 other aircraft from RAF Brighton in Yorkshire. Their mission was to lay mines off La Rochelle, western France, in a minefield codenamed CINNAMON. The crash occurred at 02:14 on 26 August during the return flight to base.

The crash site is believed to be high up on the escarpment, above 'The Ring' (Scheduled Ancient Monument) and close to the edge of the golf course 17th fairway, although the point of impact cannot be precisely determined since debris was apparently strewn over a wide area. This is the area recollected by eyewitnesses to the crash scene. Coordinates offered in RAF records are some way off and do not tie in with the crash scenario.



Aerial view of crash site, close to the top of Cleeve Hill escarpment

The most conclusive evidence for the location comes from the chance discovery of a small fragment of the wreckage among gorse bushes in August 2020. The fragment bears serial numbers which positively identify it as part of a Halifax bomber, probably a section of an outer wing.



Recovered fragment of Halifax bomber

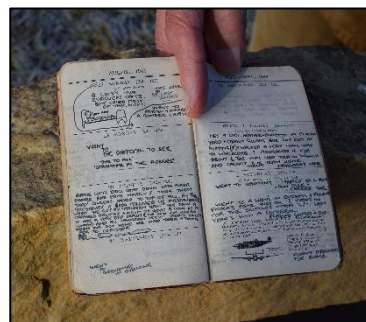
Eyewitness accounts

We are fortunate in having first-hand recollections of the incident from local residents who were children at the time.

One of the first people on the scene was Walter Hilsden, a boy who lived at Nutterswood, a small settlement on the edge of Cleeve Common. He arrived well before the RAF secured the site and was met by the grizzly sight of bodies still in the

wreckage. He picked up a fragment of the aircraft, but that appears to have been lost over the years.

Bernard Parkin, another local resident who was 14 at the time, recorded in his 1944 diary for Tuesday 29 August that he climbed to the top of Cleeve Hill with friends: “When we got by ‘Malvern View’ we saw a crashed Halifax and went to have a look at it. It was a very bad crashand all Canadian crew”. He even included a sketch of an aircraft in pieces.



Ann Dembenski also vividly recalls visiting the crash site as an 11 year old girl. Although the wreckage had been removed by that time, she and her school friends picked up handfuls of ‘silvery tape’ (chaff) which had been scattered over a wide area. She recalls a feeling of great sadness in the local community over the loss of young lives, with people saying, “only a few feet higher and they would have made it”.

The investigations

Neither the RAF accident investigation nor the subsequent Court of Inquiry were able to fully establish the cause of the crash. The flight path to home base at RAF Brighton would have taken the aircraft on a NNE compass bearing, but the location of the crash site means it must have been flying S or SE when it impacted. Although general weather conditions were fair, Cleeve Hill was at the time shrouded in cloud.

Both reports concluded that the aircraft was flying level at impact, but could not identify why it had turned away from home and was at such low altitude. Normal cruising height would have kept it well above the summit of the 1000ft Cleeve Hill. The aircraft appeared to be serviceable, with at least 3 of the 4 engines running normally; flight controls also appeared normal and it had sufficient fuel. The navigator’s log indicated that the aircraft was heading toward Pershore aerodrome, about 15 miles to the north, although no intent to land was recorded. According to his log the Navigator “seemed to know his position.”

The Court of Inquiry report noted that Pershore was also cloud-covered and “they seem to have been doing an erratic descent and crashed into high ground”. The Base Commander recorded his assessment that it was “most unlikely” the aircraft was attempting to penetrate cloud without some reason which “may have been engine failure”. Though he concluded the absence of a distress signal made this possibility “seem unlikely”.

In signing off the Court of Inquiry report, the Commander of 4 Group observed that the aircraft fuel valve selection seen in the post-crash examination was problematic because it presented a risk of fuel starvation to more than one engine, since all engines were running from a single tank. He did not however state that this caused the crash, concluding that the reason was “obscure.” The possibilities of battle damage, unrealised by the crew, or human error were not mentioned.

We are unlikely to ever know the full reason for the crash of MZ311.

The crew of MZ311



Flying Officer Elton
Eugene FREEMAN
RCAF (J/28223)
Navigator, aged 29



Flying Officer John
Alexander GLENN
RCAF (J/36021) Air
Gunner, aged 19



Pilot Officer Hugh
Brannan HAMILTON
RCAF (J/89908) Air
Gunner aged 21



Flight Lieutenant
Charles Maurice
HOWES. RCAF
(J/25977) Pilot
aged 22



Flight Sergeant John
McARDLE RAF
Volunteer Reserve
(1684019) Flight
Engineer, aged 23



Flying Officer George
William McCARTNEY
RCAF (J/28883)
Air Bomber
Added 32

No image available

Sergeant Emmanuel Henry HARRIS. RAF
Volunteer Reserve (1423759). Wireless Operator, aged 20

RAF 78 Squadron

The mixed Canadian/British crew was not unusual. RAF Bomber Command lost 55,573 people during World War II, 10,250 of whom were Canadian. The crew was flying its 25th operational sortie. At this time of the war, although survival prospects while serving as aircrew in Bomber Command were slowly improving from the horrific attrition rates of earlier months, the probability of survival was on average about 50% over a standard period of service, usually taken to be 30 operational sorties.

78 Squadron completed 5120 sorties with Halifax and lost 158 aircraft, about 3%. The unit suffered more losses of aircraft and personnel than any other Halifax Squadron, both as a percentage and in absolute terms.

Epitaph

The statistics on losses serve to remind us of the horrendous cost paid by Bomber Command as it sent out its youthful crews night after night. We can do no better than quote the words of the tribute Sir Winston Churchill paid to Bomber Command:

“All your operations were planned with great care and skill. They were executed in the face of desperate opposition and appalling hazards, they made a decisive contribution to Germany’s final defeat. The conduct of the operations demonstrated the fiery gallant spirit which animated your aircrews, and the high sense of duty of all ranks under your command. I believe that the massive achievements of Bomber Command will long be remembered as an example of duty nobly done.”

Memorial

Cleeve Common Trust has erected a memorial to the crew members of MZ311.



The memorial to the crew of MZ311 on Cleeve Common

The memorial was unveiled on 7 December 2022 by Air Marshal Sir Dusty Miller KBE, President of the Royal Air Forces Association Cheltenham Branch and High Sheriff of Gloucestershire.



Sir Dusty Miller salutes the crew of MZ311
Photo by Rickie Gauld



With Ann Dembski and Bernard Parkin
Photo by Rickie Gauld

Sir Dusty Miller commented:

“With the end of World War II almost in sight, a fact unknowable at the time, these 7 young men, among countless other crews, bravely took to the air into the teeth of enemy flak and night fighters as they had done so very many times in the preceding months.

Having completed their hazardous mission off the west coast of France they returned towards the safety and comfort of their home base of RAF Brighton in Yorkshire, yet some unknown occurrence caused them to perish in a crash high up on the escarpment of Cleeve Common.

The courage of these men, alongside their contemporaries, to launch repeatedly into the night knowing full well that the odds against their survival were very high, is simply astonishing by any measure, which makes their loss in this way even more tragic.

We owe our freedom today to their unflinching courage and, ultimately, their sacrifice, and a chief role of the Royal Air Forces Association is to ensure that we and others proudly and thankfully remember them, as we do today.”

Colonel Philip Robson, Chairman of Cleeve Common Trust, noted:

“The reason for the crash will remain a mystery, but identification of the crash site from eye witness accounts and the fragment we found mean that we can now commemorate this tragic event as an important part of Cleeve Common’s history.”

The memorial is located not far from the trig point and topograph at the summit of the escarpment, about 75 yards off the Cotswold Way long distance footpath. The grid reference is SO 98564 26516; the what3words code is [///chiefs.hers.pokers](https://www.what3words.com/#!/en-gb/chiefs.hers.pokers)

Acknowledgements

Cleeve Common Trust is indebted to the following people who made it possible to retell this sad story and preserve the memory for future generations.

Cris George, who spent most of his professional career in military aviation with the naval forces of Australia and New Zealand and remains an aviation enthusiast. He undertook the extensive research that forms the basis of this account.

Ann Dembenski and **Bernard Parkin**, local residents who grew up in this area and were eyewitnesses to the crash scene as children.

Glyn Thomas, who found the aircraft fragment in 2020 and kindly donated it to the Trust to preserve for posterity.

Barry Fisher of the Yorkshire Air Museum, who confirmed the identity of the fragment of wreckage and provided valuable background information on Halifax bombers.

Michael Bryant, Chairman of the Cheltenham branch of the RAF Association, for his liaison with RAFA and advice on protocols.

Mark Wilks who designed and donated the memorial plaque.

David Organ, local aviation enthusiast and pilot, for assistance in identifying the crash site and the aerial image used in this account.

This account was compiled by Michael Bates, Clerk of Cleeve Common Trust

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