



## OLD EAGLE HOUSE SOCIETY

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### WORLD WAR II AIR CRASH – JANUARY 1944

For a while the Society have been trying to find out more about the personnel who tragically lost their lives in the crash in the school grounds in January 1944. The plane destroyed the gardener's cottage. I wrote to the Air Historical Branch of the RAF and they replied requesting the geographical location, aircraft type / serial number, etc and I was going to send a plea to members asking if they could fill in the gaps. Out of the blue I received an email from David Owens asking about the air crash because he is doing some research on his wife's grandfather who should have been on the fatal flight.

David Owen writes: "I have all the information you requested along with a photograph of two of the crew who perished that day, two of whom were very close friends of my wife's grandfather. Sidney Millbank. Sidney was not flying with his usual crew that day and I do not know for sure why however I have got a rip cord and family seem to remember that he had to bail out at some time and was injured - again and possibly in hospital.

#### **Details of the aircraft are as follows.**

Boston IIIA BZ387 OM-L From 107 Sqn Raf

The crew that crashed at the school was as follows:

Lt ARTHUR G. TRUXLER (U.S.A.A.F.) Pilot

Pilot Officer DONALD H SKIPP Bomb aimer

Pilot Officer ALBERT JOHN NAISBIT Air gunner

Pilot Officer BRIAN ALPHONSUS McCONNELL D F M (RAAF) air gunner

Returning from a bombing raid in Northern France when it would appear that on approach to RAF Hartford Bridge one of the engines failed, having being involved in heavy and accurate flak over the target area. From my initial findings it would appear the aircraft was attempting to land when this happened and veered over and into a steep dive and then crashed killing all the crew."

#### **The AIR CRASH - Smith-Vaughan, Arthur (Retired RAF) – ex Eagle House pupil**

I remember the gardener, Mr. Hill, who helped us to grow lettuces. The photo of the 3 chaps is great. The one on the left was a member of the OBSERVER CORP (His wing is O), and most likely was the navigator which was not mentioned but would have been vital to find a spot in France !! The chap in the middle was a WOP, Wireless OP & Gunner. (Crossed sparks on his right shoulder and AG wing). The chap on the right was an RAF Sgt pilot although the text refers to a US officer, Lt. Truxler. It would be unusual for an RAF aircraft and aircrew on OPS be piloted

by a US Officer. Incidentally it is not "U.S.A.A.F" because the US did not have an "Air Force" during WW2!!! It was a corps. in the ARMY known as the "Army Air Corps." It was several years later, after the war that they realized that they needed an Air Force and not just a "corps" in the Army !!!!

**Extract from:**

**"The War Years! = J S Marshall**

On New Year's Eve the local pubs were full to overflowing, including the 'Dog and Partridge', where a bucket of beer cost just five shillings which meant that everyone had a lot to drink and a good time was had by all.

WAAF Paddy Marshall recalled that there was usually a good singsong too and that her speciality party piece was a spirited rendition of 'Blaydon Races'. January 1944

The New Year was in the usual style well and truly welcomed in. The 1<sup>st</sup> of the month saw the arrival of 2800 Squadron from RAF Ibsley, near Fordingbridge in Hampshire, with their anti-aircraft guns for the defend of the airfield. They took over from 2773 Squadron which moved out to RAF Kirton-in-Linsey, Lincolnshire, on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Also on the 3<sup>rd</sup> there was a further visit to the airfield by AVM BE Embry of 2 Group.

The Bostons of 107 Squadron were airborne on the 4<sup>th</sup> for a circus operation on the 'no ball' target at Ligescourt in France, while 16 and 140 Squadrons continued their photography of the sea bed, coastal defences and ports in the Normandy beaches area. Yet another 'no ball' target was attacked by 107 Squadron on the following day, each of their aircraft dropping 4x 500lb bombs from 9000 feet.

The following day, the 6<sup>th</sup>, was to prove a sad one for 107 Squadron when they lost Boston BZ387 (L) when it crashed on approach to land. The pilot, an American, **Lt Art Truxler**, was overflying Little Sandhurst when the aircraft for some unexplained reason (but believed to be due to engine failure) dived into the ground. **Jim Moore** of 88 Squadron was in Sandhurst at the time and recalled seeing the aircraft pass overhead. He said: "During the afternoon of the 6<sup>th</sup> we were in Sandhurst when we saw a Boston flying over on its landing approach. Inexplicably it crashed about half a mile from us. A local airman who was on leave, together with two civilians, went to the crash scene in an attempt to rescue the crew, but the aircraft blew up, killing not only the crew but also the airman who was trying to help. The two civilians were badly injured in the explosion and when I cycled back to the airfield I was horrified to learn that it was **Art** and his crew that had been killed."

## Extracts from:

### “RAF Hartford Bridge 1942 – 1944 = Times to D-Day - Peter Jenner

On January 6th 1944 a 107 Squadron Boston attempting to make HARTFORD-BRIDGE after a sortie, during which it lost an engine, crashed between the kitchen garden of Eagle House School and 'Ivy Bank' bungalow in Longdown Road, Little Sandhurst.

**George Loader**, who was delivering coal in Little Sandhurst that day, remembers: “I was near Napper's bakers shop, now called Victoria Stores I think,, at about mid afternoon when I heard an aircraft engine misfiring. I looked up and saw a plane nosedive down. I immediately drove in the direction I thought it had fallen. It was just off Longdown Road in the kitchen garden of Eagle House School, there used to be a gate to it two doors up from 'Ivy Bank'. Leaving my lorry in the road 1 went into the garden where I saw one of the airmen burning, he was the only one to get out as far as I could see, I think he might have been blown out. I went to him and was putting out the flames; while I was doing this the bomb exploded, the airman gave a kick and died and I was knocked over on the ground by the blast.

There were several people injured and a soldier [I think his name was **Rance** who was on leave was killed. The people there as far as I remember were **Frank Peabody** [had leg injuries], **Lev Goswell** [had cuts about his face], **Mr Williams**, **Mr Snell**, **Mr May**, **Mr May Senior** and **Councillor Smith**. I cannot recollect any fire engines or ambulances attending the crash.” **Rosie Coleman** was also there and recalls that "I got my bum burned by a bit of engine or something for being too noseey"

**Sid Rance**, on leave from his R.A.F. unit attempted a rescue and died shortly afterwards in Pinewood Hospital according to other eyewitnesses. **Frank Peabody** was the butcher and **Mr Williams**, landlord of the Fox And Hounds, lost a leg.

George Loader continues: — "As there was nothing else I could do I went back to my lorry and saw that all the windows had been smashed by the blast. I went into Mr. Snell's house, walking through broken glass all over the road, not all of it from my lorry, to phone the coal yard to say where I had been and then carried on delivering coal."

**Mr. Benfield**, who lived in 'Ivy Bank' was cooking a very late lunch and not, as was usual for him, sitting between the two windows that were blown in.

The ground crew buzz as recounted by a member of 16 Squadron suggested that the crew were French [another account account says the pilot was American\*: his rank was Lt., so it could be

either] who did not dump their bomb load over France when they lost an engine and did not make an emergency landing at FRISTON 'crash strip' either. HARTFORD-BRIDGE was cleared for a reverse circuit --- reputedly Bostons were particularly unstable when turning away from a dead engine — but the pilot did a normal left hand circuit and flipped over LITTLE SANDHURST. As with any good buzz, plausible -- but was it accurate?

\*He was, see Roll of Honour. [Later information]

Whether this interpretation is correct or not – and it asks a number of questions - put alongside [Jeff Smale's](#) one engine return, it illustrates the knife edge and vital [literal meaning] decisions that young pilots had to make on a wing and a prayer.

#### **Extract from:**

#### **“Blackbushe” = Robert Belcher**

By January 1944 there were almost 3000 service personnel at Hartford Bridge covering the five squadrons plus anti aircraft units and WAAFs. The Bostons were airborne on 4 and 6 of January, taking advantage of good weather. The mission on the 6th ended in tragedy for the aircrew of 107 squadron Boston BZ387 and locals alike. The aircraft was returning from a noball mission and had a bomb hang up but was refused permission to land until the aircraft had burnt more fuel to decrease the fire risk. The aircraft aborted its landing and continued to the north and into the circuit. It is believed it lost power and was unable to maintain height and descended low over Sandhurst in a battle to remain airborne. The subsequent crash was witnessed by many Sandhurst residents including [John Lowe](#), a keen young spotter at the time. The aircraft impacted into woods at the end of Longdown Road and several brave locals rushed to the scene to try and free the crew. Unfortunately the remaining bomb exploded, taking with it the crew and an off duty airman and injuring several local people. Shrapnel rained down in the devastated local area, narrowly missing several bystanders.

#### **The Eagle House air crash – January 1944 = Jean McLlwaine (nee Tigar)**

The 7th January 1944 brought this happy period to an abrupt end. We were all aware of the Bombers that flew out of Blackbushe, we waved them off every night, and started to count them back well into the night.

A very late arrival did not make it back to The Airfield. It crashed behind our large holly hedge in the grounds off Eagle House School, We heard a very large bang so we all huddled together under a table in a room at the front off the house. My Mother said " do not move until I get back " She told us that she ran down the small lane at the side of our garden, She arrived straight on to the utter chaos, the Janitor of the school was already there, his house was at the bottom of the

lane. He gave the prop from his washing line to my Mother and asked her to try and get the door open, she found this difficult, more helpers began to arrive, so mother and a young man called Ron were sent to get fire extinguishers which were kept in every third house, Mother kept to our side of the road and sent Ron to the other, just then there was a large explosion. She said "dive for it Ron!" She said afterwards she even had time to smile at him, he linked his thumbs and went head first into a holly hedge, just as though he was being marked for style! As she rolled under a thorn hedge on the far side of our garden, she looked up and saw this very large object coming over the house. It landed partly in the road and in the garden of the house two doors down, the very place where the extinguisher was to be found. At this stage she turned and ran back into the house to see if we were okay, this included my baby sister who had been born in the August 1942.

We ventured into the garden and I remembered seeing lots of personal belongings of the crew. We took two parachutes into the house knowing how valuable to the R.A.F, they were but the ladies of the house thought of all the nice silk underwear they could make. We were then taken from the very badly damaged house, to Harts Leap to a very caring lady.

Later on my Mother caused a problem when she asked if she could collect her Document box and her dentures. When The Larches was mentioned "You can't go up there." However she got around the senior officer, and was reunited with her precious belongings.

### **Wartime Plane Crash at Eagle House by Jack Green**

I never did know the date of the Boston air crash only through reading the Sandhurst war book by the Historical society that my dear friend Peggy Green sent me a few years ago now. This is what I remember of that day. We were on school holidays at that time and mum had just given us our lunch so my brother Ron and I called next door to get Brian Goswell and we were walking up Longdown Road. As we got to Ken Over's house which was the 3rd house from ours we heard the plane approach from across Wellington College area but could not see it as tall trees blocked our view at this time we were standing at the entrance to Eagle House laneway that lead down to the garden sheds just behind Over's house. The plane appeared at top of trees and at same time it turned quickly on its left wing and fell out of the sky. As you can imagine we couldn't believe it we saw smoke and flames rise up and nervously walked down towards the wreckage. I cant say for sure that we were the first on the scene as we were so close when it crashed, people started to arrive and gather at the scene, ammunition was exploding in the fire, but we didn't realize the danger that was happening. Someone said, how do we get the fire out, then I remembered that Mr and Mrs Webb, who lived next to us, kept a Stirrup pump and buckets of sand and water in case fire bombs were dropped in the area, these were on their front porch, so the three of us started walking back up lane to get the stirrup pump, which would have been useless in such a fire. We

got halfway up the lane when the plane exploded, and the blast seem to carry us across Longdown Road and we finished up in Michael Meads gateway straight way across the road. By this time authorities arrived and told us all to leave Longdown Road, so we went home and saw mum and sister Phyllis who were in back garden, as they had gone through our hedge at bottom of garden to see what had happened. All our back windows had been blown in and glass was everywhere, some of the splinters had stuck in our kitchen sideboard opposite the window. I remember Brian was crying as his mother Mable was at the crash and she had not returned, we did find out she was badly wounded and taken to hospital. We were told to go down to a house in Wellington Road at the end of the Walls, the lady gave us all tea and biscuits. When all was safe we all returned to our homes. Our granny, dads mother was coming for lunch that day, we arrived back to find her clearing up all the glass, so she decided to go home again on the bus to Nine Mile Ride where she lived. Once we got used to what happened, and looked around, there was a large piece of plane engine in our back garden, and on Brian's roof between the chimneys was long bits of wire and metal from the explosion. I think it was the next day that I was with Ken Over in his back garden, I looked up at something red hanging up in a Oak tree that grew along on the lane way down to Eagle House garden sheds, I pulled it down and it was the planes emergency survival kit from one of the life craft, it was all entangled in the red sail of the lifeboat, the sail had white lettering on it of how to use it, the ration kit was sealed in a plastic type package. I opened it up, finding chocolate and biscuits, also a compass, not realising what we were doing we ate the biscuits and chocolate, but I kept the compass for months, but eventually gave away to someone, now I know, of course, that I should have kept it as a memento of that sad day. When the crash site was cleared and all forgotten some weeks later, I went down to see how it looked, and looking on the actual spot where plane fell I found some money, silver and pennies which I assumed might have been from the aircraft crew. When we did return to the road that day, there was the three propeller blades and boss that had ripped through a tree at Mr Benfell's house and landed on the footpath. The people that got killed and injured can be read about in the war book, so that is my account of what happened that terrible day. I often say that the three of us were saved by Mr Webb's stirrup pump.