

Wellington's RP499 and RP565 near Topcliffe airfield.

In the morning of 17th March 1948 a number of airmen were undertaking training exercises in separate aircraft. At 09.47hrs one Wellington (RP565) had just taken off and was climbing away to join the circuit in a left hand turn. Another Wellington (RP499) was descending to join the circuit and was probably making a banked left turn. The two aircraft collided just north of the airfield and both aircraft broke up in the air. A large part of one landed on the Sgt's Mess inside the Camp and a large part of the other crashed into a field a few hundred yards away. The Mess sustained serious damage to it but there were no casualties on the ground. Sadly all eight airmen (four on each aircraft) were killed in the incident. Their names however have not been traced to actually who was on which aircraft as the station record of this was not completed. Which aircraft hit the mess is also not 100% confirmed.

The accident was put down to neither aircraft's pilot being able to see the other. Here after it was recommended that the seat next to the pilot should be occupied so that there could be a lookout on the blind (right) side. This was a known Wellington quirk but was not looked at during Wartime flying.

Pilot (of RP499) - F/Lt Franciszek Kula MM RAF (P/2204), aged 34, originally from W.Bukowiec, Poland. Buried Newark Cemetery, Nottinghamshire.

Pilot (of RP565) - Pilot II Colin Bass RAF (1603236), aged 25, of High Wycombe, Bucks. Buried West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

The other six airmen were....

? - Signaller II Walter Ernest Leslie Howell RAF (1023588), aged 27, of Bargoed, Glamorgan. Buried Bedwellty Churchyard, Argoed, Monmouthshire.

? - Signaller II Arthur Edward Highman RAF (1333571), aged 25, of Peckham, London. Buried Norwood Cemetery, West Norwood, London.

? - F/Lt William James Jones RAF (153310), aged 25, of Lambeth, London. Buried Topcliffe Cemetery, Yorkshire.

? - F/Lt Robert Sneddon Laird RAF (149193), aged 31, of Falkirk, Stirlingshire. Buried Bo'ness Cemetery, West Lothian.

? - F/Lt Harry Corelius New RAF (165262), aged 26, of Smethwick, Staffordshire. Buried Uplands Cemetery, Smethwick, Staffordshire.

? - F/Lt John Edge Kerslake RAF (182652), aged 24, of Rainworth, Nottinghamshire. Buried Topcliffe Cemetery, Yorkshire.



I would also like to thank Mr David Wiltshire, cousin of Colin Bass, for the photograph above. Colin's older brother Geoffrey Bass was a member of the RAF in the War and served in Bomber Command. Prior to his death Colin had served at Driffield in a similar piloting role to trainees with 10 ANS.



I would also like to thank Ms Margaret Astur for her contact and allowing this photograph of her uncle Arthur Highman. Some years ago when just beginning in this whole research I was contacted by a relation of Arthur Highman. I would like to thank her for contacting me and at the time information I had on this incident was only very vague. Since then this information has grown and I would be happy to share this but have lost her contact details. However from an internet search it transpires that Arthur served in 49 Sqn during the War and completed thirty operational flights before being posted to the Middle East. It is believed that the crash in which he lost his life at Topcliffe was his first as an instructor at Topcliffe.

Sgt Kula (P/782693) was flying in England in 1942 with 305 Squadron. On the night of 28/29th August 1942 he was

flying in Wellington Z1460 on Ops to Saarbrücken. Their aircraft was badly damaged by enemy night-fighters and was on fire when the pilot (F/Lt Tadeusz Czołowski) ordered the crew to bale out over Belgium. Only three of the crew complied, Sgt Kula and the other two (Sgt Cwiklinski and P/O Alexandrowicz) landed near Braine-l'Alleud and were captured. The two pilots remained on the aircraft as their rear gunner had been seriously injured and they were to attempt to land the aircraft to save his life. The fire on board the aircraft was put out and the belief is that they crossed the English Channel and landed safely at Manston however the gunner had sadly died. Of the three who baled out; two became PoW's while Sgt Kula was able to evade capture and return to England in October 1942. For his actions in evading capture he was awarded the UK Military Medal.

His flying hours at his death show that he had flown for some time although at just shy of 600hrs on the Wellington with a further 500hrs on other types this suggests he had some Wartime flying experience. As well as being buried at Newark he is commemorated on a memorial plaque in Tivetshall St. Mary, Norfolk. I would also like to thank Ms Julie Savory for contacting me regarding F/Lt Kula. he is commemorated on a plaque in Tivetshall St. Mary Church, Norfolk and there is a suggestion that he was either based nearby or had become friendly and may have even married the vicar's daughter during the War.



F/Lt Kerslake's gravestone at Topcliffe Cemetery, Yorkshire. John Kerslake served in RAFVR in the War and received his commission on 11th July 1944 to P/O on probation (emergency), on 11th January 1945 he rose to F/O (war subs) before transferring to the RAF. He rose to F/Lt on 11th January 1948.

William Jones was a member of the RAFVR in the War, he received his commission on 3rd September 1943 to P/O on probation (emergency) to F/O (war subs) on 3rd March 1944. He transferred to the RAF after the War and continued his service, rising to F/Lt on 9th May 1947.



In September 2008 Ken Reast, Albert Pritchard, Dick Barton and David Thompson and myself located one of the crash sites - the aircraft which came down just outside the camp boundary, this is shown in the centre of the photograph above and in front of the brown muddy area. Small remains were found but enough to confirm the site. Showing photographs of the other site (which is still a military establishment) would perhaps not be a good idea. I would like to thank the landowner for allowing this visit.



A couple of buckles found at the crash site in 2008.